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## Short Communication

## Goals and good health: Undergraduates' goals for avoiding COVID-19

James B. Moran<sup>\*</sup>, Travis J. Miller

Department of Psychology, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA 70118, United States of America

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## ABSTRACT

We observed COVID-19 concern during goal pursuit data collection, where some undergraduates self-reported COVID-19 specific goals. Thus, we analyzed the individual difference in students who self-reported COVID-19 specific goals in this current exploratory study. The results revealed ( $N = 496$ ) that there were no differences in those who reported COVID-19 goals with their self-reporting of the Five-Factor Model. Additionally, participant's most reported goal was to 1) not contract COVID-19, 2) be social during COVID-19, and 3) follow health and safety protocols. This study provides researchers with both qualitative and quantitative evidence about college students' concern with COVID-19.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, public health and government agencies encouraged individuals to engage in behaviors, such as wearing masks and social distancing, that would help avoid the contraction and transmission of COVID-19. Despite the urgent need to limit the spread of the disease, compliance with these recommendations was not universal (Travaglino & Moon, 2021). One possible reason for this is that individuals may not have been properly motivated to engage in protective behaviors. This study explores the prevalence and nature of goals relating to the COVID-19 pandemic in a sample of college students and the relationship between having these goals and individual differences.

Individuals set goals towards desired outcomes (Little et al., 2017). Many methods have been developed to measure and describe individuals' motivations. Among them are operant approaches that ask participants to provide a list of their own goals (e.g., Emmons, 1997; McClelland, 1980). This list of goals can then be coded for themes (e.g., affiliation or achievement) or domains of interest (e.g., finance or health; Dunlop et al., 2017). Studying individuals' desires in this open-ended way allows for a thorough understanding of the individuals' lives and provides clear connections between these desires and the participants' motivations (Emmons, 1997).

Motivations may stem a person's fundamental needs—a set of interactive goals that integrate a human's fundamental social motives (e.g., physiological, self-protection, affiliation), and these needs are activated and overlap with one another depending on with external forces at play (Kenrick et al., 2010). For instance, the environmental force of infectious disease can impact one's affiliation motive to ensure they are

not transmitting disease to others in their environment. Thus, creating motivations and setting goals to minimize disease transmission is warranted. This evolved a motivated disease avoidance system, known as the behavioral immune system—a suite of psychological mechanisms associated with behavior and cognitive avoidant mechanism to minimize contracting a disease (Schaller, 2011). For instance, the threat of disease has encouraged individuals to be less extraverted (Mortensen et al., 2010). In addition, the threat of COVID-19 increased support for travel bans (Moran, Goh, et al., 2021) and decreased people's desire for casual sex (Moran, Kerry, et al., 2021). This suggests that the threat of disease may activate a motivational state, leading an individual to set a goal to avoid getting sick.

## 2. Current study

The current exploratory study examined how undergraduates' goals reflected the ongoing pandemic. The purpose of this study was to investigate if undergraduates reported goals that focused on COVID-19 and if these types of pandemic-related goals could systematically be grouped to assess themes. We also aimed to understand if those who proposed COVID-19 goals differed across personality traits.

## 3. Method

## 3.1. Participants

The sample 496 undergraduate students from a private southeastern university (aged  $M = 18.75$  years,  $SD = 1.02$ ) who were recruited via the

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Tulane University, 2007 Percival Stern Hall, New Orleans, LA 70118, United States of America.  
E-mail address: [jmoran5@tulane.edu](mailto:jmoran5@tulane.edu) (J.B. Moran).

psychology department's subject pool. In this sample, 72% identified as female, 75% as White, 8% as Asian, 6% as Hispanic, and 6% as Black.

### 3.2. Materials and procedure

Data were collected online via Qualtrics survey software. For the current study, participants provided demographic information, completed a personality trait measure, and then listed personal goals. These data include additional measures and were originally collected for a project on a different topic (see, Miller, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.2.1. Demographics

Participants were asked to report their age, gender, and ethnicity.

#### 3.2.2. Personality traits

The Big Five Inventory-2 (BFI-2; Soto & John, 2017) was used to assess Big Five traits. The BFI-2 is a 60-item scale that has participants respond to items (e.g., "Is outgoing, sociable") on a 7-point scale from *disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*. In this sample, the reliability ( $\alpha$ ,  $\omega$ ) of scale was of Extraversion (0.84, 0.85), Agreeableness (0.82, 0.82), Conscientiousness (0.86, 0.86), Emotional Stability (0.89, 0.90), and Openness (0.81, 0.81).

#### 3.2.3. Personal goal

Participants were asked to list up to 15 personal goals and how they plan to realize it. The instructions provided an example set of goals for a hypothetical middle-aged man (Miller et al., 2019). The full instructions and example goals can be found in supplemental materials.

**3.2.3.1. Coding personal goals.** A pair of judges independently rated each of the 7113 personal goals for if it pertained to the Coronavirus pandemic. Judges agreed on how the goal should be coded on 7070 goals (99.4%). The remaining 43 goals were coded by a third independent judge. Goals were considered Coronavirus goals if two judges agreed that they pertained to the Coronavirus pandemic. We identified the content that manifested in these goals about the Coronavirus pandemic (Manifest Content; Schaller, 2011; Schwab & Syed, 2015). Two judges rated each goal for if each of the Manifest Content categories were present, multiple categories could be present in one goal (for a list of Manifest Content categories see Table 1). For all categories, the two judges agreed on how it should be coded on 94% or more of the goals. Across categories, the judges did not agree on 19 goals, for these a third independent judge was brought in. Goals were considered to contain the Manifest Content if two judges agreed that they pertained to that category.

**Table 1**  
Frequency of Manifest Content in goals pertaining to the Coronavirus pandemic.

	Frequency
Not get Coronavirus	66
Be social or have fun safely	18
Follow health and safety protocols	13
Support my community	7
Travel despite Coronavirus	6
Wait out the Coronavirus	5
Recover from Coronavirus	2
Improve or maintain mental health	2
Not be punished for violating health and safety protocols	1
Get Coronavirus	1

Note.  $N = 103$  goals provided by 91 people.

## 4. Result

### 4.1. COVID goals

In total 103 goals (1%) pertaining to the Coronavirus pandemic were identified, belonging to 91 of the 496 participants (18%). The majority (83) of the participants who reported having a Coronavirus goal had 1 goal, 5 participants listed two, 2 participants listed three and 1 participant listed 4 coronavirus goals.

### 4.2. Manifest goals

Table 1 presents the frequency of manifest content in Coronavirus goals. Most commonly participants stated the goal not to get the Coronavirus. Most goals (87) were best represented by one category, but 13 goals were represented by two categories and 3 goals by 3 categories (for example the goal: "do my part helping reduce the curve of COVID" was coded as a goal to Not get the Coronavirus, Support my community, and Follow health and safety protocols).

### 4.3. Correlates of goals

Having a goal pertaining to the Coronavirus pandemic was not related to any Big Five trait ( $r_{extraversion(494)} = 0.02, p = .60; r_{agreeableness(494)} = 0.07, p = .14; r_{conscientiousness(494)} = 0.05, p = .32; r_{neuroticism(494)} = -0.07, p = .12; r_{openness(494)} = 0.05, p = .29$ ), or demographic characteristic ( $\phi_{gender(494)} = -0.06, p = .20; r_{age(494)} = 0.05, p = .27$ ).

## 5. Discussion

The current findings demonstrate that in Fall 2020, 18% of college students sampled set goals to avoid contracting COVID-19. Additionally, having a COVID-19 goal was not related to personality traits. These results present a specific snapshot of college students' lives during the pandemic that may have triggered some to focus on staying healthy.

One aspect of this population deserves note. The researcher's institution required their students to come back to campus (Fall 2020) with several precautions (e.g., COVID-19 testing every 2-days; mandatory mask). With all the safeguards employed by the institution, 1 in 5 students stated a COVID-19 relevant goal. Even with these institutional safety measures, the undergraduates still reported COVID-19 goals. The institutional safety measures may have made COVID-19 more salient, which may have encouraged undergraduates to self-report COVID-19 relevant goals.

The highest reported goal finding reflected that 72.5% mentioned not contracting the virus. The second most reported goal was to be safe when socializing during COVID-19. This goal may reflect that the college students were adapting to the mandated precaution employed by their institution but were still motivated to interact and socialize with their peers. These findings align with the fundamental social motive of affiliation (Kenrick et al., 2010). First, contracting COVID-19 would be detrimental to one's health, but in this case, it would have socially isolated the students because infected students were brought to a hotel away from the university and isolated from roommates and friends for 14-days. The second goal—social interacting safely—ties in with the affiliation motive because infecting others within a group can impact one's status and group membership, and not taking precautions when socializing may put others in the group at risk of contracting COVID-19.

Another notable finding was that setting a COVID-19 goal was not related to personality traits. Previous work documented that individual differences relate to various COVID-19 related behaviors (Makhanova & Shepherd, 2020). For instance, those higher on extraversion were less likely to engage in social distancing (Han et al., 2021). In the current study, extraversion was not related to stating a COVID-19 goal. The goals reported for COVID-19 were mainly focused on not contracting the

<sup>1</sup> [https://osf.io/tfa7r/?view\\_only=aaa813f0575d433b93be8022dc2abe2a](https://osf.io/tfa7r/?view_only=aaa813f0575d433b93be8022dc2abe2a).

disease. This may be why extraversion did not predict self-reporting COVID-19 goals because the self-reported goals were related to self-isolation and avoiding large groups. Although a small sample of participants ( $n = 18$ ) did report wanting to be social during the pandemic, this is too small of a sample to understand their relationship with extraversion.

Additionally, neuroticism has been related to an increased in hoarding behavior during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Yoshino et al., 2021). In the current study, neuroticism was not related to setting a COVID-19 goal, and recent research (Weston & Jackson, 2018) suggests that neuroticism's subfactor—vigilance—predicts engagement in healthier behaviors. In this current study, not observing a relationship between COVID-19 goals and neuroticism may result from the institution's attentiveness to students' health. Therefore, one's vigilance was not needed and therefore not a motive to form a COVID-19 goal.

Although this research is one of the first to explore goals during an ecological threat, there are potential downfalls. First, the surveyed participants were undergraduate students at a small private, wealthy university in the southeastern United States, and thus results may not represent others' goals during the pandemic. Additionally, the college students surveyed may have been different from others around the United States because they were required to attend classes in person in the Fall of 2020, live on campus, and were subject to frequent mandatory COVID-19 tests. Thus, it is plausible that if this preventative measure were not mandated, these self-reported goals may be different. Nevertheless, the current qualitative results may have practical implications for clinicians by providing them with a catalog of goals reported during the pandemic, which may assist them in their counseling services. Additionally, future research can use the reported goals to create validated measures that may assess people's likelihood of setting these pandemic-related goals and how these goals may map onto pandemic-related health behaviors (e.g., mask-wearing, taking a COVID-19 vaccine). Lastly, although personality trait measures were not related to reporting a COVID-19 goal, it may behoove researchers to assess if working towards these goals may relate to personality variables (e.g., neuroticism) that have previously been observed to be predictors towards health behaviors.

## 6. Conclusion

Ultimately, this current study is a snapshot of the lives of undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides exciting accounts of individuals' goals under novel ecological threats, like a pandemic. Moreover, this study provides further evidence that some dispositions may not be related to specific self-reported health goals.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**James B. Moran:** Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Visualization. **Travis J. Miller:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Visualization.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111452>.

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