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Anonymous, Oral History Interview, 2022

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Recommended Citation

Interview with ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ conducted on November 14, 2022 via Zoom by EMU undergraduate Dominic Vigliotti (DV) for You Li's Journalism 313 course.

Transcribed by Dominic Vigliotti

DV: All right, this is Dominic Vigliotti recording ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ for Journalism 313. The date is November 14, 2022, and we can just go ahead and get started, I guess. So, could you start by just telling me a little bit about yourself.

▮   Yeah. My name is ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ I'm twenty-one years old, and I currently study Media Studies and Journalism at Eastern Michigan University, and Yeah.

DV: All right, So I know we talked about doing this about the impact that COVID-19 had on your mental health. What was your living situation like prior to the beginning of COVID-19, like the lockdown?

▮   So before COVID-19 started in the United States, I was living on campus, actually, I didn't have a roommate, but I was hanging out with a lot of people before classes and everything. I was living a very social life, I suppose, and when I remember actually when I first got the text, the email that they sent, the University sent

regarding—saying—regarding the pandemic, they sent an email saying classes, I believe, would be suspended for two weeks. Some professors chose to have online classes some didn't, but, I actually, I was—I was taking a nap, and I woke up to people like cheering outside of the dorms and that was like the email just got sent out, so everyone was really happy about it but I was kind of—I didn't really realize how big it was going to be. And then, so, basically, after I got that email, they gave us the option to—the University gave the option to either go back home or to stay on campus during that two-week period, and so I decided to stay because I really liked being social. It was really weird, though it felt kind of like the end of the world in a way, because I was saying goodbye to all of my friends on campus for that two weeks, but yeah, so I stayed on campus for as long as I was allowed to before they sent us home for good.

DV: And what was your living situation like after the lockdown actually began?

█   So, I think, I think it was March 11, 2020 when we got that email. And then they told us we actually had to move out at the end of March, so I think I moved out, maybe like March twenty-eighth or something, and after that I moved back home, and I got a new room when I was gone, so as adjusting to a different bedroom, I was—my mom, dad, and my two little sisters were living at home, so I moved back in with them and it was very interesting. One, because I hadn't seen them in a while and two, because my mom is a hospice nurse, and they thought she had COVID-19 when I moved back home because she got tested for strep throat, and I can't remember what else. But basically, it all came back negative. And so because they, her work, thought she may have COVID-19,

she stayed home for a few weeks, and because of that, my dad stayed home for a few weeks, so the whole family was just together for a few weeks, and it was really nice in a way, I guess, when my mom got better we were able to bond and do like PowerPoint presentations, or do a Kahoot, which is a trivia game. So it was nice, I liked the living situation for a while.

DV: What do you believe affected you, like your mental health specifically, the most during the pandemic.

■   So during the pandemic um, I'd say probably just not going anywhere. I kid you not, for one month straight, I never walked farther than the driveway of my parents' house, and it was only a couple of times I actually walked outside of the doors of the house. It, during it I guess, I think I disassociated for most of it. I honestly can't remember much about that first initial month. I just have, like, snippets of different memories like the one I told you with the Kahoot with my family. Anything that gave me serotonin, I guess, in that moment, is what I remember, but there weren't many good moments. And also the one time I did leave the house, the first time I left the house actually, was when I went to a job interview for the grocery chain, Aldi, and I live in—I live near Ford Road and so we were driving that way, on Ford Road to get to the Aldi, and Ford Road, at least by my house, is very busy, like constantly there's tons of cars, the traffic is awful, and I remember my grandpa was taking me to the interview because I didn't have my license at the time, and it was just empty. It—I cannot put into words how empty I felt looking at the emptiness, because it's just something you don't see, and then when I went to Aldi people were wearing gloves, like—like it was, it was out of a movie which I'm sure

many people have heard of before when referencing the pandemic. But it just felt like I was pulled out of reality. Um, and, you know, as time went on, like if we're talking about even later in the pandemic, because you know it lasted a long time, I started going out more. I didn't get the job at Aldi, but I got the job at Starbucks and when serving customers and everything, well the inside of the store was closed down, drive through was the only way to actually order. And, I don't know it just, I'm—my—what I find meaningful in life, the reason I think living has meaning, is because of connections with people, and that was the first time that I actually completely kind of lost that. Like sure you can text people, you can call people, but it's not the same as being in front of someone and seeing their reaction and everything. So I guess it just affected my mental health by making me kind of feel empty inside and making me feel away from what I care about the most. And yeah, I don't know.

DV: Uh-huh. And during that time, like during COVID-19, what mental health symptoms did you face?

■:   So um, I've been diagnosed in the past with anxiety, depression, bipolar. I felt very anxious all the time. I still, let's see, like you said it's November fourteenth, We're coming up on three years kind of, of when it first started. I still wear my mask occasionally, because, like I'm vaccinated too, and I still wear my mask because I just get so anxious about it, because no one I knew personally died from COVID-19. But if you look at the numbers, you know, it's bad, and uh, I just—it's—I'm anxious all the time about that. But also with depression, I mean it's very hard to list the symptoms of what I deal with, because, like I said I kind of disassociated for most of it, so I don't think I really

was crying or having mood swings necessarily. I just kind of would wake up every day, check my phone, see the new numbers of who died in Michigan, who tested positive, which isn't a really good way to live, but it's just every single day that'd be the first thing I looked at when I woke up, and then I would just disassociate and go on my phone or do whatever I had to do that day, go to work. I did, I did like the transition to online classes, I must say, so that was nice, in a way, because it was just easier to attend classes and everything. It was more smooth for me, so that didn't really affect my mental health that much, but yeah, thank you.

DV: So you mentioned that you use your phone largely to keep up with the news surrounding COVID-19. Was that like the main method you use? And was there any other ways you kept up with the news? And do you feel like that was a big impact on your mental health?

███   So I'd say with regards to the pandemic exactly, I would mostly go on, I forget what it's called, but Michigan—State of Michigan's official like website, where they kept track of everything. That's what I referenced a lot, and I watched like CNN news, they would report on stuff. I did get into politics more with regards to the pandemic, because I personally felt like it wasn't handled correctly at the time, and then we—I feel like the, I feel like the whole country got very political during the pandemic, which I guess can happen when something so traumatic is happening. People choose sides and whatnot, or they try to find stuff that will keep them distracted from what's actually happening. So, I started watching more like conference videos and everything with, I don't know how to pronounce his name. Dr. Fauci, I think. So, my time, with regards to news, were

mostly like video footage of like official meetings and whatnot, and also the tracking

count. A lot of other bad stuff happened, it feels like, during those months as well. And

yeah, just to like name one, the Black Lives Matter movement happened which was, you

know, good that people were standing up and protesting and everything but it's very sad

to see what happened and what's been happening and stuff, so I don't know. I feel like

the first few months of COVID-19 was just a very dark time for America, and I—It's just it.

It did affect my mental health because it felt like every time you were going on the news,

watching the news, it was something negative, so yeah. And also I did, I did start actually

using Twitter as a way for news. Not like people, not like individual citizens. But you

know, Twitter has this feature where they'll have the news listed, they'll have

information like—as of this recording, as of right now, I don't know if they still have a

COVID-19 tab, but they did have a tab during, like, for a while, even when people would

argue that COVID-19 kind of slowed down, but there they would list national COVID-19

news, updates on vaccines, all that stuff. So it did help a little bit to keep me educated,

and also it just made me feel better that people were like actively reporting on stuff,

looking into things, it felt like we were going someplace as a country, like, you know, all

working together to find a vaccine and whatnot. But yeah, for the most part I'd say the

news was difficult at times, but there are also like, it's not official news, but some people

were, there was this one celebrity, John Krasinski. I forget what it was called, but he had

this YouTube channel where he would talk about good news about how—and I know I

said the country got very political and stuff during the pandemic, but people, people

were also coming together to help one another, especially helping healthcare workers,

and John Krasinski's Web series really showcased that, he would talk about how people

were coming together to help, how they were donating money, they were having drive

by birthdays for people. So there were good things still happening, you just had to know where to find that reporting on it.

DV: So you said that you would use social media sometimes to keep up with the new surrounding COVID-19. Do you feel like that affected your social media use? Or do you feel like the lockdown as a whole affected your social media use?

■ I mean my screen time definitely went up. If that's what you're asking. Yeah, I'd say that I was on social media more because there wasn't much to do, because yes, I was hanging out with my family, but eventually my mom got better, and so she went back to work. My dad went back to work. So when I wasn't working or in classes, I preoccupied my time with social media, and it also went up too, because sometimes I would join Zoom calls on my phone. I don't think news by itself is what made my screen time come up because I always kinda check the news, but definitely apps like Instagram went up because I watch video edits for fun, like fan-made video edits, and so that's how I'd kind of escape things or deal with things is watching those. And because my mental health was not good, I turned to those more, so, yeah.

DV: What do you think about the effect of social media on mental health in general? And do you think that that changed during the pandemic?

■ See that's, I think it depends on how you use social media, and that, as to whether or

not it will affect your mental health in a good or bad way. For instance, like, say

Instagram, for example. Something I've struggled a lot with in the past is body image

issues, and seeing everyone post, you know, pictures online of like, I'm trying to find the

right words, like society's, expectations of what a girl, or even a man, it can go either

way, should look like, it can affect someone's mental health. I think during the pandemic,

social media affected people negatively, not in that normal way, but in the way that just

so much negativity was being thrown out into the world. I do think social media was

good, though, in the sense. I think—I can make the argument that social media actually

got better for people's mental health as a result of the pandemic, though, because at

least when we're talking about the social side of things, there wasn't anyone traveling,

for instance, there wasn't anyone going to parties like posting about all that stuff, so the

feeling of missing out on things wasn't really happening, at least for me, and I feel like

everyone—like it was one of the very few times in the world, The only time in my life

where everyone all over the world was experiencing the same thing, like lockdowns and

all that. So I feel like it kind of brought people together in a way, and also social media

was one of the only outlets for communicating with people. I've had online friends in the

past, because I, when talking about video edits, I used to make those. And so I would

have online friends who also made edits. And I feel like a lot of people were online trying

to make new friends, talk to new people, so it kind of helped in a way. I also, the other

day I came across a TikTok, and it was a screen recording of this app, and I had never

heard of it during the pandemic. But people were commenting how they used it a lot.

There was this app that kind of looked like a walkie talkie, and it connected you

randomly with people all over the world like voice chat, and apparently a lot of people

used that to communicate with one another to pass the time. So I do think it was helpful

in allowing socialization in a world where it felt like there was no socialization. But then,

negative aspects would probably be just, people, you know, disagreeing with certain

things politically or scientifically, because it did get very draining seeing that stuff.

DV: Was there ever any point during the lockdown where you felt like you were sort of

starting to adjust to it?

■ Hmm. I don't know if I necessarily adjusted. I think I just accepted that this was how it

was going to be, back to the disassociation thing. I don't know, I guess I just kind of

accepted it, and just, I guess maybe you could say adjusted. It wasn't—It was more of

just like, okay, this is the routine now. Like I wake up, I go do online school through zoom

meetings, and then I go to work at Starbucks, and then I come back home. I mean, I

know for some other people, it took them longer to adjust, some never really did. But I

feel like I kind of felt defeated in a way. I was like I can't control this, I can control what I

do and make sure I don't put anyone in danger, like, you know, go to parties, or hang out

with people. I can do my part, I can wear my mask and everything, but I can't, I can't

stop the virus from spreading, I can't stop other people from going out, so I just need to

do my part, stay home, and just live life this way. And eventually it did get to the point

where I did have one class in the Fall 2020 semester that was hybrid. So, the time that I

was adjusting to it, I started to get a little taste of what life used to be through that class.

So, I mean, it was very interesting. And there were also times where, like the country

thought like, oh, okay, it's okay to go back out now and then we'd get a new variant, and then we'd have to go back home and everything. So, I think I adjusted a little bit, but not fully, because everything was just so up in the air, like no one really knew what was going to come next.

DV: Could you tell me about what steps you took to improve your mental health during the pandemic?

■   The sad thing is, I don't think I really did. I think that I was so, just, taken aback by everything that I just zoned out completely, and I didn't realize how bad it was at the time. I think, I think I'm more so dealing with it now, still. I, whenever I think of the year, for example, I always think it's the year before it actually was so today it's November 14, 2022. If someone just randomly asked me, what year is it, it's going to sound stupid, but it's true, my mind will instantly think it's 2021, like I completely lost a year in my life it feels like, and I don't, I don't even think it's like oh, you just—nothing happened, so that's why it doesn't feel like a year. I feel like I completely lost a year mentally like I, I can't remember almost anything that happened in that year. And the pandemic did go on longer for a year, but it started to like, people were allowed to go out more like I'd say after year. I don't know if people would agree with me. Um, sorry, but yeah. So um, I think that was like the first time in my life I disassociated for such a long time. And it's just crazy, and I feel also like I lost, you know, the college experience, as people like to call it. Like I—the happiest I was in my life, I think, was my freshman year of college

when I was living on campus. I found people that accepted me for me, I accepted myself for me. I don't know, it's just, it's really like I'm trying to, accept the fact that that time is gone and that I won't get it back. So yeah, I'm just trying, I'm trying to accept it and give myself time to accept it.

DV: So now that we are, you know, over two and a half years since the start of the lockdown, how do you feel like COVID-19 continues to impact your mental health? And do you think it's improved at all since all of this first started?

I'd say, like I mentioned earlier, I'm still anxious about wearing a mask and everything. I'm also, I'm—I'm also more of like the germophobe now, if I'm being honest. Like at work, I keep my stuff on the highest shelf because I don't want people to breathe on my drink or my food. I sound crazy, but, and it's not—sorry, not necessarily COVID-19 I'm worried about, It's just like all germs in general. I just have this, and it sucks because, like I said, Every what's most important to me is connection with people, and I avoid people now because I'm worried about getting sick, or I'm just worried about, it's just ingrained in me now, like keep people away, like six feet away. I mean It's not six feet now to me. It's like a couple of feet, but it's like I am anxious about being near people. So probably should go to therapy to work on that. But um, I don't know, I think—I think that it has gotten better, I guess, in the way that I'm not looking up, like waking up every day to see who died in my community and dealing with the lost people I don't know, because I mean yes, I don't know them, but it's still like you still grieve it right, if you allow yourself

to, because it's like people—I'm so sorry, it's like people that were still like I said, a part

of your community, like people I may have seen at work. So it's better. And the fact that

I'm not consuming so much negativity every day, But I'm still dealing with the stress of it.

And my head, I think, still doesn't realize that it's a little bit better now. So yeah.

DV: So you mentioned feeling like more of a germophobe since the start of COVID-19, is

there any other ways that you feel like the pandemic has impacted you long term,

maybe even for many years to come?

███   I need to think about that one, just one second. Um, I, I don't know if it's—I hope it's not

time and everything, I think I need more time to process it, and I need more time to, just

grasp the fact that for a year that's what life was actually like. And in a way I feel like I'm

still kind of disassociating and maybe not due to the pandemic, maybe because of other

things, or maybe a combination of both. But, I just, it's a lot, and I can't imagine how it's

affected younger people because I was what, I was eighteen when it first happened. But

like for people younger, they lost parts of their lives that are such—so important to their

development and growth, you know. But yeah, I'd say I don't know for sure. I don't know

the answer to that. But I hope it isn't forever. I hope, with help and stuff, and just time,

I'll be able to go outside and not worry about getting sick or whatever.

DV: As things improved during the pandemic, was there ever any point in time where you

felt like there was sort of a light at the end of the tunnel, or it seemed like things were going to be better in your mind?

■ As the pandemic improved?

DV: Yeah.

■ I kind of felt this fear that we would just keep getting more and more new variants. I felt like it wasn't ever going to stop. Like I got COVID-19, they thought it was the—I'm going to butcher the pronunciation, Omicron variant. I got it when I was receiving help for something, and they were like, yeah, we think that's why, but in that moment, when I was isolating in a room for ten days I was just thinking, is there going to be a new variant? And also, every time you—not every time, but like once in a while you'd wake up on Twitter, and they'd report a new variant, and they would, reporters would, journalists. They'd say, oh, there's a new variant out, here's what scientists have to say about it, whether or not it's something to worry about, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And so I guess I was just always fearful like even if it looked like it was better, I was like, oh, something else is going to happen now. And yeah, I don't, I'm trying to think of, even if there was a time I thought to myself, oh, it's better now. I don't, I can't pinpoint when, but probably maybe like April of this year, or May of—maybe like the summer of this year. That's when I finally started to wear my mask a little bit less like, not at strictly. So I think that's when I thought it would get better, but it's like it's still something that I

worry about. It's like, is it going to return, Is it going to be bad, I know, people worry

about other illnesses now, or viruses. I remember, I don't know when it was but a few

months ago there was this thing called monkeypox for instance, and everyone was

freaking out online, saying, oh my goodness is this going to be the new COVID-19. So I

think other people are scared too, like if it's not exactly COVID-19, they're worried that

something else is going to happen that is going to lead to another lockdown. And the

funny thing, I guess, is, some people want another lockdown because for some people it

was nice to get a break away from, you know, the social pressure of hanging out, going

to school, going to work, all these things, and then for some people, it terrifies them

because they're scared to be along with their thoughts. So, it's a lot, it's complex.

DV: And the last question I have for you. Could you tell me about the support network you

        had during the pandemic, and how you felt like it helped you?

███   So I, my freshman year of high school, I met a friend, and she had a friend, and that

        friend's name was Evie, and we, I was always closer with the first friend that I initially

        met, but during the pandemic, I feel like Evie and I kind of grew closer, and she's now like

        my best friend. I mean the other friend as well. Right when the first email got sent out

        saying campus was closed for two weeks, we FaceTimed one another during that time.

        We actually, I was in my dorm still, and we were playing—we were FaceTiming one

        another but playing Club Penguin in the same lobby, and that's one of my favorite

        memories with all of them. But I don't know it's, Evie and I got really close, and she's like

        my main support system now. We FaceTime each other a lot like now, and even during

        the pandemic just to talk about stupid things. And I don't know, I'm very grateful for the

pandemic in the way, in the sense that, like it, it gave me a best friend, which I didn't feel like I ever had besides, like middle school. But I don't talk to that person anymore. So I think, I think a beautiful friendship blossomed out of it. And also my older sister, too. I called her a lot during the pandemic, and even now she gives me a lot of advice about school, or when I'm like stressed out about things, I always talk to her. So those are my two main support systems, Evie and my older sister.

DV: All right. Well, thank you so much for your time, and for telling me so much about your personal experiences with COVID-19, and the lockdown as a whole.

■ Thank you. Thank you for interviewing me.