A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE

THEATER MAJORS IN REGARD TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND

LOCKDOWNS IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Ronda Celeste Jones

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns were phenomena experienced by the majority of the modern world, but not everyone experienced it in the same way. Each person brings their own past, their own interests, and their own needs to the lived experience. Pre-pandemic research on art therapy suggests that creative expression could be helpful to adolescents experiencing such trauma. Theater majors are a particular set of people for whom creative expression through theater is a huge part of their life. Theater majors are also participating in a creative activity that requires social contact, and that social contact was limited or eliminated during the COVID-19 lockdowns. In this qualitative phenomenological study, eight college theater majors were able to express their lived experience through both interviews and a sketch they created to communicate that experience. They described themes of isolation and fear, changes in their school and theater environments, and a desperate creative urge within their lived experience. This study adds to the growing body of understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, which will help modern society to better face another world-wide trauma, should it arise.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns, adolescent, college transition, phenomenology, theater majors

Dedication

God be in my head and in my understanding;

God be in my eyes and in my looking;

God be in my mouth and in my speaking;

God be in my heart and in my thinking;

God be at my end and at my departing.

(Prayer from the *Old Sarum Primer*)

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

In March of 2020, the world, as many adolescents in the United States knew it, changed completely. A new and dangerous disease was spreading and, in an effort to protect their citizens, states began to restrict personal contact and group meetings, including schools, theaters, and many workplaces (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). For adolescents, whose development depended in part on their connections to and experiences of the outside world (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this separation and the stress of a disease they knew little about led to unprecedented challenges. In an effort to understand what this experience meant for these adolescents, research in the last few years re-examined risks and resilience for students in high school and college (Bako & Zana, 2021; Blackwell et al., 2022; Bryce & Fraser, 2022; Calma-Birling & Zelazo, 2022; Chen et al., 2022; Colasante et al., 2022; Dixon et al., 2022; Houghton et al., 2022; Lohani et al., 2021; Lotzin et al., 2022; Pasupathi et al., 2022; Stamatis, 2022; Velez et al., 2022; Zinn et al., 2020). There are many things that, according to the research, either worsened the effects or protected the adolescents from the effects of the trauma of COVID-19 (Byrce & Fraser, 2022; Calma-Birling & Zelazo, 2022; Houghton et al., 2022; Shu et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2022; Ulset & von Soest, 2022; Velez et al., 2022; Zhen & Zhou, 2022). Some of these are similar to some of the aspects of creativity and creative production, especially theater (Brosowsky et al., 2020; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Gentzler et al., 2020; Panero, 2019). This study examined the COVID-19 experiences through the eyes of creative theater majors in their first few years

of college. All of this began with an understanding of where creativity comes from and what it means to face trauma.

Background

Biblical Background

The Bible has much to say about creativity and trauma in daily life. First, the trauma of those people whose stories are included in the Bible speaks to the current experience of trauma resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. This is especially clear in the Psalms, like Psalm 79 where the people of God are crying out for help and deliverance (*New International Bible*, 1973/2011; Smith, 2022). The raw emotions and response to crises in the Psalms are familiar as the world recovers from this global pandemic.

Additionally, creativity is covered in a particularly special way as it is found in the very actions of God in Genesis 1:1-2:3 (*New International Bible*, 1973/2011) and in the first mandate given to men by God (*New International Bible*, 1973/2011, Genesis 1:27-30). In the creation narrative, the rhythm of the words of God changes to highlight the difference in the Trinity's creation of humanity in His own image (Bowers, 2016). Humans are different. Humanity will bear the image of God, not in the least, as creators or co-creators (Bowers, 2016; Molhoek, 2022). Humanity's creativity is not perfect, as no human will ever be God, but when it is taken seriously as a part of bearing the image of God, it can bring glory to Him (Watkins, 2012). This worshipful creativity and the trauma of this life are integral parts of how the Bible describes humanity and, therefore, are necessary for understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

Current Research

Effect of COVID-19 on Adolescents and Young Adults

The COVID-19 worldwide pandemic was so unique that some researchers felt the need to create new measures for coping during this particular event (Lotzin et al., 2022). Understanding the effects of this unique trauma on the young fostered the interest of several international researchers. The results range from increased depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for those who do not positively adapt, to development of posttraumatic growth (PTG) and displays of resilience in those able to positively adapt (Houghton et al., 2022; Morales-Vives et al., 2020; Shu et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2022; Ulset & von Soest, 2021; Zhen & Zhou, 2022). Both the positive and the negative effects were echoed in studies conducted in the United States, though the lockdown procedures were not as extreme in most states (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022) as they were in China (Shu et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2022; Zhen & Zhou, 2022) or parts of Europe (Morales-Vives et al., 2020; Ulset & von Soest, 2021). Because of this difference, focus on research from the United States can give a unique perspective for understanding students in the United States.

The research in the United States has reflected the challenges of school disruptions (Bryce & Fraser, 2022; Kattago, 2021; Velez et al., 2022), family stressors and protective factors (Blackwell et al., 2022; Bryce & Fraser, 2022), fear of illness (Bako & Zana, 2021; Calma-Birling & Zelazo, 2022), and additional stresses for those students who are transitioning between the worlds of high school and college (Pasupathi et al., 2022; Stamatis, 2022; von Keyserlingk et al., 2021). But it is not just the problem areas that have been revealed by research. Protective factors like connection, digital or

not (Blackwell et al., 2022; Bryce & Fraser, 2022; Colasante et al., 2022), engagement in a task that feels useful (Lohani et al., 2021; Zinn et al., 2020), and a healthy vision of their own future (Pasupathi et al., 2022) have also been revealed. Creative endeavors were also shown to be a protective factor for many during the COVID-19 pandemic (Brosowsky et al., 2020). Many of these factors, traumatic or protective (Dixon et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2021), were also evident in earlier research on trauma and art therapy.

Healing and Communication through Art

Art therapy, whether it is dance, physical art, or drama, began to emerge as a viable therapy for those who have experienced trauma before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ali et al., 2020; Bernstein, 2019; Braito et al., 2021; Cook & Borgen, 2020; Frydman & Mayor, 2020; Gildea, 2021; Kewley & Van Hout, 2022; Schnitzer et al., 2021; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Uttley et al., 2015). Research on art therapy has also revealed that creative expression can help developmental processes, especially when those processes have been interrupted (Chapin et al., 2020; Grosz et al., 2022; Lerner & Callina, 2018; Pierroux et al., 2022; Savage, 2020). Additionally, art therapy can help developing minds to communicate trauma when they do not have the words (Kronick et al., 2018; Lombar & Muller, 2018; Wymer et al., 2020). Creativity, then, has a history of healing trauma, but for many young actors and those going through drama therapy, the restrictions on physical contact during COVID-19 changed the landscape of their creative expression considerably.

Actors, Theater, and Drama Therapy during COVID-19

Actors and theater majors have been shown to differ from their non-theater counterparts in college especially in their emotional processing (Gentzler et al., 2020).

Some researchers have even posited that some of the behaviors of acting, like the process of creating a character that is separate from themselves, are traditionally maladaptive behaviors made adaptive through acting (Panero, 2019). Throughout this research, it is clear that for these young actors to develop adaptively, they need the outlet of the play. This outlet was changed, however, when COVID-19 restrictions limited interaction to mostly online platforms. This included the theater industry and drama therapy.

Some research shows that actors' lives were disproportionally affected by the pandemic lockdowns (Williams et al., 2022). Drama therapy and therapy training seemed to show the way to reintegrate the experience of theater as it moved to the online platform (Adderly, 2022; Psalti & Piclhofer, 2022; Young, 2022). Though many complained that the new platform could be exhausting, it seemed to fulfill a need for many of those who had been involved in traditional theater (Adderly, 2022). It also offered, to college theater students, the creative activity and interaction with peers and leaders that they needed (Ettekal & Agans, 2020; Perry & Cuellar, 2022). It remains to be seen whether it was enough to constitute a protective factor or if these theater majors were more at risk because of their chosen creative expression. There is a great deal of research to be conducted in order to answer this question.

Problem Statement

As the world begins to emerge from the fear, separation, and trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, developmental psychology researchers are just beginning to look at any effects that this experience may have had on young people in high school and college (Blackwell et al., 2022; Bryce & Fraser, 2022; Calma-Birling & Zelazo, 2022; Houghton et al., 2022; Lohani et al., 2022; Pasupathi et al., 2022; Shu et

al., 2022; Stamatis et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2022; Ulset & von Soest, 2022; Velez et al.,

2022; Von Keyserlingk et al., 2022; Zhen & Zhou, 2022). Other research on adults

suggests that creative endeavors might have helped people of all ages to cope with the

stress of the lockdowns (Adderly, 2021; Brosowsky et al., 2022; Perry, 2022; Psalti &

Pichlhofer, 2022). Creativity's effectiveness in treatment of trauma was a subject of

interest before the pandemic. Some of this research suggests that creative expression may

be helpful for young people in their development or in processing trauma that may be

difficult for them to verbalize (Braito et al., 2021; Frydman & Mayor, 2021; Grosz et al.,

2022; Kronick et al., 2018; Pierroux et al., 2022; Savage, 2020; Schnitzer, 2021;

Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020).

There is also evidence that shows that acting majors in college may process

emotions differently and have unique experiences as a direct result of their creative

expression in theater (Gentzler et al., 2020; Panero, 2019). In addition, there is evidence

that the mandates of the pandemic may have made life more difficult for those who are

involved in theater (Adderly, 2021; Williams et al., 2022). But no research, known at this

time, has been done to examine the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and

lockdowns through this unique group of college students.

Creativity is a deeply ingrained part of what it means to be human (*New

International Bible,* 1973/2011, Genesis 1:1-2:3) and has been shown to change the

experience of life events (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Also, according to Bronfenbrenner's

(1979) model of human development, the upset to the many levels of these students'

ecology will most definitely have an effect on their individual development. To neglect to

directly examine the unique experiences of particularly creatively productive people, like

theater majors in college, through the COVID-19 pandemic is to miss not only a unique perspective but miss out on the discovery of risks and protective factors for future widespread trauma. What is missing in the research that has so far been published is a careful look at what effects creative expression, like theater productions, may have had for students in high school and college during the COVID-19 pandemics and lockdowns and, transversely, how those lockdowns may have affected their creative expression.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns as experienced by these college theater majors. Participants shared their unique experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as members of the cohort of theater majors who began their program after March of 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions in the United States, including the school years that began in fall of 2020, 2021, or 2022.

Research Question

RQ1: How do college theater majors who began their programs in the fall of 2020, 2021, or 2022 describe their lived experiences of the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns?

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

In general, one of the main challenges of a phenomenological study is the amount of time and focus required to interview several participants and then transcribe and code those interviews. Each interview must be reviewed during transcription and then reviewed many more times in order to include all information that might be contained not only in the participants' words but in their body language and any impressions that the

interviewer may have formed. All of these things must be coded for all of the interviews in order to form the themes that will define this lived experience.

The need for multiple interviews to form the full understanding of the themes of this lived experience led to two more challenges. First, recruiting the participants required that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences with the interviewer and that there were enough of them volunteering. The number did not need to be large though, as the study aimed to understand the lived experience of a very specific group of people. Second, an uncomfortable or hesitant participant will not be completely truthful. Whether this is conscious or not on the part of the participant, it could hamper the honesty of the participants' reports. With proper attention to the body language of the participants and with enough participants, this challenge was averted.

There was one final limitation that was found, not in the type of study, but in the phenomenon being studied. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns began fairly recently and, for some, may not feel completely finished. This held the possibility to make it difficult for participants to consider the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns as a change in their lives. Properly phrasing the questions in order to prompt the remembrance of the experience without using leading questions was crucial. When these challenges were carefully approached, the results represented an important window onto the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns for theater majors.

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

This study focused on two areas in order to investigate the lived experience of this phenomenon by the chosen group of people. The phenomenon of COVID-19 is a societal and personal trauma that affected the development of this group of creative adolescents

experiencing the transition between high school and college. In order to approach this investigation, it was necessary to understand background for development, especially the effect of societal trauma on development and creativity. For this, foundational information was found in the Bible (NIV, 1973-2011), in the work of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (2014) on creativity, and in the Ecological Systems Theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979).

The Bible speaks of the creativity of God from the very beginning (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011, Genesis 1 & 2) and, as humanity is created in the image of a creative God, one of the defining factors of humanity should be creativity (Bowers, 2016; Molhoek, 2022). It also speaks of trauma, telling stories that could be said to reflect the lived experience of personal and societal trauma (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011, Genesis 32, Psalm 74 & 79). Creativity and trauma are described in the Bible and researchers have been studying these themes generations afterward (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Creativity is a skill that changes the way that a person participates in problem finding, problem solving and the approach to everyday occupations according to the work of Csikszentmihalyi (2014). His theories are influential in the understanding of the effects of creativity and therefore were chosen to help understand creativity in life experience for this study.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) formed a theory that changed the way that developmental psychologists viewed human development. In his theory, the person does not develop apart from their home, neighborhood, society, world and time in which they live, and they influence each sphere as they develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As the COVID-19

pandemic touched every one of these levels, it was important to keep his model in mind while collecting and describing the lived experience of the developing, creative individuals in this study.

Definition of Terms

The following is a list of definitions of terms that were used in this study.

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) – The infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus with symptoms that range from mild to moderate respiratory illness to symptoms that require hospitalization (World Health Organization, 2023).

Creativity – Thinking in novel and useful ways and often making products that are themselves novel and useful (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Ecological Systems Theory – A model put forth by Urie Bronfenbrenner that views development as "a lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with his environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.3). The parts of this model consist of the child, the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem, which Bronfenbrenner added later (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Shelton, 2018).

Lockdown - "a temporary condition imposed by governmental authorities (as during the outbreak of an epidemic disease) in which most people are required to refrain from or limit activities outside the home involving public contact (such as dining out or attending large gatherings)" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Pandemic – This is when an infectious disease reaches epidemic spread on more than one continent, which happened for COVID-19 in March of 2020 (World Health Organization, 2023).

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – The development, after exposure to a traumatic event, of certain characteristic symptoms including intrusive symptoms (e.g., unwanted thoughts, dreams, or emotional reactions to stimuli reminiscent of the trauma), persistent avoidance of the things or memories associated with the trauma, memory problems, negative or distorted thoughts, other negative trends in emotions, changes in the persons response to stimuli making them particularly jumpy or distracted, all resulting in a significant impairment to the person's everyday life (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) – Perceived positive outcomes of emerging from trauma, which include factors like perceived change in the self, a changed sense of relationships with others, and changed philosophy of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Significance of the Study

Psychological research is just beginning to discover the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, especially on adolescents. Though there is some indication, from previous research interests, as to what might have been experienced by adolescents during this time and some indication of the effects of creativity for adolescents, this study fills the need to hear the voices of those students. In pivotal events like this, the voices of those who lived through the event illuminate the why and how of the phenomenon much more than forms of inquiry that serve to answer more of the what.

In this study, the voices of those who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the students of theater, may bring a new understanding of what protective factors against trauma may exist in the expression of creativity through theater. It may also expose any risk factors for this group towards maladaptive pathways resulting from

trauma that may have been experienced during the unprecedented phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary

The worldwide phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns associated with the attempt to control that pandemic have noticeably changed the world. The effects of this phenomenon on adolescents are the subject of much recent and ongoing research. Most of that research, however, does not focus specifically on college theater majors, a group shown to deal with emotions differently and express them differently.

Previous work examining the effects of art therapy suggests that creative expression might be helpful in trauma recovery. Additionally, research emerging regarding college students during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns in various countries shows both trauma like responses and some helpful effects of creative expression. These two thoughts together suggest that there is a need to hear from the voices of college theater majors in regard to their lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in the United States.

A qualitative phenomenological study that allows the voices of these creative students to speak, both through interviews and their familiar form of theater, is ideal. When they were able to express their experience, new avenues of research may have been opened and greater understanding of the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic began to form.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented. The reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic were extreme and governments and schools acted without the benefit of historical precedence. The novelty of this phenomenon means that the experiences of it are completely unique. The experiences of creative people, like theater students, are also unique. In order to build the foundation of this study, research had to be taken from multiple areas of study.

The first step in building such a foundation is a good understanding of human creativity, both original mandate and current experience, (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; *New International Bible,* 1973/2011, Genesis 1:28) as well as development in ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The research then continued by examining the current research on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns on young, developing people, and moved to the research on opportunities for healing and communication through the arts in places like art therapy. Finally, it was important to review research on the uniqueness of actors, and research on the unique effects of COVID-19 on theater and drama therapy.

Description of Research Strategy

Online Library Search

The background research for this project began with the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Bronfenbrenner and searches in the Liberty University Library online advanced search. The library search allowed a search of multiple databases, including PsycARTICLES from APA PsycNet, EBSCO, and ProQuest. Initial online searches were

limited to material produced no earlier than 2017. Following up on some of the articles found in the initial search led to some material produced earlier, and many foundational resources were also older. As there was no research known at this time that specifically speaks to the experience of creative adolescents during COVID-19, several searches on various topics that would feed into the research question had to be conducted.

The first subject to be investigated was art therapy or drama therapy, as this is one area where the creativity and creative activity are clearly used in an effort to directly affect those impacted by trauma. The search terms used here were *drama*, *drama therapy*, and *art therapy*. The parameters for inclusion of articles were that they addressed either treatment of trauma or the specific trauma of developing children. It was also helpful, but not required, that the article address acting or drama therapy specifically.

The next subject was creativity and childhood trauma and used keywords *childhood trauma*, *creativity as a protective factor*, *protective factors*, *ACEs*, *adverse childhood experiences*, and *risk*. This search proved to be a bit vague for the background needed for this project and so was altered to include research on the minds and especially the emotional processing of young actors. The keywords used in this search were *theater* and *acting*.

The final subject included the newest information. This subject was the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns and any effects on adolescents. Keywords included a combination of *COVID-19* and *adolescents*, *COVID-19* and *college*, *COVID-19* and *lockdown*. It was also discovered that COVID-19 must be searched using variations of the phrasing as early on in the pandemic there was little consensus on a correct phrasing. For this reason, *Covid 19*, *Corona Virus*, and *covid* were all searched and attached to the

previously mentioned keywords. This last usage of multiple keywords for COVID-19 completed the online search.

Subscriptions

In addition to the use of online library resources, existing subscriptions to peer reviewed psychological publications and the APA PsycInfo service were used. *Monitor on Psychology* (APA, 2022) assisted in understanding the direction of new research. Several pertinent studies were found in *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* (APA, 2022) and *American Psychologist* (APA, 2022). All of these publications helped to find the pertinent gap in the direction of new research on adolescents during COVID-19, namely the lack of specific studies on the experiences of creative students.

The APA PsycInfo service was used to keep an eye on emerging research. The service allows the use of keywords for sorting what research will be sent for consideration. The keywords used were *creativity*, *intelligence*, *resilience*, *acting*, *theater*, *education*, *development*, *COVID-19*, *Corona Virus*, *Pandemic*, and *Lockdown*. Any articles about creative adolescents, creative college students, adolescents or college students during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, and effects of COVID-19 on education were read and considered for inclusion in the background to this project.

Biblical Background

The search for Biblical foundations began with a search of the Bible for the words create or creation using www.biblegateway.com. The next step was a careful examination of the creation story in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, the trauma poetry in Psalm 74 and 79, and the trauma narrative in Genesis 32 using the Bible (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011) and the *Believer's Bible Commentary, 2nd Edition* (MacDonald, 2016). After

this, a search of the databases through Liberty University's Library led to papers in theological journals using the keywords *creation*, *create*, and *imago dei*. This led to research regarding God as creator and humans as those created in the image of God.

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Review of Literature

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Background Theories

Many researchers have investigated creativity and many more have formed theories of development. To guide this research one researcher in each field influenced the direction of inquiry. For a window on how to capture the experiences of the creative, the work of Csikszentmihalyi (2014) was chosen, and in order to guide the understanding of development in relation to the larger world, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory was used. Each theorist was chosen because their theories informed the direction of the present research.

In creativity, there are myriad theorists who each provide a different perspective on a rather ethereal field of study. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) spent the better part of five decades before his death in 2021 (IMDb, n.d.) researching not only creativity in its many manifestations, but also play, adolescent development, and attention. In one of his most familiar studies, he and his colleagues and students interviewed people involved in various past times that they found intrinsically enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 135-139). It was in this investigation that he discovered something that he called flow. This experience, Csikszentmihalyi (2014) pointed out, is akin to the experience of creating and working out new ideas. It is also similar to what has been called religious ecstasy (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). A person in flow, in whatever activity they experience it, will report feeling less self-conscious and more focused on the action without worry of

losing control of the situation (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 138-146). It is easy to see how the experience of flow, which often helps experiencers escape feelings of boredom, worry, or anxiety, may be an adaptive experience for those sensing a lack of control during a societal trauma.

Csikszentmihalyi's work has also given insights into the process of creativity and creative production such that the topic has become accessible for laypeople as well as psychological researchers (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; IMDb, n.d.). When Csikszentmihalyi (2014) began investigating creativity, the prevailing insight into creativity was that it was no different than problem solving. He and others pointed out that, when the accomplishments of imminent creative scientists are considered, the chief necessary skill is not just finding the solution to a problem but finding the problem itself, the tools to solve that problem and the solution to the problem (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 157). Creative thought requires the person to be so interested and motivated to find solutions in their particular creative field that they are able to reach beyond what can be rationally obtained.

Csikszentmihalyi's work with experience sampling and his work reporting the experiences of the imminent Creatives of the world inform the qualitative nature of this study (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Topics like creativity and flow are very personal and yet universal. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) used the voices of those who experienced creativity and flow to describe the experiences. This study hopes to follow that example. It is important to remember, however, that all of these experiences occur within the context of a person's environment and society.

The ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) completes the frame for understanding the experience of the creative developing young adults. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model says that a developing human does not develop alone but in interaction with the different layers of the world around them. The layers of this theory are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and, added in later years, the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Each system represents a layer of the world around the developing child that not only influences the child but is then influenced by the child in turn. For example, in the microsystem, which includes those in closest proximity to the child (e.g., caregivers), the caregivers will of course influence the course of the child's development, but the child will also, through feedback, influence the caregiver (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is true of all of the levels so that the interactions look more like this: mesosystem (e.g., schools, religious organizations) ↔ child's microsystem ↔ child; exosystem (e.g., parent's jobs, government organizations) ↔ child's mesosystem ↔ child's microsystem ↔ child; macrosystem (e.g., cultural attitudes, ideologies) ↔ child's exosystem ↔ child's mesosystem ↔ child's microsystem ↔ child; all of these are nested in the chronosystem of time passing. With this in mind, it is clear that the actions of governments (e.g., pandemic related restrictions), the actions of schools (e.g., virtual meeting), the stress of families, and the perception of time would affect and be affected by the theater majors being interviewed in this research. It is expected that this will be reflected in their reported experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. There is also a great deal of research done regarding the effects of this worldwide pandemic and related restrictions on college students, although very little of it reflects the voices of creative college students as this work will.

COVID-19 and the Adolescents and Young Adults of the World

Building on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) understanding of layered systems, the developing young adults and adolescents who lived through the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns experienced massive changes in several layers. There were changes not only in their family and school (microsystems, mesosystems), but also in the larger context of the government's influence and cultural practices (exosystems and macrosystems; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is important to consider the effect of these systems when trying to understand how students coped during the pandemic. One of these efforts to create and test an evaluative measure of coping during the pandemic was the Pandemic Coping Scale (PCS) tested by Lotzin and colleagues (2022). This measure included six different domains of behavior in a self-report measure, one of which was social support (Lotzin et al., 2022). Social support was also a factor in several other studies done during this time.

Bako and Zana (2021) explored the interaction of the social support system and the developing person when they examined the phenomenon of public mood affecting private mood during the pandemic and lockdowns of 2020. They investigated how, in their own and others' experiences, the atmosphere of change in the psychology of the "we," or the group or society, affected the "me," or the person, during this stressful and rapidly changing period (Bako & Zana, 2021). But they were not the only ones pointing out this interaction in their research. In Australia, Houghton and colleagues (2022) examined how the closure of schools effected adolescent feelings of loneliness and depression over several time periods during the pandemic. Researchers in Germany looked, through online questionnaires, at how people felt about the changes in cultural

offerings as in-person events were cancelled and virtual events came into being (Gotthardt et al., 2022). Research in certain areas of China, the first affected, measured both personal and contextual issues when they examined what factors predictively affected the mental health of young people during the pandemic (Chen et al., 2022). Chen and colleagues (2022) showed that these contextual elements accurately predicted depression and PTSD but only predicted other mental health issues when combined with personal elements.

The personal elements studied in research done around the world focused on adaptive and maladaptive practices and outcomes for the students. Following the example of their fellow researchers in China, Shu and colleagues (2022) continued to look at an environmental-individual interaction as it pertains to a mediating effect on college students' anxiety. Their questionnaire went to 2734 Chinese college students during pandemic control efforts and used rating scales for social support, self-esteem, resilience, and anxiety (Shu et al., 2022). Their results pointed to a complicated interplay between social support, self-esteem, and resilience in reducing anxiety (Shu et al., 2022).

Another survey done with 2,090 initial Chinese college students and 1,609 follow up participants examined posttraumatic growth (PTG) longitudinally after the lockdowns (W. Tang et al., 2022). These researchers considered self-esteem as Shu and colleagues had (2022), but also considered emotional intelligence and emotional regulation in their survey components (W. Tang et al., 2022). In yet more evidence of the need for a multilayered approach to college students' development, their conclusion suggested that training in emotional regulation and self-esteem may encourage PTG in the future (W. Tang et al., 2022). In this same vein, other Chinese researchers found not only

development of PTG but co-occurring development of posttraumatic stress (PTS) and depressive symptoms in relation to the experience of preventative measures for COVID-19 (Zhen & Zhou, 2022). This body of research seems to indicate that the mental health results for Chinese students show a myriad of both adaptive and maladaptive results. But there were countries that did not experience the extremes of efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

In the UK, where there were several waves of lockdown, students did show some maladaptive results according to a longitudinal survey study (N. K. Y. Tang et al., 2022). The Responding to COVID-19 by Enhancing Resilience in Students (RECOVERS) survey collected data from UK college aged students investigating anxiety, depression, insomnia, substance misuse, and suicidality at two different times after the initial and secondary lockdowns (N. K. Y. Tang et al., 2022). The participants were college students ($n = 895$) and people of the same age who were not attending college ($n = 547$) though only 201 of these would ultimately participate in the longitudinal aspect of the study (N. K. Y. Tang et al., 2022). These researchers discovered that their participants' biggest risk factors for severe symptoms of anxiety and depression as well as increased substance abuse and misuse were their age, pre-existing conditions, their status as caretaker for other individuals, difficult financial status, and irregular sleep or sleep difficulties (N. K. Y. Tang et al., 2022). An interesting fact was that the numbers of students experiencing these negative results decreased after the third lockdown, which prompted the researchers to speculate that perhaps this indicated adaptation to their new circumstances (N. K. Y. Tang et al., 2022).

In Spain, researchers also noticed that there could be negative effects on the population's mental health related to the COVID-19 preventative lockdown procedures and wanted to know which factors might help in adapting to the lockdowns (Morales-Vives et al., 2020). In a survey issued at four different times to four different groups of people they looked at satisfaction with life, subjective happiness, resilience, the Big Five personality traits, and the experience of COVID-19 and health in general (Morales-Vives et al., 2020). The participants were between the ages of 18 and 80, and the results showed that age and sex did make a difference in adaptability with women and young people showing less adaptability (Morales-Vives et al., 2020). Though they did not speak directly to the experience of college students, it is possible that younger college students would find it more difficult to adapt as they often fell in the younger part of the sample for the study presented by Morale-Vives and colleagues (2020). Elsewhere, research has focused on more positive or balanced outcomes and adolescent groups.

For example, in Norway, researchers, like their Chinese counterparts, examined PTG and risks and protective factors for adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns (Ulset & von Soest, 2021). Ulset and von Soest (2021) recognized that adolescents are in a transitionary and formative point in development and wanted to know how best to help them adapt by looking for the factors that most influenced the development of PTG. Their survey was sent to 12,686 students in Norwegian middle and high schools in the early months of the pandemic and consisted of selected questions from the childhood version of a Posttraumatic Growth Inventory as well as other mental health questions, social relationship questions and questions regarding the participants' experience rated on a Likert scale (Ulset & von Soest, 2021). They did not show as large

a segment of their participants in the moderate to high level of PTG as other studies they used as reference, but this may have come from the early timing of their study as many other PTG studies are done months to years after the initial trauma (Ulset & von Soest, 2021). It seems that follow up research would be useful in several of these studies to examine what the incidence of mental health issues and PTG may look like several years after the initial COVID-19 lockdowns (Morales-Vives et al., 2020; Ulset & von Soest, 2021; W. Tang et al., 2022; Zhen & Zhou, 2022). While this research is all very helpful in guiding future research, there are others who focused directly on the experience of the American College student.

COVID-19 and the American College Student

In the United States, efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 began to impact schools, including college campuses, with the social distancing measures issued in late March of 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Depending on the state, several schools saw movement to virtual classes or drastic changes in the landscapes of the classroom. These efforts, which were hotly debated in all of politics and thought to be temporary, were lifted and put back into effect multiple times throughout the next two years and, for some, the practice of school and going off to college was never the same (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Researchers in the United States investigated several different effects resulting from the school interruptions.

Several researchers investigated what the disruption in the traditional approach to school meant to students from middle school to high school and beyond (Bryce & Fraser, 2022; Kattago, 2021; Velez et al., 2022). Bryce and Fraser (2022) surveyed students in

middle and high school ($n = 726$) to find their perceptions of the interruptions in schooling, personal life challenges during the pandemic, and feelings of school connectedness using Likert scales for each. They also used open ended responses for a qualitative view of the students' perceived challenges and positive aspects of the pandemic (Bryce & Fraser, 2022). They then compared these to an earlier survey (pre-pandemic) of hope to see if pre-pandemic hope could have been a factor in these perceptions (Bryce & Fraser, 2022). What they discovered was that the students did perceive that their lives had been massively interrupted and their education had suffered, but if they had measured high on the hope scale before the pandemic, their level of school connectedness was still high (Bryce & Fraser, 2022).

These findings were echoed in the work of Velez, Hahn, and Troyer (2022) whose qualitative work with 816 adolescents examined how those students were making meaning out of their COVID-19 experience. These students again recognized and reported a great upheaval but were more specific as to where the changes were most strongly felt. They reported that the upheaval was felt because of the inadequacy of online communication, what had been strong connections between their mental health and social routines, and the feeling of missing out on major milestones and events in life because of the pandemic and lockdowns (Velez et al., 2022). This feeling of missing milestones in life is further explored by Kattago (2021) who argued during the lockdowns that these measures were distorting people's very view of time and causing them to live not in the chronology of their lives but in a constant present state of emergency. Because of this, there was a sort of mourning of the time that was not and the futures that were postponed, especially for those on the cusp of transitions traditional to students in the

United States, like that between high school and college (Kattago, 2021; Velez et al., 2022).

But the work of Bryce and Fraser (2022) did not just point to the negative. In addition to hope, it was shown that one protective factor was the digital schooling, which, despite being inadequate as a replacement for in person schooling (Velez et al., 2022), was still a necessary connection to the outside world for the student (Bryce & Fraser, 2022). Perhaps this is because many of the students who experienced the transition from middle to high school or high school to college during the pandemic are what can be called digital natives (Colasante et al., 2022). For them the digital classroom may have provided the social connectedness despite the distance (Blackwell et al., 2022; Bryce & Fraser, 2022; Colosante et al., 2022; Velez et al., 2022). This seemed to be the case in the cross-sectional survey performed by Blackwell and colleagues (2022) in which it was discovered that for both their 2- to 12-year-old cohort ($n = 977$) and their 11- to 17-year-old cohort ($n = 669$), social connectedness was a strong protective factor and had a large impact on their life satisfaction even though the only social connectedness offered was, in some cases, online. Colasante and colleagues (2022) spoke directly to this fact when they looked at social support via digital means for digital natives. While their participants were surveyed before the pandemic and from a Canadian college ($n = 185$), their results pointed to the possibility that digital support may be as effective for digital natives as in person support (Colasante et al., 2022). This could mean that the move to digital schooling in the United States, while obviously an upheaval, may have yet provided some of the support necessary for the digital natives transitioning into college.

Though the research discussed so far suggests some protective and risk factors for young people in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, much of this had not focused on the specific transitionary period between high school and college. For students in the United States this transition is a milestone at which much is changing in the academic, social and even residential fronts while they are also continuing to develop physically into adults. One of the studies conducted on this developmental period during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns was done by Ang, Monte, and Tsai (2022). They gathered information from 476 first year college students from a New York college and found, unsurprisingly, that the more psychological resources the students had, the better their outcomes (Ang et al., 2022). Their research focused mostly on hope and gratitude as protective factors, like Bryce and Fraser (2022), and showed that these two factors influenced the outcomes by first creating what they called a higher COVID-19 protective self-efficacy (Ang et al., 2022). Calma-Birling and Zelazo (2022) also recognized in two studies (Study 1: $n = 392$; Study 2: $n = 1200$) that in their network of protective and risk factors and their effects, self-compassion showed a very strong link to students' positive observable emotional responses. They were not the only ones to find that the students' vision of themselves and their own future was important to their development of adaptive versus maladaptive practices during the pandemic (Pasupathi et al., 2022; Stamatis et al., 2022).

Pasupathi and colleagues (2022) pointed out that students experiencing the very particular transition from high school to college in the United States are dealing with several developmental factors, including issues with academic resilience, mental health, and identity development. They conducted a year-long (four waves of data collection)

study of first year college students ($n = 243$ participating in all four waves) across four institutions to examine developmental function and, in particular, identity development during the first year of the pandemic (Pasupathi et al., 2022). This is the time for adolescents to be on their own and test their own ideas of who they are and what they believe the future holds for them. It is not surprising, then, that Stamatis and colleagues (2022) also discovered the effects of this internalized vision of a personal future, as it relates to the world around the student, when they searched for concrete predictors of poorer mental health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic for college students. Each of these studies confirm earlier discoveries in the longitudinal study of 10th and 12th grade students in Southeastern Michigan, which showed that a healthy Prospective Self was key to limiting both internalizing and externalizing problems, even in the face of Early Life Adversity (ELA) (Zinn et al., 2020).

There are several reasons that the identity formation of these students in transition to college may have been endangered during the pandemic, and these stressors were evaluated in some other studies conducted during the period (Lohani et al., 2021; von Keyserlingk et al., 2021). The college transition period is stressful, but even more so during the pandemic when classes transitioned to various virtual platforms (von Keyserlingk et al., 2021). The work of von Keyserlingk and colleagues (2021) pointed this out when they used a longitudinal survey of students in Southern California ($n = 274$) to investigate the differences in study related stress for students. While their research pointed to an increase across the board for study related stress, they also showed that those students with self-efficacy in self-regulation reported less of a stress increase (von Keyserlingk et al., 2021). These skills, which are part of an individual's identity, may

need to be taught for students to handle stressors like the COVID-19 pandemic should they occur in the future.

This work is echoed in the experience sampling study done by Lohani and colleagues (2021) at about the same period in the pandemic timeline. In this study 94 participants received messages to their cell phones to sample their experiences in real time (Lohani et al., 2021). Their results, however, focused on emotional regulation, another facet of identity formation, and showed that adaptive emotional regulation strategies were positively correlated to better psychological health during the pandemic (Lohani et al., 2021). Both self-efficacy in self-regulation and emotional regulation are facets of identity development that helped those students experiencing the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic at school and each report suggested that institutions help their students develop these skills (Lohani et al., 2021; von Keyserlingk et al., 2021).

There are also other activities and personal habits that have been shown to be adaptive to a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. In Lohani and colleagues' (2022) above mentioned study, many of their real time experience samples reflected better emotional regulation when the person felt that the task that they were engaged in at the time was of use to themselves or others. Secondly, as was mentioned in the discussion of Pasupathi and colleagues' (2022) and Stamatis' (2022) studies, when the participant reported elements of a healthy view of their own future, they also displayed less of the maladaptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Finally, one of the activities that helped stave off the damage to well-being, common in the extended lockdowns and with the added stress of spreading disease, was daily creative endeavors (Brosowsky et al., 2020).

Brosowsky and colleagues' (2020) work during the pandemic echoed many of the works discussed earlier in this literature review, in that they focused on meaning-making and intrinsically centered positive views of one's own future. In Brosowsky and colleagues' (2020) conclusion, it seems that creative endeavors may have met that need during the isolation of the COVID-19 restrictions. There was some concern that the social aspect of many pre-pandemic creative endeavors suddenly being eliminated may cause damage to the well-being of those pre-pandemic creative people (Brosowsky et al., 2020). The results, however, seem to show that this effect, though present, did not hamper the protective effects of creative endeavors that were possible in isolation (Brosowsky et al., 2020). These results cannot conclusively say if the social aspect of creative endeavors was missed, however, because of the strictly qualitative structure of their surveys given to 924 participants of various ages and genders recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (Brosowsky et al., 2020). The findings are encouraging, though, regarding the protective factor of creative endeavors, even if they are in isolation. This finding that creative endeavors correlate with more positive assessments of well-being should not be surprising given the wealth of research on the benefits of arts therapy after trauma (Ali et al., 2020; Bernstein, 2019; Braito et al., 2021; Cook & Borgen, 2020; Frydman & Mayor, 2020; Gildea, 2021; Kewley & Van Hout, 2022; Schnitzer et al., 2021; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Uttley et al., 2015) and in assisting proper development and communication (Chapin et al., 2020; Grosz et al., 2022; Kronick et al., 2018; Lerner & Callina, 2018; Lombar & Muller, 2018; Pierroux et al., 2022; Savage, 2020; Wymer et al., 2020).

Healing and Communication Through Art

The use of creative endeavors for the treatment of trauma and/or developmental delay has been called art therapy and can come in several forms depending on the creative product, the intended audience, and the facilitators. Hundreds of studies have been done on this rather nebulous subject, many of them case studies, and the very novelty inherent in creativity means that there is little agreement on definitive practices across the board (Braito et al., 2021; Schnitzer et al., 2021; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Uttley et al., 2015). To begin examining what art therapy is and what it can mean to various groups, it is helpful to begin with a broad view by looking at systematic literature reviews of the subject.

In the review performed by Uttley and colleagues (2015) the focus was the clinical and cost effectiveness of art therapy for participants' non-psychotic mental health disorders. This review was performed five years before COVID-19 restrictions were put in place, and there is no mention of this kind of mass stress incident in any of the studies mentioned in the review. The review provides a careful examination of the results of several individual quantitative studies to look for overarching patterns of correlation between art therapy and positive benefits, regarding cost and clinical outcome, and also includes comparisons with other forms of therapy, though they admit, a true meta-analysis was not possible with the disparate research available (Uttley et al., 2015). The results of the review were obviously frustrating for the reviewers, as there was a need for more research in order to find any definitive answers (Uttley et al., 2015). The trend, though, that they found was that art therapy was clinically beneficial to at least the same level as other therapy methods, as long as the practitioner was skilled and the therapy was not abruptly ended, as too abrupt an end would leave a sense of unresolve with the

participant (Uttley et al., 2015). The cost benefit hinged on the perceived clinical benefit and though it cost more than talk therapy, benefits may outweigh this differential (Uttley et al., 2015). As a majority of the American college students are unlikely to have a diagnosable psychotic disorder, this population's result could possibly extend to them.

A more recent and broad review of the literature is more focused on youth as it looked at art as a bridge to dealing with sensitive topics with young people in therapy (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020). In their review of literature from a 20-year period (1997-2017), Tumanyan and Huuki (2020) discovered three themes that describe what art therapy can do for young people that may be missing in traditional therapy. Namely, invisible aspects of the young person's history may be made visible in art, life changes may be encouraged by art therapy, and aspects that reach beyond the fully conscious and the conspicuously human facts of the young person's experience may more easily come to light (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020). This focus of the review seems to be more pointed at the effectiveness of art therapy in dealing with the things that young people cannot yet put into words, which would make traditional talk therapy less than useful (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020). Traumatic experiences, like the stress of a worldwide pandemic, would fit snugly in this list of things young people find difficult to describe.

The difficult to describe can often result in the difficult to control, like the emotions and actions and avoidances of PTSD. Schnitzer and colleagues (2021) were sensitive to this when they reviewed literature pertaining to art therapy's impact on those suffering from PTSD. Braito and colleagues (2021) also saw this trend and looked more specifically at the population of children with mental health disorders, like PTSD and how art therapy affected them. Each of these reviews cite the need for more research, but

in both, the use of art therapy to work around the defensiveness and avoidance behaviors of PTSD and other mental health disorders appeared to be beneficial to the participants (Braito et al., 2021; Schnitzer et al., 2021). There does seem to be a benefit, then, of art therapy for victims of trauma.

An interesting examination of this benefit is in Gildea's (2021) creative use of the wilderness metaphor to describe the work with childhood trauma victims using poetry. Using poetry, the participants are allowed to explore what Gildea (2021) calls the "wilderness of grief," which often does not follow linear thinking or logic. There are layers of the trauma that participants are able to access through their art that are not accessible when simply talking through the events of the trauma (Gildea, 2021). Gildea's (2021) approach, which is termed "poetic inquiry," is a free form, stream of consciousness process that brings the participant into awareness of their grief and trauma as they write. A similar approach can be found in the research of Giovanelli (2022), who explored the experience of reading the writings that sprang from the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Giovanelli (2022) goes one step beyond Gildea (2021) in that the poetry is not just written but read and responded to by others experiencing similar phenomenon to the writer. The beauty of communication is captured in this examination of what Giovanelli (2022) terms "covid poetry." In these two studies, not only does art therapy, in this case writing, help to process trauma but also to communicate the experience to others who might identify with or not otherwise be aware of the experience of the writer.

Other expressive forms of therapy are also used to help victims confront trauma and communicate their experiences to others (Ali et al., 2020; Berstein, 2019; Cook &

Borgen, 2020; Frydman & Mayor, 2020; Kewley & Van Hout, 2022). The dance therapy

model implemented by Bernstein (2019) uses the body to create images that, for the

victim, represent the trauma they have experienced. Bernstein (2019) shares some of the

background research, personal successes, and useful tools in a short explanation of her

own practice since 2008. The knowledge of the connection between body movement and

neurological processing of memories and emotion help to make this therapy effective

beyond words, but the use of expressive language on the part of the victim has also

proven effective in Bernstein's (2019) experience. Drama therapy, also a combination of

movement and verbal expression, has also been used to serve several different subsets of

trauma victims, including military veterans (Ali et al., 2020) and those recovering from

addiction or struggling to connect to a community (Cook & Borgen, 2020; Kewley &

Van Hout, 2022).

To look into the benefits of drama therapy, case studies and qualitative research

are often the best ways to capture the voices of participants. Ali and colleagues (2020)

examined a program funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) called DE-

CRUIT. This method brings together small groups of military veterans struggling with

reintegration into civilian life and, using Shakespeare's military writings as a bridge,

teaches them to communicate their earliest trauma through monologues they write (Ali et

al., 2020). The program works for these veterans as it moves past old stigmas of

weakness associated with emotional expression by using the example of the military

writings of Shakespeare (Ali et al., 2020). Surprisingly, not all of the trauma expressed by

the veterans has any connection to their military service (Ali et al., 2020). Again, what

people are afraid to talk about, no matter how deeply buried, seems to be communicated through art.

Other examinations of drama therapy also show a movement past stigma and towards integration with the larger community. A group called *Staging Recovery* was examined in a qualitative study conducted by Kewley and Van Hout (2022) in which people suffering from addiction who had chosen to go through the recovery process experienced theater in successively more personal levels until they were able to relate their most personal struggle. The participants reported, over the three years of this phenomenological study, that they were able to not only delve into the deeper and more painful parts of their addiction but also to develop a community of support that proves necessary for successful recovery (Kewley & Van Hout, 2022). Community like this is also represented in the work of Cook and Borgen (2020) as they described the experiences of those involved in a community collective theater experience called *Voices UP!* in Canada. Many of the same sorts of deep emotional exploration and community making reported in Kewley and Van Hout's (2022) work were also present here. Most of these studies look at the adult stage of development, but drama therapy and art therapy in general have also been shown to help school children as well (Frydman & Mayor, 2020; Grosz et al., 2022; Pierroux et al., 2022).

The use of drama therapy in schools in any structured sense is fairly new, though the practice has been used in some form since the 1970's (Frydman & Mayor, 2020). The arts have often proven to be beneficial for school aged children. In a recent review of studies of intentional and active involvement in the arts in school, it was discovered that this involvement might coincide with development of personality traits like extraversion

and conscientiousness, which may then lead to later success in life (Grosz et al., 2022). Much more research needs to be done to be able to understand the true impact of active arts involvement and drama therapy in schools, but there are some suggestions that it might foster adaptive development and help students dealing with trauma when it is allowed to go forward in a supportive environment (Frydman & Mayor, 2020; Grosz et al., 2022). Frydman and Mayor (2020) suggest in their survey of school drama therapists that this might mean that, not only should drama therapy receive more financial and political support, but that the role of drama therapist in schools might become one of further training the staff and faculty in order that more students can be reached. This suggestion of community involvement echoes some of the Positive Youth Development model and the Ecological Systems Theory of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as it suggests that the community be involved in the positive development of the student, in this case through drama (Lerner & Callina, 2018). Development through art, like any other aspect of development, would then depend on both adults and peers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner & Callina, 2018).

Peer involvement in development through the arts can be seen in the case study presented by Pierroux and colleagues (2022). In this study, they are looking at the adolescent development of creative-imagining processes through group creative projects (Pierroux et al., 2022). Adolescents' imagination and ability to think conceptually is usually making huge developmental strides and, in Pierroux and colleagues' (2022) case study, collective creating offered not only opportunities to develop in these two areas but also to grow and develop in the way that they communicated their imaginings and concepts. Their peers were the challenge that allowed them to develop in this aspect

(Pierroux et al., 2022), but there is also a need for adult interaction in creative endeavors (Chapin et al., 2020).

Chapin, Fowler, and Deans (2020) explored the role of adults in the development of youth in arts programs when they examined a particular filmmaking program aimed at fifth through eighth grade students. They interviewed several adult facilitators in the program to see what they viewed their most successful roles to be for the group (Chapin et al., 2020). What they found was not the traditional hierarchy of adult/child relationships, as they might be found in schools or at home, but more of a collaboration with modeling and support from the adult (Chapin et al., 2020). It was in the film making experience that the students were able to experience healthy and supportive relationships with adults who listened and understood the dynamic of the group and focused on the eventual autonomy of the students (Chapin et al., 2020). The adults in this group were not only focused on the students learning to create the product, but also on the students beginning to learn to collaborate with others in their community (Chapin et al., 2020). Communication and collaboration seem to be a theme in most of the research regarding art therapy and drama therapy with children and adolescents, especially for those who have faced trauma (Kronick et al., 2018; Lombard & Muller, 2018; Savage, 2020; Wymer et al., 2020).

Having undergone trauma, some children and adolescents may not be able to properly communicate what they feel or even what they saw or experienced in order for others to understand and help them (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020). The arts can be used to help developing minds communicate the trauma (Kronick et al., 2018; Savage, 2020; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Wymer et al., 2020). Wymer and colleagues (2020) suggest

that expressive art techniques may be useful when integrated into trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy. They explain that when a child endures trauma, their development is affected, often leading to differences in the way the brain handles speech, memory, and meaning making (Wymer et al., 2020). These effects are caused by the protective and defensive actions of the brain but can lead to an inability to process the trauma, especially in traditional talk therapy (Wymer et al., 2020). Trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy finds ways to help these children communicate what they feel and what they need, and one of these ways can be expressive arts (Wymer et al., 2020). Lombard and Muller (2018) seem to have discovered this from the other side, as they endeavor to unlock everyone's creativity. What they found was that creativity is often found in the unconscious and they used psychosynthesis psychology, which gives the participant a framework with which they can synthesize their mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual human dimensions, to connect to that unconscious part of their personality (Lombard & Muller, 2018). The children who have experienced trauma are using creativity because it resides in those unconscious spaces where their trauma may also be hiding (Lombard & Muller, 2018; Wymer et al., 2020).

There are opportunities to study this phenomenon in practice, and Kronick and colleagues (2018) and Savage (2020) present two such examples. In Kronick and colleagues' (2018) description of the use of sandplay narrative with a group of children in an immigration detention facility in Canada, the ability for art to communicate traumatic events that children may not even fully understand is described. These children were seeking asylum from an oppressive regime and had seen military actions that some adults may have had trouble with and then been detained when they arrived in a new country,

but when they were offered toys to build a world in a 50cm by 30cm box, the results were amazing (Kronick et al., 2018). The children were able to describe the world they had created and, in this way, describe their feelings about the trauma in their lives in a safe way and using their own vocabulary of images and toy representations (Kronick et al., 2018).

In Savage's (2018) work with adolescent girls who had been adopted out of foster care, more than the trauma is safely communicated. These girls were given an opportunity to better understand, and begin to like, themselves despite or even because of the trauma they had endured (Savage, 2018). The process consisted of creating an imaginary public service announcement about themselves (Savage, 2018). In these personal public service announcements, developed through weeks of narradrama, the girls were able to express how they wanted to be seen and what they had endured to get to that point (Savage, 2018). The practice of artistic expression, through poetry, mask making, digital art and improvisational drama allowed them to access what was going on inside and communicate it to the outside world (Savage, 2018).

This communication can be healing to the young developing people who have experienced any sort of trauma (Kronick et al., 2018; Savage, 2018; Wymer et al., 2020). They receive the support in a social situation that may be a safe place to learn creative expression and proper relationships with adults and peers (Chapin et al., 2020; Pierroux et al., 2022). But one of the defining features of the COVID-19 pandemic was a separation, from social distancing and virtual schooling to complete lockdown where entire communities could not leave their homes (Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention, 2022). It is important then to look at how this changed art therapy, drama therapy, actors, and the theater experience during COVID-19.

Art, Actors, Theater, and Drama Therapy During COVID-19

The experience of acting is one that fascinates and confuses people who do not experience it personally (Panero, 2019). Actors perform fiction with real emotions and real characteristics, which may or may not be present in their own, effectively blurring the lines between what is real and what is not real (Panero, 2019). This ability to experience the emotions of a situation that is not currently happening requires that the actor have a deeper understanding of the emotions involved and process them in the safe space of fiction, a fact that contributes to the therapeutic aspects of drama (Panero, 2019; Savage, 2018). It also means that the theater major's experience and processing of emotions is also different from the experience and processing of emotions by their non-theater counterparts (Gentzler et al., 2020).

In a survey of 284 college students, Gentzler and colleagues (2020) outlined these differences. The students came from three separate groups: theater majors, those with some theater experience, and those with no theater experience (Gentzler et al., 2020). Their survey consisted of several different measures examining temperament, emotional beliefs, emotional regulation, and emotional perception (Gentzler et al., 2020). What they found was that theater majors had a more positive view of negative emotions, were more aware of their own emotions, and were better able to amplify their emotions than their non-theater counterparts (Gentzler et al., 2020). This emotional difference may have contributed to a unique experience of the highly emotionally charged atmosphere of a world in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theater, drama therapy, and role-playing of any kind are not just emotionally charged, but socially dependent as they require interaction with other performers or the public (Adderly, 2022; Psalti & Piclhofer, 2022; Williams et al., 2022; Young, 2022). One example, though not specifically drama therapy, is Young's (2022) exploration of the COVID-19 restriction experience from the point of view of counseling students adjusting to online role-playing. Students of counseling often learn through role play before practicing with actual clients in order to learn from their mistakes in a safe environment. When COVID-19 restrictions made this impossible, instructors pivoted to an online platform for the role-playing activities (Young, 2022). Though the move presented challenges, the students reported a hope that this practice would provide them experiences in virtual therapy, which is fast becoming a norm, that they would not get from a pre-pandemic program and that would help them in future employment (Young, 2022). Learning a new skill for a quickly changing world is a theme echoed in drama therapy as well (Adderly, 2022; Psalti & Piclhofer, 2022).

In the case study of iScan, an online sociodrama network based in the UK, Diane Adderly (2022) shares her personal experience with the efforts to move sociodrama to an online platform. The purpose of sociodrama is to address interpersonal issues that may exist in a society or group by assigning people to play one of the roles in that group in a dramatic play. After the roles are assigned, the group will work together to understand how their individual roles would interact to create the story of the play. Adderly (2022) shares that the adjustment to the online platform could be exhausting and that many of the practices of pre-pandemic sociodrama were impossible, but also points out the wider reach provided by the online world and the unique experiences and discoveries that could

only have happened in a virtual world. This is reiterated in the work of Psalti and Piclhofer (2022) when they also looked at iScan and saw the possibility of online sociodrama's ability to help people deal with the liminality of the COVID-19 pandemic. In their view, the job of sociodrama is to create liminal spaces to help those involved learn to better handle the larger transitional spaces of life and, in this sense, was perfect for the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions (Psalti & Piclhofer, 2022). When the world changes, the resources that help people learn to deal with the world must change.

Nowhere is this more important than in the lives of adolescents, who were already dealing with transitions in their lives before the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. These adolescents will need to develop coping mechanisms and safe spaces to process the trauma they experience, and the arts could offer what they need. In a mixed method study conducted by Perry and Cuellar (2022), college students who had suffered childhood trauma reported that the performing arts was one of the most useful coping mechanisms, even above trauma focused therapy. As the world locked down to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it became even more important for the performing arts as a form of connection, communication, and learning to adapt to the environment. As Ettekal and Agans (2020) pointed out in their advice for programs designed to serve the positive development of youth, each program had to find the ways that they could best continue to offer the support adolescents needed, such as supportive adults, skill building, and meaningful youth leadership opportunities.

Despite the growth opportunities, there are some who believe that the restrictions were felt disproportionately by actors and theaters (Williams et al., 2022). Williams and

colleagues (2022) examined the experiences of those in the cultural and creative industry in Tasmania during the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions. What they found was that workers in this industry were most affected by the shutdowns, as they had to scramble to find ways to continue their work after social restrictions were put in place and, whether they were successful or not, their art was not the same (Williams et al., 2022). Whether theater majors felt this disproportionate weight, or whether they felt that it was a creative opportunity, or somewhere in between remains to be understood.

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Biblical Foundations of the Study

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While the Bible may not speak directly to the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic or how creative people experienced that particular event, there are two constructs of this study that are clearly spoken of in the Bible. To begin with, the very first thing God does in the Bible is create (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011, *Genesis* 1, 2). In the midst of this creative act, God created humanity in His image (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011, Genesis 1, 2). Secondly, as the Bible goes on, humanity struggles with trauma. Especially in the Psalms, there are countless reactions to trauma that mirror what humans are still experiencing, even in unprecedented times (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011).

Created in the Image of the Creator

It is not by accident that the opening chapters of the Bible speak of God's act of creation (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011, Genesis 1, 2). God creates the world out of the formless void, making something new, beautiful, and pleasing out of nothing (Bowers, 2016). Each step of the creation of the Earth is carefully outlined as God intentionally laid out the earth, readying each area for specific types of animals or plants

(Bowers, 2016; MacDonald, 2016). When it came to the creation of humans, the pattern of the story and the pattern of God's creation changes (Bowers, 2016). God, as the Trinity, discusses the creation of humanity, uniquely, in His own image (Bowers, 2016; MacDonald, 2016). Through this process, God is introduced as Creator (Elohim, MacDonald, 2016) and, after the creation of humanity, as Lord (Jehovah, MacDonald, 2016). This description of God offers a small window onto the meaning of humanity's unique creation in the image of God.

In Genesis 1 and 2, humanity is created, and God decides to create humanity uniquely in his own image (Bowers, 2016; *New International Bible,* 1973/2011). This is often referred to by the Latin translation of that phrase *imago dei* and theologians debate many different ideas of what that means, especially in regard to creativity (Molhoek, 2022). One of the most talked about explanations is the opinion expressed by Phil Hefner (1993) and later discussed by Molhoek (2022). In his opinion, humans are created co-creators. This means that, while they are still wholly dependent on God and limited, they are still creators (Molhoek, 2022). Other theologians argue that humanity should be considered sub-creators in order to emphasize that any creation of humanity would be below that of God (Bowers, 2016; Molhoek, 2022). J.R.R. Tolkien (in Molhoek, 2022) was one of the most notable of those that hold this opinion. Humanity as sub-creators would only be able to create using the basic building blocks provided by the ultimate creator, God, but could still create novel things (Molhoek, 2022).

If humanity as image bearers of God possess the propensity to create, whether co- or sub-creators, the next most important thing to understand is how they are to use this. Humanity not only possesses creativity but also free will, as evidenced by the choices of

the first man and the first woman (Molhoek, 2022). This free will could lead to humanity choosing to create for their own glory or for the glory of God (Bowers, 2016). Creativity then, is not good or bad on its face, but relies on the way in which it is applied. In the Bible, the mandate God gives humanity is to fill the earth (Bowers, 2016). When creativity is adaptive, it will fill the earth with things that reflect God, direct the worship to him, and bring healing (Smith, 2022). The creativity in this mandate often shows itself in the way that people through the Bible have dealt with trauma (Smith, 2022).

Trauma in the Bible

There are many reports of traumatic events in the Bible. One of the largest is the destruction of the temple and the defeat of the Israelite people at the hands of the Babylonians (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011, Psalm 74, Psalm 79). Not only did the Israelite people lose their temple, they were so utterly defeated that many of those who died did not have any family left to bury them (MacDonald, 2016, p. 611). This was by no means the last trauma that the people would see, but through creativity regarding the Babylonian trauma, the authors of the Psalms helped to remind the people how to deal with the traumas and what meaning to glean from them (MacDonald, 2016, pp. 602-603; Smith, 2022). The author of Psalm 79 in particular used the medium of poetry to creatively direct a hurting people back to a healing God (Smith, 2022). It is a reminder that the results of the trauma can lead them to a different understanding of life, themselves, and God (Smith, 2022).

In other stories of trauma shared in the Bible, these lessons are again reiterated in another creative form. In Genesis 32, Jacob faces the fear of death at the hands of his angry brother (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011). This story, creatively told in

narrative form, shows future generations the struggle that Jacob faced attempting to deal with the fear using his own cleverness (MacDonald, 2016, pp. 63-64). It also teaches future sufferers that when they turn to God to deal with their desperation, they will be delivered (MacDonald, 2016, p. 64). Jacob does not come out of this experience unscathed or unchanged. Jacob is renamed Israel by the Angel of the Lord and, because of his hip that was dislocated in his struggle, walks the rest of his life with a limp (MacDonald, 2016, p. 64; *New International Bible,* 1973/2011, Genesis 32:27-32). Future generations will know that God will deliver them from trauma and that after the trauma, they will never be the same.

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions had wide ranging effects on various people. Developing adolescents experienced impacts in family life, community life, school life, (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and also felt the effects of worldwide trauma (Ettekal & Agans, 2020; Kattago, 2021). School closures, virtual school, interruptions in activities outside of school, and the stress of disease and economic instability created a world in which these adolescents would have to struggle to make meaning of their lives and begin to develop into adults (Ang et al., 2022; Bryce & Fraser, 2022; Velez et al., 2022). Creativity was one of the factors that would help these students adapt to the stress of the COVID-19 restrictions (Brosowsky et al., 2022). This aligns with the research into art therapy, which suggests that expressive creativity can be beneficial for those who have experienced trauma (Ali et al., 2020; Bernstein, 2019; Braito et al., 2021; Cook & Borgen, 2020; Kewley & Van Hout, 2022; Kronick et al., 2018; Savage, 2020; Schnitzer & Holttum, 2021; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Wymer et al., 2020).

If creativity was helpful to people during COVID-19 restrictions and expressive art therapy has been helpful to others who have experienced trauma, it stands to reason that those involved in expressive creativity like theater might have some protective factors from this activity. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, theaters were closed and the social interaction necessary for acting was restricted. It is important to know what the experience of adolescents who participate in acting, theater majors in college, was during the COVID-19 pandemic, and one way to begin to understand it is to record their experiences in their own voices.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to capture the lived experience of college theater majors during the pandemic. These creative people communicate in creative ways and, for that reason, creative methods are necessary to hear their voices regarding their experiences. This study utilized an interview and a group created sketch. By utilizing both of these methods, the experiences were communicated in the ways most natural for this group. This chapter outlines exactly who those people are, which phenomena was the focus, and how their voices were heard. This all started with a simple research question.

Research Question

RQ1: How do college theater majors who began their programs in the fall of 2020, 2021, or 2022 describe their lived experiences of the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns?

Research Design

While quantitative methods have proven useful in previous research that attempted to identify protective or risk factors, or for those studies that hoped to track changes in mental health during the pandemic, the collected data only explores the empirical conditions and not the conscious experience of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pezzella, 2021). Surveys served these studies well, and the results showed trends helpful in understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. These studies could not, however, speak to the lived experiences of the participants through their own perceptions or capture the meaning that they ascribed to this experience (Polkinghorne,

2005). In order to obtain this part of the picture of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, qualitative research is necessary. In particular, phenomenology can capture the voices of those who lived through the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Phenomenology began in philosophy and naturally transitioned into use in psychology (Pezzella, 2021). It addressed much of the same subject matter in a completely different way than the predominate practices of the time, which attempted methodologies more akin to the physical sciences (Pezzella, 2021). Influential theorist Edmund Husserl began to change psychology through phenomenology and others, like Edith Stein, continued to add to psychology with the depth of phenomenology (Pezzella, 2021). Edith Stein argued that phenomenology would address not only the natural human being, but the spiritual human being as well (Pezzella, 2021). Without the addition of qualitative methods like phenomenology to the quantitative methods, a great deal of what it means to be human and experience various phenomenon would be lost.

In an effort to complete the picture of human psychological experience, phenomenology allows the researcher to start with the participants' reported experience rather than constructs or personality traits that can be measured in a survey. For complicated unprecedented experiences, like the COVID-19 pandemic through the eyes of theater students transitioning into college, phenomenology offers the opportunity to begin with the reports of the lived experience and recognize themes in particularly poignant or important statements of the participants. This format gives a much deeper examination of the phenomenon than questionnaires or surveys (Polkinghorne, 2005). A

phenomenological study of this topic will add to what has been learned in the quantitative studies so that future generations are better cared for during a future worldwide trauma.

Participants

In order to collect the data necessary for this phenomenological study, it was important to select participants who would provide intense and full descriptions of the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic (Polkinghorne, 2005). Eight Sophomore, Junior, or Senior college theater majors between the ages of 18 and 22 were chosen as participants to describe the lived experience of young adult college theater majors who were transitioning into college as the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns were occurring in the United States.

The students were selected from among a group of students at Oral Roberts University. These students come from various parts of the United States and reflect several regional views. They are theater majors and, because they have chosen this creative focus in their college career, they are the most likely to have had theater experience in their pre-college life. They represent several different pre-college experiences, different COVID-19 experiences, and different college experiences within the same program. Their experiences provided sufficient variety to the interview responses such that the themes coming from their responses created an accurate picture of the COVID-19 experience of college theater majors.

The necessary number of participants was between 7 and 10 and the final group of participants numbered 8 in the interviews and 7 in the group feedback and sketch writing session. The group that was investigated in this study is very specific and small. The full and saturated description of the experience of the COVID-19 phenomenon by college

theater majors was possible with this number of participants (Polkinghorne, 2005). They were also an ideal number for the second step of the study, which required them to work together to give feedback on the discovered themes and create a sketch to communicate their experience to others.

Study Procedures

Initial contact with the pool of students from which the participants came was via email. The chair of the theater department, who was contacted via phone, was the source of the email addresses and the initial connection to the students. The initial email was a recruitment letter (see Appendix A). In an effort to recruit the 7 to 10 participants, the email was sent to all Sophomore, Junior, and Senior theater majors. When interested students responded, they were directed to a link to a Google Form, the official consent form (see Appendix B), which was digitally signed and return via Google Forms. After they signed the form, I kept one copy, and the student was encouraged to keep a copy in their files.

After the consent form was signed and each party had their copy, I worked with the participant to schedule a semi-structured, 1 and ½ hour interview time over Zoom. Zoom was chosen as the platform as it is easily obtained. The participants received a $25 Amazon gift card via email after the interview. This interview was then transcribed. The transcripts, and any notes I had taken during the interview, were then reviewed to discover important phrases or ideas that repeated or occurred across the interviews to form the initial themes of data analysis.

After the initial themes were discovered, these themes were taken to the group in a group session via Zoom that lasted ½ hour. The group had the opportunity to give

feedback on the accuracy and legitimacy of the themes. After a short discussion, the participants worked together over Zoom for another ½ hour to create a short sketch that they felt communicated their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. This group session was recorded and observed to further deepen the understanding of the participants' experience of COVID-19. The group decided on a final script, which was written in collaboration over Google in real time, and portions of the sketch were used in the final data analysis. The students all did a table read style performance of the final script. After the group meeting, participants were sent a $25 Amazon gift card via email.

Instrumentation and Measurement

Semi-Structured Interview

The interviews were conducted via Zoom and took no more than 1 and ½ hour. The interview protocol started with a short reminder of the purpose of the study. The interview questions that followed were developed in an effort to connect to the memories of the participants' experiences. The initial question was a memory anchor question, as it had been quite a while since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. This question was designed to help the participant to place themselves back in that experience so that the responses to the next questions were as honest and deep as was necessary for the clear understanding of the lived experience of theater majors during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. The next questions were patterned after the research question. The first was a very broad question, and the next four were possible follow-up questions and encouraged deeper answers when necessary. They were meant to help focus on the theater student's unique experiences (see Appendix C). Using active listening, the interviewer responded to and followed up on what the participant said in

order to gain a clear understanding of the experiences the participant needed to share. After the interview, the participant was thanked and again reminded of the purpose of the study. Also, after the interview, the participant was given a confidential pseudonym for the purposes of this study, and all responses that were quoted from the interview were quoted under this pseudonym.

This interview protocol was designed based on the purposes of phenomenological psychology. This means that the utmost goal of the interviews was to deeply examine the personal lived experiences of the participants without guiding or leading them in any way (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2005). With very open questions, which closely mirrored the research question, the data is valid. With very few questions, the responses of the participant were the most important thing and were not hampered by preconceptions or biases of the interviewer.

Dramatic Sketch

The dramatic sketch was a creative product developed in a group Zoom meeting by the participants as a group after the initial interviews and the participant check back meeting in which they were able to check the accuracy of the themes discovered. The theater students are practiced at using drama as their deepest form of communication. By using a communication form that differs from the interview protocol, and also ensures that the form is comfortable to the participants, deeper expressions of the lived experiences were discovered. The process and product of the sketch writing added to and deepened the final data analysis. The table read of this sketch helped the students

communicate the things they wanted to communicate most about their unique COVID-19 experience.

Trustworthiness

To ensure that this study contributes an accurate picture of the phenomenon it intends to investigate, the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns by college theater majors, it is important to note credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. First credibility was ensured because the interview questions were open so that the participants had room to talk about their experience and any focus in the questions related directly to the research question. Even though the questions were open, the process of the interviews and sketch writing could be easily replicated by another researcher, which lends the study dependability. Confirmability of the results came from detailed descriptions of the interviews, direct quotes from the interviews used to illustrate the themes, and selections from the sketch to further illustrate those themes. In order to ensure transferability, details of the demographics of the students and their school and home environments were included in the conclusions making a point to acknowledge how this affects the data. The trustworthiness of the data was built into the design of the research, which employed all of the above-mentioned techniques as well as a check back with the participants to ensure that the themes developed in data analysis were true to their lived experience.

Data Analysis

During each interview, I took notes on any non-verbal cues or impressions from the interview to develop some process and some descriptive codes. These notes, along with a transcription of the interview, were analyzed for particularly significant statements

or cues using descriptive initial coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2005). These particular statements and cues from all of the interviews were analyzed to find connections, which led to more broad meanings or themes, and these themes were the ones taken to the group for validation (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

In the group session, more notes were taken to further refine the themes and ensure that they accurately reflected the participants' lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2005). The transcript of this group session was also analyzed to find any significant statements in order to further refine the themes and discover any new codes or themes. Observations of the next step, writing the sketch, were also included in the analysis for codes, connections, and themes.

After the final session in which the sketch was written and read by the participants, the final analysis was written. This began with line-by-line coding to ensure that all experiences were included in the final analysis. The analysis consisted of a discussion of the themes and supporting quotes from the interviews and group session. They also included portions of the sketch as evidence of what the participants wanted to communicate about their lived experience. This discussion contained the essence of that lived experience, covering not only what they experienced, but how they experienced it (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

Delimitations, Assumptions, and Limitations

Delimitations

The group of participants chosen for this study was intentionally very specific. The participants were all from Oral Roberts University, from the theater department and

designated theater majors, between the ages of 18 and 22, and had experienced the

COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns as they transitioned from high school to college.

These participants were selected because of the life transition they were experiencing

during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns (Ang et al., 2022; Bryce & Fraser, 2022;

Calma-Birling & Zelazo, 2022; Lohani et al., 2022; Pasupathi et al., 2022). The second

reason they were selected was the fact that they were involved in an expressive creative

endeavor, namely theater. Expressive creativity has been shown to be helpful in the

treatment of trauma (Ali et al., 2020; Bernstein, 2019; Cook & Borgen, 2020; Kewley &

Van Hout, 2022; Kronick et al., 2018; Schnitzer et al., 2021; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020;

Wymer et al., 2020). COVID-19 restrictions did limit in-person expressive creative

endeavors as many of the restrictions required that either no one could meet together or

only small groups could meet together (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

2022). These participants spoke to a very specific lived experience of the COVID-19

pandemic, lockdowns, and restrictions assuming that they were in fact involved in theater

and honest about their experiences and how they felt about those experiences.

Assumptions

The first assumption of this study was that students who choose to major in

theater in college are participating in the expressive creative endeavor of theater. It was

possible that one of the theater majors did not actually have experience in, want to have

experience in, or plan to have experience in the creative endeavor of theater. For the sake

of this study though, it was assumed that they are involved in theater.

The second assumption of this study is that each participant was honest in their

recounting of their experiences. There is no way to test the honesty of a report of how a

person felt about the things they experienced during a phenomenon. The researcher must trust that the participant will be honest and if they are not, their experiences will not be echoed in other interviews and will not affect the themes or the discussion of the what and how of the lived experience. This is a limitation of the phenomenological investigation.

Limitations

While there was a hope that self-reported lived experiences gave a deep and truthful picture, people do not always have a deep and complete view of their inner life (Polkinghorne, 2005). This makes it difficult to prove the construct validity of any research, not only qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 2005). With this study, the semi-structured interview and the addition of the group meeting and group production of a sketch were used to mitigate this limitation.

One of the limitations, beyond self-report, of phenomenological studies is the sheer amount of time and focus required to personally interview all of the participants and transcribe and code those interviews. Each interview must be reviewed over and over in order to ensure that the lived experience is accurately captured. This also requires the time and focus of the participants as it is necessary that they are honest and committed to communicating their experience to the researcher.

Another limitation of this study is the size of the participant group. When the number of participants is small, it is more difficult to generalize the results of the study to a wider population. This study's aim is to study college theater majors who transitioned to college during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, the years 2020, 2021, and 2022. This aim does mean that the population from which the sample is drawn is smaller

than it would be if the study were looking at all college students during that time or all college theater majors. Still, more study participants would allow for more generalization.

A final limitation is one that is closely connected to the phenomenon that was being examined in this study. These interviews were conducted via Zoom. This is a platform that became familiar during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. It may have benefited the interviews as it may have sparked some memories of the distanced learning and distanced creation experiences of the participants. It was, however, very difficult to read the reactions of a person through a screen and some observations had to be weighed against the fact that I could not know what the environment was like on the participant's side of the conversation. Much of this limitation, however, was mitigated by the use of the secondary group meeting and the writing of the sketch by the group of participants. All limitations were mitigated by the acknowledgement of that limitation, the redundancy of the research design, and the theme checking by the group.

Summary

In this study, I wanted to investigate the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns by theater majors. These participants were between the ages of 18 and 22, as they are the group whose transition to college was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. The participants related their lived experience through interviews initially. They were given the opportunity to give feedback on the themes developed by analysis of the initial interviews and then were asked to create, as a group, a sketch communicating their lived experience.

The study was not without limitation. The honesty of these self-reports was assumed, but should there have been dishonesty, redundancy and the group check back

helped to mitigate it. The platform was another concern as the participants and I were not in the same physical space during the interviews. This may also have been a benefit, as much of the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns was also through a screen for these participants.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns as experienced by college theater majors. The following chapter will outline the results of that study in which participants shared their unique experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as members of the cohort of theater majors who began their program after March of 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions in the United States, including the school years that began in fall of 2020, 2021, or 2022.

The data were collected through individual semi-structured Zoom interviews. The questions began with a memory anchor question in order to help the interviewee to bring the memories related to COVID-19 to the forefront. The rest of the questions were designed, first, to answer the research question and, second, to follow up or redirect toward the research question. The data collection was completed with a group Zoom meeting in which the participants gave feedback on my initial understanding of their experience through the interviews. In this meeting they were also afforded time to discuss their experiences and produce a sketch that, they believed, best communicated their experience. The individual meetings were a safe and comfortable place for the participants to share, but the final session was where they were able to share with each other and discover commonalities in their differing experiences. The interviews set the foundation of the understanding of their lived experience, but the final group meeting opened them up, and together they discovered and clearly communicated what they really wanted to share about that lived experience.

All of the research was guided by the following research question:

RQ1: How do college theater majors who began their programs in the fall of 2020, 2021, or 2022 describe their lived experiences of the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns?

Descriptive Results

Participant Demographics

The participants in this study all began a college theater program after March 2020. This date marks the beginning of many measures taken by state and federal governments in the United States to combat the spread of a COVID-19, which had been declared an international pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Each of the participants recalls the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns as occurring before their participation in the college theater program at Oral Roberts University.

I met, via Zoom, each of these participants after sending a recruitment email to various members of the Oral Roberts University theater department, all of whom would have met the criteria of this study (Appendix A). Several students volunteered to participate, though many of them seemed surprised at their ability to contribute. Each of their different experiences brought depth and richness to the picture of the lived experience of college theater majors during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

The age range of the participants is necessarily restricted as they were all experiencing many of the same developmental changes during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Participants were between the ages of 19 and 22 and were representative of White (50%, $n = 4$), Black (25%, $n = 2$), Hispanic (12.5%, $n = 1$), and Mixed (12.5%,

n = 1) races. The majority of them were female (75% female, *n* = 6; 25% male, *n* = 2).

To preserve confidentiality, they have been given pseudonyms in this study (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Years in Theater
Aleph	20	F	White	undisclosed
Fay	21	F	Hispanic	undisclosed
Mem	20	F	Black	undisclosed
Nun	19	F	White	10
Tav	21	F	White	10+
Vet	19	M	White	6
Yod	22	M	Black	undisclosed
Zayin	20	F	Mixed Race	7 but always

Each of the participants came from different backgrounds and reported different remembrances of where they were when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and lockdowns were imposed. Aleph remembers her junior year of high school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Spring break began for her, and she and her friends never returned to the building that school year. Fay was in the last part of her Senior year with plans to attend ORU in the Fall. Her father, with an eye out to protect her, was adamant that she not follow through on those plans. Mem was in her junior year of her home-schooling experience in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She found her access to her friends at her Co-op suddenly cut off. Nun was a sophomore in high school facing, like Aleph, an extended spring break, and when it never ended, her hope for a college experience was all but eliminated. Isolation became a real issue for her as she attempted to avoid an alcoholic parent in her home. Tav was completing her senior year in her home state of Illinois.

While the lockdowns were not extreme there and many restrictions were loosened after a couple of months, she still lost the last two months of her senior year, and her graduation was cancelled. Vet was completing a musical during his sophomore year of high school in Bentonville, Arkansas. The restrictions in Arkansas, as in Illinois, were not as strict, and his teachers, though only teaching online, often allowed the student to work at the school, though it was not the same. Yod's experience was unique among the group as he had already begun college classes in North Carolina, but in exercise science. He found himself returning home and living again under his mother's roof. Creative experiences during the lockdowns led him to begin his theater program at ORU. Zayin was in her junior year and in a show, like many of the others, at the beginning of the pandemic and lockdowns. But unlike the others, her family moved from Virginia to Texas during the pandemic. Each participant brings a unique story to this study, but they all come together to highlight the commonalities of the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns for college theater majors. Careful analysis during each of their interviews, and afterward via transcript and recording, combined with equal analysis of the group discussion and sketch began to form a better understanding of that lived experience.

<div align="center">**Study Findings**</div>

Analytical Process

Analytical processes in the reflexive thematic style were undertaken in order to answer the following research question:

RQ1: How do college theater majors who began their programs in the fall of 2020, 2021, or 2022 describe their lived experiences of the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns?

After the initial interviews were completed and transcribed, I began to review the transcripts against the corresponding videos and my notes that were taken during the interviews. From this I formed initial impressions or codes. At that time, they were creativity, pandemic, and lockdowns as defined in Table 2. These were the impressions that were presented at the group meeting to check with the participants. The participants agreed that these impressions were accurate and that they felt that I had heard their description of their lived experience.

Table 2

Codes Based off of Initial Impressions

Code	Definition
Creativity	Loss of old creative experiences, new experiences, new outlets, refocus/renewal of artistry
Pandemic	Experiences of fear, isolation, loss, margin/introspection, at home/quarantines related to COVID-19
Lockdowns	Experiences with masks, school closures, at home/quarantines

After checking the initial codes, the participants were instructed to create a sketch that communicated to an audience who had not shared their particular lived experience. This activity gave me yet another chance to observe the participants as they shared their experiences and created a communicative sketch. Keeping the research question in mind

and using these observations, the transcript of their final group meeting and the sketch they created, I found that three more codes could be added: Politics, defined as mentions of the presidential election, alleged or actual presidential action, or the Black Lives Matter movement and various social unrest; Truth as defined by mentions of various conspiracy theories, and practices/theories regarding vaccines and masks; and finally, Theater Education, which encompassed all mentions of what classes in theater looked like during the pandemic/lockdowns and provided a needed separation between creativity in and outside of school.

Using these codes and revisiting the research question to focus analysis, I returned to the transcripts for all of the individual interviews, the group interviews, and the sketch to code them line by line. In this process, it began to be clear that two of the original codes overlapped quite a bit, which meant that the Pandemic and Lockdown codes could be combined. It was also clear that a new code would be needed for those comments regarding school in general but not theater classes. This code became School After Covid and was defined as any mentions of the school experience outside of the theater experience. The final list of codes, as it developed in the process of line-by-line coding, is described in Table 3. After line-by-line coding using these codes, each statement was summarized in one or two words in order to clearly see descriptions of and interrelations between the codes and to find themes.

Table 3

Final Code Structure

Code	Definition

Creativity	Positive mentions of new and refocused creativity or work arounds. Negative mentions of loss of creative outlets or goals.
Pandemic/Lockdowns	Positive mentions of margin or time for introspection or focus and passion. Negative mentions of fear or loss, isolation, or conflict. Mentions of masks or vaccines.
Politics	Mentions of the Presidential election, Black Lives Matter, or various political unrest during the pandemic and lockdowns.
Truth	Mentions of conspiracy theories or differing opinions on vaccines or the use of masks.
Theater Education	Descriptions of theater classes during the pandemic and lockdowns.
School After Covid	Any mentions of the school experience outside of the theater experience.

Themes and Sub-themes

After a line-by-line coding and a final return to the transcripts with a mind to answer the research question, several themes and sub-themes emerged (see Table 4). These themes were Isolation and Fear, Changes in School and Theater Life, and finally Desperate Urge to Create and Communicate. A word cloud from the sketch that the participants created points out some of the words they used to describe these themes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

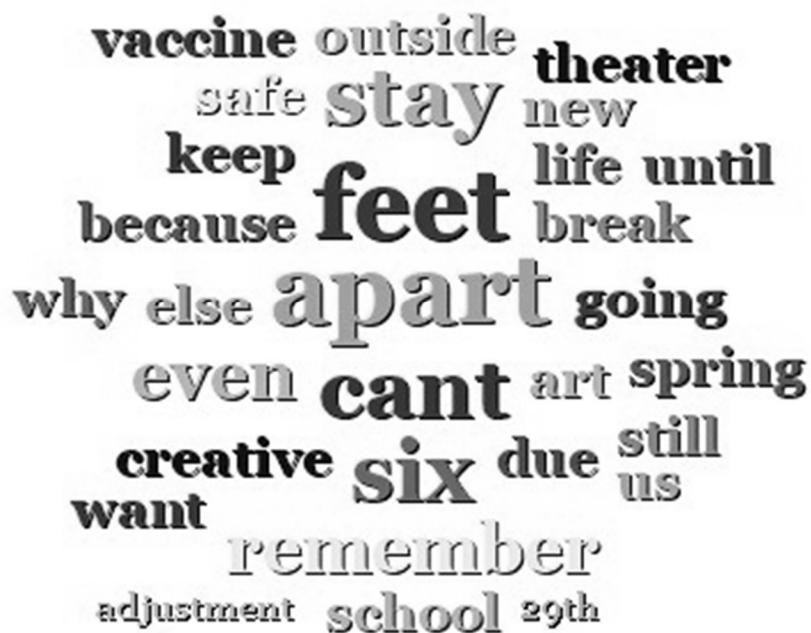*Word Cloud of the Communicative Sketch*

Table 4

Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
	Physical separation
Isolation and Fear	The strife of home life

	Uncertainty of what is true or right
Changes in School and Theater	Focus on masks
	Interrupted future
	Excellence versus cheating
The Desperate Urge to Create and Communicate	Missing outlet of theater
	Self-guided creating
	The wider community of creatives

Isolation and Fear

Feelings of separation from others and fear were often reported by the participants. These reports crossed over several of the codes and appeared in the final discussion and sketch. Based on repetition across transcripts, three sub-themes were identified. Sub-themes included: 1. physical separation, 2. the strife of home life, and 3. the uncertainty of what was true or right.

The first sub-theme within the theme of Isolation and Fear, physical separation, appears prominently in the sketch and is evident in the larger words in the word cloud in Figure 1: stay, feet, apart, can't, six. The participants chose to separate the sections of the sketch with these words that they all spoke in unison, "Stay six feet apart" (see Appendix D). They also chose to emphasize this fact in a pair of lines describing the anxiety regarding the truth of the world:

"ALEPH: What is the truth?

ALL: Stay six feet apart."

Finally, while they repeated the sub-theme of physical separation, they chose to end with the same words in a more hopeful arrangement when they said:

> "ZAYIN: The stage is still big enough for all of us, even if we are-
>
> ALL: Six feet apart!"

This requirement of physical separation clearly made an impact on this time in their lives as they have made it an integral part of what they like to communicate about their lived experience through the medium of theater.

The second sub-theme that appears under Isolation and Fear, the strife of home life, is less about separation and more about conflict and worry in a home where family members were often too close. The experience appeared in almost every participant's comments but in varying degrees of intensity. For one young lady, life was made frightening and isolated because of the strife in her father's life:

> "That was the year that my dad lost his job and he became an alcoholic. And just everything was leaning on alcohol. I felt like I had to stay in my room. Otherwise, a lot of really bad things would happen, or I would say something to upset him. And then it was just…a whole. I basically spent two years straight in my bedroom." Nun

But for others, the experience of home was separation from other loved ones, as was the case in another young lady:

> "It was just me and my mom at home. The rest of my family was gone, and so we were like…they couldn't get back to us, because all the flights were shut down, and so they had to stay where they were at so definitely…it's definitely weird being like…why is the whole world shutting down?" Aleph

Home experiences included not only fear, danger and separation, but in some cases strife

with other members of the family:

> "I was trying to be a man, and I was trying to be my own man, who makes his
>
> own decisions, who does his own thing, who goes to the beat of his own drum.
>
> But then, having my mom tell me, be home by 8 because you have to…. you gotta
>
> have dinner. Be home by 10. Don't go out more than that. Don't go out past 12 at
>
> night. And you're like, like, okay, but I used to do this back in college, and it used
>
> to not be a problem. Now, it's a problem. And it was just weird cause it was
>
> creating this rift between me and my mom. And also, tensions were high, just
>
> because of it being covid." Yod

These experiences were all on a spectrum of intensity but all displayed feelings of fear

for and of family, or feelings of frustration, which caused tension within a family. Each

of the participants acknowledges that their family life changes were a result of changes

occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

The changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns were not

limited to the home; that is the nature of a pandemic. This means that the final sub-theme

to Isolation and Fear, uncertainty of what was true or right, is a difficulty in trusting the

changing wider world. In a worldwide situation where little was known about the danger

of an unknown pathogen, the participants in this study describe fear of governmental

actions regarding the disease:

> "I never had Covid like my whole family had it, and me and my sister never had
>
> it. I think that either I had it like very, very early on, like that February before it
>
> even came out, or that I just never had it all, and I remember being scared out of

> my wits. If the government was gonna try and take my blood to make some sort
>
> of cure. I don't know if y'all remember people talking about that, but it scared the
>
> wits out of me. I was like, no, nobody can know that I've never had Covid.
>
> Nobody can know. Just keep your mask on to be quiet." Zayin

Conspiracy theories were often mentioned in remembrances of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, some of them ridiculous and not even related to COVID-19 itself. Their prevalence seemed to suggest that everything seemed to be up for re-examination. This included protocols for protection from COVID-19. There were often questions regarding mask rules:

> "…my school, made like masks like mandatory. But some professors would have
>
> them below their noses, and then it's like, do they get in trouble? Well, I like, I'm
>
> not gonna remind…. like it's… it was such a rule, and like political and like it said
>
> so much about you: how you wore your mask. If you were, if it was the official
>
> one, if it was like a blue…like the blue one, there was the clear, like the face
>
> shields, like there's all these…. It was just such a judgmental time and so, and like
>
> you didn't, you didn't care about others if you didn't wear a mask. Things like that.
>
> It was just very. It felt like you had to do everything right. But you didn't really
>
> even know what was right or what was best." Vet

Vet also described personal struggles during the sketch (see Appendix D) related to this uncertainty regarding masks when he said, "I can't keep wearing this thing, but I have to. I don't want to hurt people." In addition to the mask requirements, the restrictions on group meetings and interaction with the elderly led to many fears about the future, as exemplified in Nun's description of the first months of the lockdowns:

"I remember being really, really scared a lot of the time, because I wasn't sure I was ever gonna be able to hang out with my friends again, and I wasn't sure I would ever be able to see my grandparents again, and it was just this whole thing of not necessarily living in a culture of fear, but being told that I should be living in a culture of fear, and it was just like a really odd experience." Nun

Within this culture of fear, these young creative theater majors also saw a world of conspiracy theories. Some of them were more plausible than others and some were political, but all seemed to be a source of confusion and doubt as is evident in the participants' final sketch:

"ALEPH: Conspiracy theories are going haywire.

MEM: Birds aren't real.

ZAYIN: Hellen Keller faked everything. No shot she could fly a plane.

VET: Was Covid-19 a political tactic?

YOD: The vaccine is the mark of the beast and a way for the Government to track you, man.

FAY: Covid was a weapon sent from China to kill us.

TAV: The world is running out of toilet paper?

ALEPH: What is the truth?"

These sub-themes of forced physical separation, restriction to fearful, frustrating or even dangerous situations, and the uncertainty regarding what was right or true all led to the larger theme of Isolation and Fear in the interviews and final sketch. Many of these feelings came because of the changes in school and the outlet of theater. The prevalence of discussion on these changes led to the next theme.

Changes in School and Theater

As the world changed, the personal worlds of the participants changed. This was evident in their descriptions of their school and theater experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Several things in particular stood out in their comments and these formed three sub-themes: 1. focus on masks, 2. interrupted futures, and 3. excellence versus cheating.

The first sub-theme involved a focus on masks. While in the previous theme masks played a significant part in the participants difficulty delineating what was right and true, here masks and other restrictions constituted a significant change in both the school environment, after the strictest lockdowns were lifted, and the theater world. There was social pressure regarding masks:

> "It was this weird like, if you're not wearing it, you don't care about the show, and you don't want the show to go on like you're just selfish. So that was really weird." Tav

The masks became a signal of devotion to the show or the school or society in general. But it was clear to these students that even their teachers were finding it difficult to adjust to the new restrictions. These participants often watched as teachers worked around difficulties hearing or communicating with their students. In theater classes and shows, the challenge became how to produce communication effectively through masks.

> "And so, we had professors trying to think up all sorts of different things about doing face shields, clear masks, seeing if those would fog up. I remember at one point we had a…. I had a teacher have us all paint masks that looked like our face" Zayin

Masks and other restrictions were causing teachers to pivot and find new methods, but they were not the only ones. The participants themselves reported numerous pivot points and work arounds in school and their own creativity. They reported changing school plans or majors, changing acting styles to compensate for the distance and physical barriers, and new tools like Zoom or outdoor meeting places to meet with classes or rehearse and produce shows. Yod points to his first theater experience as a result of this unique pivot:

> "My first theater performance was [in] an outside theater, but who else gets to have such a unique start to a career like I did?" Yod

> Not every pivot was seen as positive, however. Many changes led to interruptions in participants' plans and what was seen as a loss of important experiences. This interrupted future is the next sub-theme under the broader theme Changes in School and Theater. For some, like Nun, the restrictions on public gathering seemed to end their plans for the future.

> "I was a sophomore in high school at the time and so, that's about when you start looking for colleges and listing the things you want from college experiences and things of that nature. And so, I didn't even really feel like it was an option for me. I was like, well, there's no real point in looking at colleges because you're never gonna go outside again."

For others, like Tav, the experiences they had been looking forward to were cancelled.

> "I experienced the loss of my last two months of high school. It wasn't the first month home not doing anything. We…my spring musical, was canceled. Graduation was canceled all the things, you know."

The cancellations were difficult for those who experienced them, but they also created a strange new world for classes under them, like Nun's.

> "And it was the craziest thing. We were a week away from doing our spring show, and we had to…we had to recast all the seniors the next year, and just do the exact same show again. Oh, okay, so awkward! It got done, though."

The changes did not stop in high school. The whole of the transition to college was touched by COVID-19. The first year as a college theater major for Mem was full of cancellation and postponements and seemed to remind her of the loss in her Senior year of high school.

> "[T]he very first show at in college we had a Covid breakout a week before tech week, and we had just postponed the show an entire month. And it is…. what it goes back in my senior year, if I like…. Oh, my gosh. I…I had to quarantine as well. There. My college! So that was really rough."

With all of the unrest, cancellations, postponements, and readjustments, it seems it was inevitable that the participants would also report some holes in their education and creative experience.

The final sub-theme in Changes in School and Theater, excellence versus cheating, stems from these holes. The participants reported a depleted work ethic. When responding to statements made by Zayin during the sketch writing, Aleph shared:

> "There was, and maybe this is, I don't know, this could not be related to Covid. It could just be our generation. But there, I think what you were saying this kind of about the whole cheating the system on a lot of things. I think that decreased a lot of work ethic."

Some even admitted to cheating during online classes:

> "I so remember having to get through a math test and not trying to learn. We're
> not trying to learn it, but trying to get through it. So, I cheated on that test.
> because, like. because of Covid being like a thing. It just was like, well, who's
> gonna know?" Yod

It is interesting that Yod would mention that he and his fellow students were "not trying
to learn it, but trying to get through it." The uncertainty of the worldwide and the college
situation led to a survival kind of learning attitude. This attitude created, and is still
creating, problems for college theater majors. Aleph describes some of these problems:

> "There's just no ability to cheat in theater. And so, I think it's been interesting to
> see that like even now, just being all these people who are accustomed to be able
> to look things up and what not, and you can't do that in a role, and you can't have
> Chat Gbt memorize your lines for you, and things like that. But we're just
> accustomed to being able to figure out a way to make it easier for ourselves rather
> than doing the work. And so that's, I think, an interesting thing that is came out of
> Covid."

Vet continues that observation and interjects the feeling that it is time to return to
excellence in both theater and education.

> "There's all these things all the time where it's like, no, we're back to normal. We
> can do excellence. Again and again, I think that applies for outside of theater, but
> definitely theater."

> It seems that though these participants were experiencing the transition out of
high school and into college in a time different than any other, they realize that they were

impeded by restriction, were redirected by cancellations and were encouraged to take short cuts in their education and theater. They are aware that their experience was changed. They are also driven by a change that occurred within them during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

The Desperate Urge to Create and Communicate

The final theme to emerge from the interviews comes from those descriptions of that drive. These participants were living in a time where their creative outlet, theater, was not an option as it had been in previous years. They were also in a world full of new tools and experiences. They described the vacuum created by the shutdown of traditional theater, the desire to create or communicate themselves, as well as the ability to see others create in a newly connected society. This led to the identification of three sub-themes in this area: 1. The missing outlet of theater, 2. self-guided creating, and 3. the wider community of creatives.

The first sub-theme of this urge to create is the missing outlet of theater. The old missive that nature abhors a vacuum seems to apply to the participants desire for creativity. They spoke first of the desire they saw in others to create and what that desire did to the creative mind:

> "I think that the pandemic either fueled passion for creatives or it broke creatives down of like, 'I'm not doing this anymore.' I think people either go one side or the other of like, this is an impossibility. And like you're just gonna…you're gonna jump through all these hoops to actually do what you love. And I think that other people became more passionate about it, and like took the time to become better. While they could, away from people." Fay

Zayin described that feeling within herself and the choice she was faced with during this vacuum:

> "But it's like that's not as filling as especially with other things. It just it…and so it pushed me a lot [to] create, like in a creative sense, but it also pushed me in another sense. I think you see a lot of like creatives end up like going crazy, and I felt like it was taking me down that route. Where you see a lot of people who are really creative and they and they're very expressive. And when they have nothing to express with…especially with the pandemic…I felt very numb a lot of the time, and so like with creating. There's a lot of expression that goes behind it. But if there's nothing to express, it was like, I just felt like I was going insane."

The group that comprises the focus of this study is currently majoring in theater, so giving up on their creativity was not their choice no matter what temptation they may have found to do so. To fight this feeling of going insane or numb within the empty creative space, these creatives did not quit, but found other outlets. For some this was a deeply spiritual exercise. Tav described the absence of public meetings like theater as a time to discover that creating was a deep part of her personality, not just an assignment.

> "And then realizing, okay, I feel the most myself when I am making art. Maybe there's something to that, and I feel the most in touch with him [God] when I'm doing that. But I don't think if…that if Covid wasn't the case, my semester wouldn't have been slowed down. And so, I would have just gotten involved with, like all of the college activities. And I wouldn't have had margin in my life to create things that weren't assigned to me."

The space left by the canceling of much of traditional theater allowed for and even demanded that the participants to find other means with which to create, and in that space, they discovered much about themselves.

The discovery of self-guided creating is the next sub-theme. This sub-theme of self-guided creating is best described in a line from their sketch. Mem says, "My secret TikTok has become my new creative outlet." Platforms like TikTok allowed many of the participants to create their own content.

"Actually, personally for me, I was bored and TikTok was starting to come up on the rise and…weirdly enough, I was like, I'm gonna do TikTok. So, I started doing TikTok and…like it blew up. And it…went to like 33,000 people following my account. So, it was…pretty big, but it was still kinda like me, you know. So…I was doing the stuff…to be like a creator. So, I was like on the Creator Fund later on, but not at the beginning…[I]t will do like live stuff and I was able to do everything but like…it was weird, because, like usually creativity when I'm bored, doesn't really like….but during Covid, when there was nothing to do, it sparked a lot of stuff and cause I was watching a lot of like anime and cartoons, I was like, this is my content that I can make for people. So…I had a target audience…It sparked…more of a creativity and ideas for me to…do more stuff online." Yod

TikTok and online media became one outlet for self-directed creativity among many others.

"I don't do Tik Tok anymore. But that was something. My first year of college where I met a lot of people through it. And I also had a lot more alone time to

pick up hobbies that I hadn't done in a while, whether that was just literally

drawing or painting, or it wasn't just acting, and, like, you know, performing arts.

It was a lot of visual arts, too. And in the first year my first semester of college it

was a very…I have the personality that I wouldn't actually get involved in

everything but nothing. There was nothing to get involved with besides this Zoom

show." Tav

All of the participants, whether they used TikTok or not, reported experiences with other

forms of self-directed expressive creativity. The absence of theater provided space for

these other options.

"I guess I kind of mentioned this earlier: since I didn't have like theater as an

outlet, I turned to journaling and like painting a lot. I had just kind of entered a

big painting phase, and so like, I just kind of carry that through. I have a bunch of

canvases up in my room…I often paint about my feelings and journal about my

feelings, so like I'll draw a self-portrait and then just mess with the facial

expressions, or like, write a word bubble and stuff, so like I kind of turn to

different outlets of creative work instead of theater for the time being." Vet

Some reported that this need to express themselves through other means led them back to

the root of their own creativity. This was expressed simply by Nun:

"It was a lot of going back to what started me being creative, which was a lot of

painting, a lot of drawing, a lot of listening to new kinds of music and

experimenting with different things."

Tav's expressions of her spiritual experience during COVID-19 also express a discovery

of the root of her own creativity.

"I had a lot of alone time and my relationship with God got so deep because I had

so much alone time, and I found that the more time I spent with him the more art I

was creating because I got to know him, and then he inspired so much art in me.

And so, it was poetry, it was painting, it was so many things. and then…yeah, that

was like deeply."

As they were discovering the roots of their creativity in the creative vacuum of COVID-

19, these participants also were able to see other creatives find ways to express

themselves and create community.

The discovery of the wider community of creatives is the final sub-theme in this

theme of the Desperate Urge to Create. Again, TikTok was a major tool in this

development.

"I picked up a lot of hobbies, and Tik Tok was a big thing. And so, I started

making TikTok and actually got like a decent following. I ended up having, like

10,000 followers on Instagram, and then, like 50,000 on TikTok, really random.

And that led me into the art world, like the creative space. And so, I met a lot of

creatives that way. And we would do collaborations and just make silly videos. So

that was one of the first things I did that made me realize, okay, I think I want to

do something creative because I like the people I'm meeting in this." Tav

The participants in this study were discovering a wider community. They were often the

learners, but the teachers were finding a way around the restrictions as well.

"Well, I think we've talked a lot about the kind of negative impact that Covid had

on all of us. But there were also some really unique things that came out of Covid

as well like we, a lot of people in the theatre world, and other people are like, oh,

well, the whole world is on Zoom, like, they're all on media now. So, what are some ways that we can like give some access to certain things that you wouldn't typically have had if you wouldn't have gone through the season of Covid. Whether it was to video footage of shows or interviews because they were a bunch of interviews from famous actors or people in the technical world that we got to just kind of discover, because there was nothing else for anybody else to do, and so there was a plethora of information that was kind of poured into us from experts and professionals. That was also very unique and positive, I feel, that came out of that experience." Fay

The theater world had moved on to other media, and one of the positive outcomes of this was access. Students were able to access professionals and connect to media that was previously not widely available. They were also able to find a kinship to other creatives who were experiencing some of the same things.

"There was so many artists that I was listening to that were talking about Covid: Luke Holmes. When I got into like start and listen to country. Luke Holmes had made a song called 6 Feet apart." Yod

The participants' need to create saw them through the confusion of the vacuum created by the sudden absence of public meetings and live theater. They began to fill the space with creations that expressed their deep feelings. They began to understand the reasons they created. Much of their creativity was self-directed, but they found that the greater community of creatives was also finding a way. They learned from others and felt a kinship to others who were also expressing experiences of the pandemic and lockdowns.

Summary

Interviews with eight college theater majors between the ages of 18 and 22 and a final check in and sketch writing process with seven of these participants led to a rich and complex description of their lived experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Codes were formed first from impressions during the interview and then adjusted throughout a line-by-line coding process. Short descriptions of each statement helped to narrow this process and identify the patterns and connections that formed three themes and nine sub-themes.

The three themes were Isolation and Fear, Changes in School and Theater, and the Desperate Urge to Create. The theme of Isolation and Fear began with emphasis on the physical separation, represented by the mandate to stay six feet apart while in public spaces. It continued in remembrances of difficulties at home ranging from parental alcoholism to uncomfortable situations. Isolation and Fear also stemmed from an inability to judge truth and right from the massive amount of information and conflicting accounts available to them. The second theme of Changes in School and Theater included, like the search for truth in Isolation and Fear, masks and their effects. It also included a sense of an interrupted future and the idea that cheating was easier and at odds with excellence in school and theater. The final theme of the Desperate Urge to Create began with the vacuum that the cancellation of theater activities created and the myriad ways the creative participants filled that vacuum. It continued with a realization of their own creativity and the ability to self-direct that creativity. The theme completed with a strong sense of

creative community brought about by all of the new opportunities afforded by the tools

made necessary by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns as experienced by college theater majors. The following chapter will begin by briefly outlining the results of that study in which eight participants shared their unique experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as members of the cohort of theater majors who began their program after March of 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions in the United States, including the school years that began in fall of 2020, 2021, or 2022. It will then discuss these findings as they relate to existing research, and what they mean for the future. The chapter will also discuss the limitations of this study and advise directions for future research in the same vein.

Summary of Findings

Over Zoom and during eight individual interviews, one feedback and group discussion session, and the process of writing and performing a short communicative sketch, the participants in this study shared their lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns as theater majors. Their individual interviews gave a good foundation for understanding their lived experience, and during the group feedback session and group writing experience, commonalities of experience became evident. The participants themselves were sometimes surprised at the effect the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns had on their transition time between high school and college and on their creativity. They shared both the negative experiences and the positive, sometimes funny, experiences. Three themes emerged from observation and analysis of these interviews,

discussions and the final sketch. These themes were Isolation and Fear, Changes in School and Theater, and The Desperate Urge to Create and Communicate.

Within the theme of Isolation and Fear, analysis of the transcripts led to several sub-themes. The first sub-theme is the standout from the sketch written by the participants: the idea of forced physical separation symbolized by the words "six feet apart." The participants often spoke of the experience of ensuring that, even when they could see their friends and extended family, they did not get physically close. The isolation and fear felt from this physical separation was exacerbated by the second sub-theme of strife in the home life. For some of the participants, home was not a safe place, even though it was the place they were restricted to during the lockdowns. Others were not in fear of harm but were still feeling fear of loss of family members or stress in the family relationships while sequestered in their homes. Finally, the participants' stories and the sketch suggested that all of this isolation and fear made it difficult for them and the ones around them, both peers and parents, to decipher truth from conspiracy. The last sub-theme of uncertainty of what was true or right was found in expressions of doubt regarding masks and vaccines. It was also found in conspiracy theories that had nothing to do with COVID-19 but seemed plausible in a world where truth was that ethereal. The discussion of conspiracy theories and political unrest was one of the most active during the group's creation of the sketch, second only to the physical separation and very near the group of sub-themes connected to the second theme of Changes in School and Theater.

Change is inevitable, and the changes in school and theater brought by COVID-19 and experienced by the participants were both personal and worldwide, temporary, and

long lasting. The first and most obvious change in both school and theater was the use of masks, the first sub-theme. Participants spoke extensively about the impact mask mandates had on theater rehearsals and performances. Some of the work arounds were quite creative and others were just confusing. The masks, however, were more impactful after the original lockdowns, which led to the next sub-theme of interrupted futures. These participants spoke of their fear of the future they had planned becoming impossible as so much of theater and college in the traditional sense was not possible after COVID-19 related lockdowns. Some of them also spoke of lost end-of-high school experiences like graduation or prom. They spoke not only of a mourning for lost chances, but of a need to pivot and change their plans to meet their goals. The lockdowns also seemed to have another effect related to the plans schools made to continue education without meeting in person. The participants spoke of habits formed from online schooling, which led them to choose cheating or an easier route. The final sub-theme of excellence versus cheating emerged from confessions of cheating on online math tests, turning off the camera during online classes and basically checking out of online schooling. The participants recognize that this, and other restrictions like masks in theater, have led to a lack of working toward excellence. Short cuts and work arounds have led to long term habits that now need to be worked through to create excellent work in both school and theater. The push to move past these habits come from the next theme, which can be called a Desperate Urge to Create and Communicate.

The Desperate Urge to Create and Communicate is described at times as a desire to find outlets other than theater while theater is unavailable, and other times as knowing that creative communication is what they were created to do, and still others as a

recognition that other creatives were reaching out during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. These descriptions led to three sub-themes, the first of which was the effects of the vacuum created by the absence of theater. When pandemic related restrictions were put in place, no one knew when or if theaters would open again. Participants reported that they felt like they would not feel sane if they did not find some way to create. Many of them found other outlets to communicate creatively. These outlets led to the next sub-theme of discovery of self and the desire to create themselves. They reported doing this in paintings, writings, and even TikTok performances. They discovered that their creative endeavors were necessary and could be self-guided. They also discovered the third sub-theme when they discovered that the new mostly online theater world opened up their connections with others. They could now see the works of other creatives and even collaborate with some of them even when they could not physically be in the same room. Their urge to create and communicate filled the space that theater cancellation made, caused them to self-direct and find other creative outlets and helped them find connections in this new world with other creative people.

These three themes and nine sub-themes create a detailed and intricate picture of the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns for these theater majors. They were clear and open during the interviews and the group feedback. The groups creation of the sketch also helped in the understanding of their lived experience and the sketch was an eye-opening communication tool (see Appendix D). These descriptions and themes and sub-themes should give a clear picture of ways in which their lived experience supports or differs from current research on COVID-19 experiences. It will

also have a great deal to say about creativity and the creative individual and traumas like the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

Discussion of Findings

In March of 2020, the United States began to see the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Federal government entities, local governments, schools, and other community organizations took action to try to impede the spread of this novel virus. The most extreme restrictions were lockdowns and cancelations that affected schools and theaters (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). The restrictions were given with no sense of when or if they would end and many schools and theaters began to implement some changes to try to provide what was missing. As the pandemic eased, there were reports that these cancellations, lockdowns, and changes might be responsible for ill effects on mental health and for healthy adaptations (Byrce & Fraser, 2022; Calma-Birling & Zelazo, 2022; Houghton et al., 2022; Shu et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2022; Ulset & von Soest, 2022; Velez et al., 2022; Zhen & Zhou, 2022). College theater majors were not untouched by this, but there were other factors to consider. There has been evidence that art and theater can be a successful treatment for those who have experienced trauma (Ali et al., 2020; Bernstein, 2019; Braito et al., 2021; Cook & Borgen, 2020; Frydman & Mayor, 2020; Gildea, 2021; Kewley & Van Hout, 2022; Schnitzer et al., 2021; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Uttley et al., 2015) like that experienced worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. The findings of this study found much to support and add to the knowledge in both of those areas of study and provide a bridge of sorts between them. To begin any discussion of these connections, it must be clear how the foundational theories and Biblical basis of my research relate to the findings.

Relation to Biblical Foundation

Referring back to the research question for this study, it is clear that the two most basic keys to understanding this study are creativity and trauma. In the Bible, both subjects are present and much discussed among Bible scholars. Creativity appears in God's act of creation in the first chapters of Genesis, including the creation of humans to whom he gave the mandate to create (*New International Bible*, 1973/2011), and trauma is expressed in both narrative and poetic forms (*New International Bible*, 1973/2011, Genesis 32, Psalm 74, Psalm 79). The interviews and group meetings with these participants revealed themes that coincide with the creativity and expression of trauma in the Bible.

The Bible's description of the creation of humanity emphasizes the fact that we are made in the image of God, the creator (Bowers, 2016; Molhoek, 2022). This means that, while humanity is still fully dependent on God and limited, we are creators (Molhoek, 2022). The participants in this study speak of their desperate urge to create. Tav said that she "found the more time [she] spent with [God] the more art [she] was creating because [she] got to know him, and then he inspired so much art in" her. She went on to say that she felt the most herself when she was creating. Others echoed this feeling that they were somehow designed to create and thus had to create even when theater, their preferred media, was no longer available. Through these other avenues, like TikTok, they discovered others who also felt the urge to create. It was also in those avenues where they discovered that they and others could cry out.

In the Bible, in times of trauma people would cry out to God. This often took the form of poetry as in the Psalms (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011). Psalm 74 and

Psalm 79 (*New International Bible,* 1973/2011) contain the words of the people of God as they cry out to him during their captivity in Babylon. The songs the participants spoke of, written during the pandemic to decry the separation and isolation felt at the time, and the deeply emotional artwork that the participants created, including the sketch written for this study, all are reminiscent of this cry. The study and the sketch illustrate the need to create in response to both the mandate and creation of God as well as the need to use their creativity to cry out during trauma. They also seem to support the foundational theories that were studied in preparation for this study.

Background Theories

In regard to creativity, the expert chosen to inform this study was Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (2014) because of his extensive research of the experiences of creative people and particularly for his work on what he termed flow. A person in flow, in whatever activity they experience it, will report feeling less self-conscious and more focused on the action without worry of losing control of the situation (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 138-146). It is easy to see how the experience of flow, which often helps experiencers escape feelings of boredom, worry, or anxiety, may be an adaptive experience for those sensing a lack of control during a societal trauma like the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Several of the participants in this study reported boredom, worry and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. They also reported that when they were creating, whether it was painting, or digging deep into theater resources, or creating TikTok content and garnering followers, they felt more themselves, felt less anxious, communicated their emotions better, or even felt a deeper relationship with God. These participants were younger and less experienced than the typical creative

who reported to Csikszentmihalyi during his interviews with successful creatives (2014), but they seem to support his findings. Their experiences were not limited to the internal personal thought process, which supports another of the foundational theories for this study.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) put forward his model of development, the ecological systems theory, which changed the way that developmental researchers looked at the experience of development. It was no longer simply the person who developed, but different layers of their interaction with the world around them. The microsystem, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) layer in closest proximity to the child, was fairly easy to see in this study's results. Participants reported many changes in their close families' lives as they were often restricted from going out of their homes and spent a great deal more time with their caretakers. Some reported getting to know their families better, some reported new friction at home because of the participant's growing independence. They reported changes in the way that their mesosystem, for example school and church, interacted with them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Many reported feeling the stress their caregivers carried, which also speaks to the interaction with the mesosystem, the parents' world outside the home, in exactly the way that Bronfenbrenner described it (1979). At times this even caused the situation to become volatile. The exosystem and the macrosystem were also clearly influential as the participants spoke of watching their theater world and the wider world change, sometimes moving online, and the doubts they had of what was true in the wider world (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The chronosystem is reflected in the way that the participants speak of this experience now (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). They see things now that they may not have recognized in the moment, and they report both differences and

the feeling of being frozen in time because of the COVID-19 experience. The participants reported interacting with all of these levels, often via their creativity. They also reported that these experiences affected their creativity. This interaction is as Bronfenbrenner (1979) expressed it. It also aligns with much of the other research that informed this study.

COVID-19 and the Adolescents and Young Adults of the World

The interaction with the social support system and the developing person was the focus of several studies done in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns (Bako & Zana, 2021; Chen et al., 2022; Gotthardt et al., 2022; Houghton et al., 2022; Lotzen et al., 2022; Morales-Vives et al., 2020; N.K.Y. Tang et al., 2022; Shu et al., 2022; Ulset & von Soest, 2021; W. Tang et al., 2022). The findings in this study do support the importance of the social support system in the life of the developing person.

The participants in this study did mention that the public mood affected their private mood in the comments that formed the theme of isolation and fear (Bako & Zana, 2021; Chen et al., 2022; Shu et al., 2022). They also support the idea that school closures and cancelled cultural events, like theater, had an effect on their feelings of anxiety and depression, feeling on the edge of insanity at times (Gotthardt et al., 2022; Houghton et al., 2022). Additionally, though they did not have the words to say it, the comments of the participants suggest both stress and growth similar to posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth and suggest that studies showing the two to co-occur in developing young people are correct (Ulset & von Soest, 2021; W. Tang et al., 2022).

Finally, there is a point where this study does not support the findings of previous research. This difference is with the work of Morales-Vives and colleagues (2020). They

studied stress, anxiety and depression levels as reported after three successive lockdowns and found certain signs that led them to speculate that there might be some level of adaptation to the new normal of lockdowns, but not as much in the younger demographic of their study (Morales-Vives et al., 2020). In this study, the participants were all between the ages of 18 and 23 and they did express several times that they had adapted to their new circumstances, often using their creativity to adjust and find a new way to live and be happy. It is hard to say why this difference exists. It could be a difference in the time that had passed between the trauma of the lockdown and the interview, or it could have been the participants' creativity. It could also have been because they are all American college students. For this last reason, it is useful to look at how this study's results compare to previous research on the American college student.

COVID-19 and the American College Student

The research on the effect of COVID-19, both the pandemic and the lockdowns, on American students from high school to the beginning of college has been extensive. Most of it is quantitative, some qualitative, but all have been focused on particular factors that lead to adaptive or maladaptive behavior (Ang et al., 2022; Brosowsky et al., 2020; Bryce & Fraser, 2022; Calma-Birling & Zelazo, 2022; Colosante et al., 2022; Kattago, 2021; Lohani et al., 2021; Pasupathi et al., 2022; Stamatis et al., 2022; Velez, Hahn & Troyer, 2022; von Keyserlingk et al., 2021; Zinn et al., 2020). This study supports much of what was found in previous studies and, at times, adds to some of the subjects covered.

In several studies the participants reported feeling that their lives had been massively disrupted, that they missed milestones and routines, and that their educations suffered (Bryce & Fraser, 2022; Velez, Hahn & Troyer, 2022). The participants in this

study echo many of these feelings. They spoke of shows postponed and plans for college derailed. They also complained of a lingering decrease in work ethic, which has interrupted their school work. Many of them hope that they will regain excellence in the areas of school and theater. In this hope for excellence is a fact that is supported by the previous research, that though the online platforms were inadequate for a full experience of school and social interactions, they have become new tools for learning, social interaction, and creativity (Bryce & Fraser, 2022; Velez, Hahn & Troyer, 2022). It helps, according to some research, that these students are digital natives (Colasante et al., 2022). This is clear in these participants' descriptions of their TikTok creations and the online auditions and master classes that they described using. It seems that both past research and this study acknowledge the loss and the gain in this worldwide trauma.

In previous research, the reason for the good outcomes appears to be protective factors like hope, gratitude, healthy identity management and a good ability to envision their future (Ang et al., 2022; Brosowsky et al., 2020; Calma-Birling & Zelazo, 2022; Lohani et al., 2021; Pasupathi et al., 2022; Stamatis et al., 2022; von Keyserlingk et al., 2021; Zinn et al., 2020). In this study, even those participants who expressed the feeling that they had lost or delayed their future also expressed a choice to turn to other creative outlets. This was their way to be hopeful and express themselves. They were developing their identity through creativity. They were also developing emotional regulation strategies in their creative endeavors. It seems that the participants in this study were developing the protective factors described in the previous research in their unique creative way.

Healing and Communication Through Art

Creative students uniquely developing protective factors through their creativity is something supported by the research on art therapy (Ali et al., 2020; Bernstein, 2019; Braito et al., 2021; Chapin et al., 2020; Cook & Borgen, 2020; Frydman & Mayor, 2020; Gildea, 2021; Giovanelli, 2022; Grosz et al., 2022; Kewley & VanHout, 2022; Kronick et al., 2018; Pierroux et al., 2022; Uttley et al., 2015; Schnitzer et al., 2021; Savage, 2020; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Wymer et al., 2020). The research into this therapy shows that it has been at least as useful as other therapies (Uttley et al., 2015), has been useful during a developmental life change (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020), and can have great benefits for those suffering from PTS (Braito et al., 2021; Schnitzer et al., 2021). The participants in this study expressed how their art often helped them deal with the difficulty of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. The reports of the participants in this study also support other ways in which art therapy has proven effective.

There are also some studies that focus on the use of writing or poetry to express the chaos of trauma (Gildea, 2021; Giovanelli, 2022). This is reminiscent of some of the reports of the participants in this study. Vet reported his use of journaling and painting to express his feelings in the absence of theater. He was missing an extremely expressive art form, theater, and found others, writing and painting, that helped in the expression of his deep emotions. Others also found these expressive art forms, at one point even commenting during the group feedback session that everyone was painting. In the previous research, expressive art forms in art therapy were useful in treating trauma (Ali et al., 2020; Bernstein, 2019; Cook & Borgen, 2020; Frydman & Mayor, 2020; Kewley & Van Hout, 2022). There were other elements of art therapy that also came to light during this study.

The last two important concepts that were illustrated in both the previous research and the current study were the role of adults in the healing action of art and the communication that becomes easier through art (Chapin et al., 2020; Kronick et al., 2018; Savage, 2020; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Wymer et al., 2020). The participants in this study had a complicated relationship with adult mentors. The teachers who used to be in their creative lives daily were dealing with the same restrictions as their students. Some of them did not handle it well, while others worked creatively to pivot so that theater could be provided, even if it was at a distance. In the midst of this separation from their usual theater mentors, professional actors were making their way online and acting schools were offering classes online. These people became new mentors, collaborating and modeling what the new theater world would look like for these young creatives. It was in the new world that they would communicate.

Previous research spoke of the usefulness of art therapy for young victims of trauma in that it was a way to help developing minds communicate the trauma (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Wymer et al., 2020). The participants in this study spoke of using art to communicate their emotions during the pandemic and afterward. It was this study, however, that showed them communicating the trauma, the posttraumatic stress, and the posttraumatic growth they had experienced through their most familiar art form when they wrote and performed their short sketch. There is clarity in their sketch as they chose to keep it simple and impactful. It was eye opening to watch them create it as they spent the time to discover and share the feelings, fears, and triumphs of their experience. It also highlighted the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns uniquely affected creative students within the transition to college.

Art, Actors, Theater, and Drama Therapy During COVID-19

The research suggests that the reason an event like the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns affected these creative participants was because of the unique way that actors approach emotion (Panero, 2019; Savage, 2018). The thought is that since acting requires actors to communicate emotions that they are not necessarily feeling at that moment, this both blurs the line between real and present emotion and requires a deep understanding of that emotion (Panero, 2019; Savage, 2018). For theater majors during the pandemic, that meant that they were processing and deeply understanding both their own and others' emotions. The participants in this study spoke extensively of the emotions they were feeling and the feelings of others. They also spoke of how they expressed those emotions through art, if not necessarily theater. Gentzler and colleagues (2020) suggested that this deep processing was different than their non-theater peers, but other than mentions from the participants that the theater department was "different" than the rest of the campus, further research would be required to bolster this claim.

There is one claim from the previous research that is not hard to support with the lived experience of these participants. This is the claim that theater is a socially dependent art (Adderly, 2022; Psalti & Piclhofer, 2022; Williams et al., 2022; Young, 2022). During the interviews, there was constant talk about the interruption of the masks and the fact that without relationship and connection on stage, they did not feel they were creating their art. In fact, many of them told stories of show rehearsals where the effort to work around the masks was distracting. Some even went as far as to say that the show did not happen until the masks were taken off and they could fully relate to each other. This is even more evident when they speak of the show that was performed completely online

and the rehearsals and auditions that also moved to the online platform. Because it was important for theater to be a safe place to process and the lockdowns were not going to allow for traditional space, teachers and directors had to pivot (Ettekal & Agans, 2020; Perry & Cuellar, 2022). This is again supported in this study in the stories the participants tell of these adults pivoting and, sometimes successfully, creating new spaces for this socially dependent art.

The social dependence of theater, namely the public performance for others and with others, may also have caused an undue burden on theater artists (Williams et al., 2022). This was more obvious in the working adult artists in the Williams and colleagues' study, but it is also present in the lived experience of the participants in this study. They report that they had feelings of loss for a theater or college theater future that was no longer possible. They were also struggling with parents and other loved ones who wondered why they were determined to continue a theater career when "Broadway is closed." While they were not financially burdened, they were still facing a loss and a much more difficult path to the future than they had envisioned for themselves. The difference for these participants, however, is that they felt even more motivated to make this future happen. One of the most hopeful portions of the interviews was the fact that most of the participants, if not all, expressed the knowledge that they would express and communicate even if Broadway were not an option. They were assured of their desire and gift of communication, and this is clear in their description of their lived experience.

Implications

These participants' hope and their lived experience are instructional to all who would work with students transitioning to college, creative students, or those who are

dealing with trauma. It may also be a lesson should the world ever face another trauma like COVID-19. There are many things to be considered and balanced when plans are made to protect the community from disease and mental health needs to be a part of that consideration, especially when it comes to students working to become adults. It is also important to consider what is seen in this study about creative students when thinking about that calculation. This experience can also inform the way that trauma is approached with creative students and how creativity can assist in working through trauma. Finally, but not least by any measure, it is important to consider how these events and creative people are handled in the church.

School

Schools made an unprecedented amount of change during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. While efforts were made to continue education uninterrupted, distance learning was not the same and a steep learning curve was required for effective use for teachers and students. While students in this generation, those who transitioned to college during the 2020, 2021, 2022 school years, have been called digital natives, they still missed a lot of the learning that still must happen in close interaction with people (Velez et al., 2022). The participants in this study have shown that theater students especially miss relationship in their lessons and on the stage. But they also expressed that the new tools brought by the reliance on online school has expanded the possibilities in both school and theater.

The lesson then is to be careful to measure and balance the movement to reliance on virtual tools. Schools should not shy away from using the tools that have been developed. They do expand the reach of learning and theater learning. Students can now

be exposed to experts and experiences they would never have been able to explore before. However, moving tests or lessons that require human interaction to the virtual platform may not be as successful. The participants in this study ranged from those who wanted more and attempted excellence in these endeavors, to those who found it frustrating and checked out, to those who found it easier to cheat than to even attempt the learning required of them. In an effort to keep all of these types of students involved, a mixture of the online and in-person platforms, perhaps in an effort to lower the number of students in a classroom, might be a better choice should the world be faced with another experience like COVID-19. No matter what the plan, efforts to reduce the trauma of such mandates should be taken. This study has been informative in that vein and has made it clear that creativity might be useful in mitigating trauma, but it could also put creative students in danger or greater trauma should they be cut off from their expression.

Trauma

The previous research on art therapy suggests that this form of therapy is not well defined (Braito et al., 2021; Schnitzer et al., 2021; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Uttley et al., 2015). To a certain extent, this is understandable as there are so many different ways to communicate through art. The lack of definition, however, should not dissuade those treating children and adolescents in trauma from using creative forms of expression as therapy. There is evidence that it is at least as useful as other forms of therapy and in some cases may be better, especially for those who have trouble communicating (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020; Uttley et al., 2015).

These participants show that the arts are a useful way of communicating their emotions and their trauma. Each of them described using expressive forms of art to

communicate their feelings. They also expressed the usefulness they found in journaling and painting in their quiet time. Their creativity helped them communicate their emotions around what was happening in their world and lives and their friends' lives. The final sketch the participants wrote is a good example of the use of art, especially theater to communicate the experience of trauma and to begin to heal. It is reasonable to think that this may be a useful way to help other students dealing with trauma to communicate.

The use of theater to express trauma may be something that should be implemented as a form of therapy. Theater provides a safe space to experience and work through emotions that may not be easy for adolescents and those transitioning into adulthood to communicate. Theater as a therapy form would allow for these students to not only communicate, but bring to consciousness their experience of trauma without re-traumatizing them because the stage is separate from real life, but the emotions are real. However, therapy like this should not be limited to non-church arenas.

The Church

Because human beings go through this life with hurt and trauma, the church, which is made up of people, will go through hurt and trauma. The people within the church will experience pain, though Jesus the Christ promised that humans could take heart because he had overcome the world (*New International Bible*, 1973/2011, John 16:33). Those who are outside of the church may experience that trauma without hope and peace. They must see that God offers this hope and peace. The way to communicate that opportunity of hope and peace to those outside of the church is to ensure that we are a place where the trauma is treated.

The church should embrace the creative arts as a form of treatment for trauma. The idea that humans are created in the image of God, the creator, supports this idea. This study also lends support to this idea. The lived experience of these participants includes the sense that they are inspired by God to create and communicate. One of them even spoke of the feeling that they were called to create theater and felt more themselves when they were spending time with God and creating. Acknowledging and communicating the emotions felt in relation to trauma will not only help those church members to heal in the safe space of the church and theater, but will allow others to see God as the healer of that trauma.

Limitations

While the hope that self-reported lived experiences give a deep and truthful picture persists, people do not always have a deep and complete view of their inner life (Polkinghorne, 2005). This makes it difficult to prove the construct validity of any research, not only qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 2005). With this study, the semi-structured interview and the addition of the group meeting and group production of a sketch were used to mitigate this limitation. Whatever may not have come to the conscious mind of the participants during the initial interview might have been brought out by the group remembrances during the group meeting.

One of the limitations, beyond self-report, of phenomenological studies is the sheer amount of time and focus required to personally interview all of the participants and transcribe and code those interviews. It was an iterative process, and each interview was reviewed over and over in order to ensure that the lived experience was accurately captured. The feeling of never being quite finished could have caused a delay in

recognizing the themes as they formed from analysis. Before this process, however, the time and focus of the participants was paramount as it was necessary that they were honest and committed to communicating their lived experience.

Another limitation of this study is the size of the participant group. When the number of participants is small, it is more difficult to generalize the results of the study to a wider population. This study's aim is to study college theater majors who transitioned to college during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, the years 2020, 2021, and 2022. This aim does mean that the population from which the sample is drawn is smaller than it would be if the study were looking at all college students during that time or all college theater majors. Still, more study participants would allow for more generalization.

A final limitation is one that is closely connected to the phenomenon that was being examined in this study. These interviews were conducted via Zoom. This is a platform that became familiar, if not ubiquitous, during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. It may have benefited the interviews as it may have sparked some memories of the distanced learning and distanced creation experiences of the participants. It was, however, very difficult to read the reactions of a person through a screen and some observations had to be weighed against the fact that I could not know what the environment was like on the participant's side of the conversation. Much of this limitation, however, was mitigated by the use of the secondary group meeting and the writing of the sketch by the group of participants. All limitations were mitigated by the acknowledgement of that limitation, the redundancy of the research design, and the theme checking by the group.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are a few ways that this research could be furthered in future studies. First, to have a study done in person that follows the protocol of this study may add to the communication of the lived experience because of the relational factor. Second, it would be useful to run a study with this protocol slightly adjusted to concurrently understand the lived experiences of the theater majors and their non-theater peers. It would reveal any differences in the two groups and further highlight the uniqueness of the theater majors' lived experience. Finally, multiple studies using the same protocol but adjusted for different age groups would reveal the lived experience of younger theater students, adults in their theater working lives, and older participants in theater.

There should also be more research done on theater as a therapy technique and theater therapy in churches. There is little to no consistent information on the efficacy and usefulness of theater in trauma therapy. Also, the church very rarely, to my knowledge, uses theater as a balm for trauma, and it would be interesting to see what the results would be of a program of theater treating trauma.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns as experienced by college theater majors. This chapter outlined the results of that study in which participants shared their unique experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as members of the cohort of theater majors who began their program after March of 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions in the United States, including the school years that began in fall of 2020, 2021, or 2022. The participants reported their experiences in Zoom interviews, a group discussion of the themes found and the production of a sketch to communicate their lived

experience. The first theme they communicated was Isolation and Fear, which included subthemes of physical separation, strife at home, and difficulty of knowing what is true and right in the world. The second theme was Changes in School and Theater with subthemes of masks, an interrupted future and excellence versus cheating. The third theme was the Desperate Urge to Create, which included subthemes of the vacuum created by the cancellation of theater, the discovery of self and self-motivated creativity, and the discovery and connection to others in creative endeavors.

The implications of this study can be felt in schools, in those who treat trauma and in the church. It is clear that the participants of this study, though considered digital natives and completely comfortable with the online platform, did not feel they were completely fulfilled by the online platform for school or theater. This study makes it clear that theater is about relationship and communication. Theater, in this way, could be an effective treatment for those who have experienced trauma, especially those who have trouble communicating like many young people. Theater could also be useful in the treatment of trauma within and through the church to bring about the protective factors of hope and peace. The mere possibility, presented by these students' lived experience, that theater and expressive creativity could be healing is worth further investigation and implementation.

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APPENDIX A: POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT LETTER

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral candidate in the Psychology Department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the lived experience of college theater majors during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be between the ages of 18 and 22 and college theater majors who began their degree program in 2020, 2021, or 2022. Participants will be asked to participate in a recorded interview over Zoom which should take no more than 1 and ½ hour. They will then be asked to participate in a recorded group Zoom meeting which will have two parts. The first part will last approximately ½ hour and, during that time, participants will be given the opportunity to check the themes that were discovered from their initial interview and give feedback to the researcher as to the accuracy of those themes. The second part of the group Zoom meeting will also last approximately ½ hour during which the participants will create a short sketch to communicate their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. It should take approximately 2 ½ hours total, over two meetings, to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please look for an email from ███████████████. I will contact you to work together to schedule an initial interview.

A consent document provided via Google Forms contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me before the initial interview.

Participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card after the initial interview and a $25 Amazon gift card after the group meeting.

Sincerely,

Ronda Celeste Jones
Doctoral Candidate
██████████████

Link to Consent form:
https://script.google.com/macros/s/AKfycbzPfSdWV_Vdaz8eu9NtRbgGgvUZT23qg S4gqGhVLZ1e2PqhsDc/exec?action=sign&formId=1URxQY4VyXUoGBXfmz6iJ2_ 8Kqov92V14ufLzGzuE1hU&editorUUID=2dda7556-977d-425c-b872-247680e5ad99

APPENDIX B: HUMAN PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Consent

Title of the Project: A phenomenological examination of the experiences of college theater majors in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in the United States
Principal Investigator: Ronda Celeste Jones, Doctoral Candidate, Psychology Department, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a theater student in your Sophomore, Junior or Senior year of college and be between 18 and 22 years of age. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of theater majors during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Your responses will contribute to the understanding of the essence of the experienced phenomenon, and this study will hopefully lead to further research into the experiences of other creative people in this phenomenon.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in a Zoom interview, which will be recorded and should take no more than 1 and ½ hour.
2. Meet in a group Zoom meeting, which will be recorded, to review themes developed from the interviews and give feedback as to the accuracy and your agreement or disagreement with the themes. This step should take no more than ½ hour and it will lead directly into the next task.
3. Participate in the creation of a sketch via Zoom, which will be recorded, to communicate the themes discovered in the interviews. This step will immediately follow the previous step and will take no more than ½ hour.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include a better understanding of the experience of creative students during a worldwide trauma such as the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted via Zoom and the Researcher will be in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. The participant is encouraged to also be in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in the group Zoom meeting/sketch writing settings. While discouraged, other members of the group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and any notes will be in a locked cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all hard copy notes shredded.
- Zoom recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer until the researcher has completed the dissertation process. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the initial Zoom interview participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card. At the conclusion of the group feedback and sketch writing Zoom meeting participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Oral Roberts University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Ronda Celeste Jones. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Laura Rolen, at ████████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PHENOMENOLOGICAL

EXAMINATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE THEATER STUDENTS IN

REGARD TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND LOCKDOWNS

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee Designation:

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of college theater majors during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. It will examine not only the experiences of the students but the experience's effects on their art. It will also look at the effects their art had on their experiences of the pandemic and lockdowns.

Questions:

1. (memory anchor question) Where were you when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and the lockdowns started in the United States?

2. What did you experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns?

a. (possible follow up question) What was your experience of home/school during the lockdowns?

b. (possible follow up question) What was your experience of creativity during the pandemic?

c. (possible follow up question) What was your experience of theater during the lockdowns?

d. (possible follow up question) What changes did you feel impacted you the most during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Thank you so much for granting a better understanding of your experiences. What you have shared here is confidential and anything that might be quoted in the paper from this interview or from any other participation in this study will not be associated with your name.

APPENDIX D: FINAL COMMUNICATIVE SKETCH WRITTEN BY PARTICIPANTS

ALL: And remember to stay six feet apart.

ALEPH: "Due to the current concerns of the coronavirus, we are taking the necessary precautions to keep our student body safe and will be making a temporary extension of spring break until March 29th."

ZAYIN: "There has been an adjustment to the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Due to CDC regulations, school will be online until further notice. Thank you for understanding."

TAV: We have made the decision to have a virtual graduation. Please arrive at your designated time to film your walk.

MEM: "Your friends can do a car parade for your birthday if you still want to celebrate."

VET: Put your mask up. Do you even care about others?

FAY: You cannot get the vaccine because of your diagnosis. Say your prayers now.

YOD: It's not safe to go outside.

ALL: And remember to stay six feet apart.

ALEPH: Extra spring break, but we can't even be together?

ZAYIN: No senior show.

TAV: After 12 years I have to graduate in an empty auditorium?

MEM: Why have them bother coming if I can't hug them.

VET: I can't keep wearing this thing, but I have to. I don't want to hurt people.

FAY: What are people going to think if I am not vaccinated?

YOD: Why does it feel like a life-or-death mission just to go to the grocery store?!

ALL: And remember to stay six feet apart.

ALEPH: Conspiracy theories are going haywire.

MEM: Birds aren't real.

ZAYIN: Hellen Keller faked everything. No shot she could fly a plane.

VET: Was Covid-19 a political tactic?

YOD: The vaccine is the mark of the beast and a way for the Government to track you, man.

FAY: Covid was a weapon sent from China to kill us.

TAV: The world is running out of toilet paper?

ALEPH: What is the truth?

ALL: Stay six feet apart.

YOD: My first theater performance was on an outside theater but who else gets to have such a unique start to a career like I did?

ZAYIN: Broadway might be closed forever, but I can't imagine my life without stories.

FAY: There is more than one way to tell a story.

ALEPH: I miss performing, but Ratatouille the musical proves that the creative mind isn't limited to societal norms.

MEM: My secret TikTok has become my new creative outlet.

TAV: My art became so authentic because for the first time it wasn't for anybody else.

VET: I discovered new forms of art, like painting.

ZAYIN: The stage is still big enough for all of us, even if we are-

ALL: Six feet apart!