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**The University Experience That Never Was:
First-Time University Students' Experiences of the
COVID-19 Pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand**

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of the requirements for the degree
of
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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unfathomable impact on the world, leading to the deaths of millions of people, profound damage to health systems globally, and the disruption of society on a grand scale. Universities were not immune to this disruption, and university students commencing study in 2020 entered an environment characterised by uncertainty, online learning, and a significant lack of social interaction. This study explores how first-year students in New Zealand who commenced their studies in 2020 retrospectively made sense of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences.

This thesis addresses a gap in the existing research regarding university students' own interpretations of their experiences of studying during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilising interpretive qualitative methods and exploring retrospective sensemaking through repeat semi-structured interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this current study explores and illuminates the lived experience of five first-year New Zealand university students who commenced university in 2020.

The thesis demonstrates how participants utilised memory and reframing in recounting their COVID-19 pandemic experiences. Participants' stories highlight dynamic processes shaping their stories, such as temporally locating their emotional experiences in the past, simplifying what had happened, and attempts to seek closure. Reframing their stories, participants reposition themselves positively as adaptable and resilient, without naivety or complete closure.

This thesis argues that the way participants chose to share their COVID-19 pandemic experiences enabled them to make sense of unprecedented circumstances and filter their experiences to preserve their sense of self. In addition, collective social narratives surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand provided resources for building their

own sensemaking. However, the isolation participants experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have some persistent impacts on how they view themselves and their university experiences, including a tendency to blame themselves for issues that they had little control over.

The thesis underscores the importance of foregrounding lived experience when considering future university responses to crises. This includes acknowledging the persistence of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on some university students and what could be done to mitigate effects and support university students more effectively during and after future crises.

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Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Community Psychology.....	2
Personal Statement.....	3
Background.....	5
Brief History of COVID-19 Globally	5
Universities and COVID-19	7
New Zealand and the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	8
Universities in New Zealand and COVID-19	10
First-Year University Students, Emerging Adulthood, and Transition	12
Reflection Over Time and Qualitative Insight	13
Research Questions.....	14
Thesis Structure	14
Chapter Two: Methodology	16
Ontological Perspective: Critical Realism	16
Epistemological Perspective: Interpretivism	17
Theoretical Framework: Understanding Experience, Interpretation, and Sensemaking	18
Phenomenology: Focusing on Lived Experience	18
Double Hermeneutics: Interpreting Interpretation.....	20
Sensemaking and Memory: Retrospective Reconstruction of Experience	21

Research Method	22
Ethical Considerations	22
Recruitment.....	23
Interviews.....	24
Data Analysis: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Framing	25
Reflection on Methodology	29
Participant Summaries	30
Chapter Summary	32
Chapter Three: The Retrospection of Remembering	33
Then and Now	33
Memory as Dynamic and Revised	36
Seeking Closure in Memory	38
Chapter Summary	41
Chapter Four: Painting a Positive Picture	42
Prevalence and Early Emergence of Reframing	42
Reframing, not Naivety.....	45
What Reframing Afforded Participants.....	47
Reframing as Incomplete, not Closure.....	49
Chapter Summary	51
Chapter Five: Reframing Resisted	53
University Experiences Resisted Reframing	53

University as a Symbol of Loss and Disruption	55
Reframing Through Self-Accountability	57
The University Experience That Never Was.....	60
Chapter Summary	62
Chapter Six: Discussion.....	64
Remember, Remember! – Memory and Reflection as Coping Mechanisms.....	64
She’ll Be Right – The Influence of Collective Narratives on Individual Stories	66
Mea Culpa – The Individualisation of University Disruption	69
Limitations	73
Future Directions	74
Recommendations.....	74
Conclusion	76
References	77
Appendix A	95
Appendix B.....	96
Appendix C.....	97
Appendix D.....	99
Appendix E	102

Chapter One: Introduction

In 2020, the global community was rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic. An unknown respiratory virus, identified later as Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19 for short), spread quickly from a seafood market in Wuhan, China in December 2019, infecting nearly every country in the world by early 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2024). Entire countries were locked down (Dunford et al, 2020), hospitals were pushed past breaking point (Ogira et al., 2022), and morgues overflowed with bodies of those lost to COVID-19 (Al Jazeera, 2021; Alsharif & Sanchez, 2021; BBC, 2020; Samarji, 2020; Yeung et al., 2021). Despite the global dominance of COVID-19, people tried to continue with their day-to-day lives. In Aotearoa New Zealand, essential workers, such as healthcare and supermarket staff, continued working as the majority of people were required to remain in their homes for extended periods (Kirkby-McLeod, 2025; Smith, 2021). Additionally, while closed to physical attendance, universities powered through the COVID-19 pandemic with the swift introduction of online learning and classes conducted over ‘Zoom’ conferencing within university students’ homes (Radio New Zealand, 2020; Tertiary Education Commission, 2021). New Zealand university students who began their first year of study in 2020 faced an unknown landscape, further disrupted by impacts of the global pandemic for the length of the average bachelor’s degree (three years) (Universities New Zealand - Te Pūkai Tara, 2023).

In this thesis, I explore the ways in which first-year university students in New Zealand make sense of their experiences of beginning their university studies concurrently with the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020. First-year university students in New Zealand faced a unique intersection of significant events, beginning the life stage of early adulthood, transitioning to university study, and a global pandemic mere weeks into their first

university trimester. With their undergraduate journey continuing concurrently with the COVID-19 pandemic over the course of three to four years, these university students did not share a typical university experience in New Zealand. While a significant body of research globally has been dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemics' impact on university students, little of this research has focused on how they make sense of their COVID-19 pandemic experience over time. This thesis addresses this gap by utilising qualitative methodology and semi-structured interviews with participants who were first-year university students in NZ during 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared.

This chapter proceeds by explaining how community psychology informed the thesis and my personal statement explaining why I was interested in the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic and university students' experiences. Following this is a brief general and New Zealand history of the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief history is followed by outlining the background for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on New Zealand universities, establishing a gap in existing research that this current study seeks to address. I outline the aims of my research and the research questions that developed from the broader topic focus. This chapter concludes with an outline of the structure of the remaining thesis.

Community Psychology

Community psychology is a branch of psychology that moves beyond the individual and clinical focus of traditional psychology to include the wider systemic, structural influences of society on individuals and communities (Robertson et al., 1989). These influences include economic, cultural, societal, and political contexts, all of which can affect individual and community physical and mental health. Instead of focusing interventions at the level of the individual, community psychology embodies aims of improving the wellbeing of individuals and communities through structural and societal change, with a focus on prevention (Kagan et al., 2011).

One value that community psychologists centre in their research and practice is that of collaboration (Robertson et al., 1989). Researchers are not positioned as the experts, participants are the experts of their lived experiences, and each lived experience holds inherent value. To understand a group, researchers in community psychology typically work in partnership with those they are trying to understand rather than acting as an authoritative voice, as is common in other branches of psychology (Kagan et al., 2011; Riemer et al., 2020). It is on this basis of centring participants' own ways of sharing their stories about their experiences during the pandemic that this thesis sits within the community psychology discipline. Using a qualitative research framework and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study primarily foregrounds the lived experience of the participants as they have chosen to share their experiences.

Personal Statement

In keeping with the community psychology lens and qualitative interpretive research design of this thesis, it was important to engage in reflexivity. Reflexivity is a continuous process of self-critique and evaluation of how researchers' subjectivity influences research processes (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Within community psychology, reflexivity is not simply about methodological rigour, it is a critical practice that signifies commitment to acknowledging and challenging power dynamics, including those embedded in researcher-participant relationships (Arcidiacono, 2017).

Reflexivity requires a researcher to recognise and reflect on their positionality. Positionality refers to how individuals understand the world around them based on their lived experiences and identities, such as ethnicity and gender (Murray et al., 2025). Being aware of positionality as a researcher is important due to the inherent biases and nuances that positionality can create and knowing how this can influence your interactions with participants and vice versa (Murray et al., 2025). As a Pākehā (New Zealand European)

female researcher, as well as fellow student at the time of data collection, this positionality may have influenced how participants interacted with me, what they chose to share, and what they chose to withhold. For example, I did observe an ease in the interviews with participants, who may have felt more comfortable speaking to a peer, in terms of my age and identity as a university student.

The topic for this present study inevitably reflects my own interests and assumptions about what provides a valuable research topic. As someone with an avid interest in health (from a distance) and with the experience of being a university student at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, this research topic combined both personal interest and experience. I had previously worked on an assignment about community psychology and pandemics, learning the hard way that 4000+ words will not do that topic justice. After slowly breaking the topic down further and further, the result was five key words – COVID-19, community psychology, and university students.

I personally find university students to be an incredibly fascinating group. Growing up in a small New Zealand town with a predominantly white population, university was very confronting and eye-opening. People of different ethnicities, genders, ages, cultures, and creeds were gathered all in one place. Working at the university was even more thought-provoking, giving me the opportunity to talk to so many different people and learn so many things I had never even thought to question.

Experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic myself as a third-year student and a university worker, I spoke to so many fellow university students struggling far more than they did beforehand. Financial issues increased, relationships were stretched, people were lonely, stressed, and did not know what to do. While calling and offering resources, I knew that I could only do so much to attempt to reduce their burdens. When considering what I would

want to study for my thesis, I remembered my experience, both as a university student and a university worker, and wondered how students who began university in 2020 experienced the chaos that was the COVID-19 pandemic. University students not only missed out on a typical university experience in the academic sense, but also the social and developmental aspects that make university years arguably the most memorable. To explore the context for the thesis topic, I offer some background for this current research, beginning with the global context.

Background

Brief History of COVID-19 Globally

COVID-19 spread around the globe at alarming speed, leading countries to try different ways of keeping people protected. Wuhan, China was put into lockdown, travel restrictions were put in place for both sea and air to and from affected countries, passengers aboard affected ships and planes were isolated or put into quarantine (Aspalter, 2023). Over 100 other countries began partial and total lockdowns before the end of March 2020 in an effort to slow the spread of the disease (Dunford et al, 2020). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic (CDC, 2024; Gunaratna & Aslam, 2022; Liu et al., 2020; Onyeaka et al., 2021). By 7 December 2025, the death toll of COVID-19 had reached 7,106,996 deaths globally (WHO, 2025). This number is thought to be significantly larger due to global under-testing and under-reporting of COVID-19 deaths (WHO, 2021; WHO 2023).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was profound and devastating. While not all aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic were negative, such as the positive effects on the environment like reduced air and water pollution (Talukdar et al., 2024), the negative aspects were bleak. Due to the concern that people's bodies would be infectious if they died from COVID-19, morgues and funeral homes were flooded with bodies to process. Each country

and city had different ways of handling the unmanageable number of dead bodies. In New Delhi, India, funeral pyres were created outside crematoriums to keep up with cremations (Yeung et al, 2021), while the holy Ganges River of India overflowed with bodies considered to have died from COVID-19 (Pandey, 2021). In Bucharest, Romania, bodies were wrapped in black bags and lined along hallways in hospitals (Al Jazeera, 2021). In New York, United States, mass graves were created (BBC, 2020; Samarji, 2020), while refrigerated trucks were utilised as body storage (Alsharif & Sanchez, 2021; Samarji 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected some people's mental and physical wellbeing, beyond the health impacts from the virus itself (Onyeaka et al., 2021; Platto et al., 2021). Globally, reports indicate that mental wellbeing suffered, particularly as a consequence of social isolation, and fear and stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying safety regulations. In some cases, psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety have been linked with experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Moustafa, 2021; Naveed et al., 2024; Ryan, 2020; Ryan, 2021). Insomnia and substance abuse also increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Moustafa, 2021; Naveed et al., 2024). Lockdowns, paired with a decrease in mental wellbeing, increased physical inactivity and poor diets (Naveed et al., 2024). One additional source of increased mental and physical stress appears to be higher incidence and severity of domestic violence which was exacerbated by lockdowns when abuse victims were without the escape of school or work (Naveed et al., 2024; Piquero et al., 2021; Ryan, 2020). This section has demonstrated significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic globally, including mortality, morbidity and mental health consequences found in the literature. I now turn to research examining the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected university students.

Universities and COVID-19

University students globally were largely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in more than one aspect of their lives (Birmingham et al., 2023; Idris et al., 2021). The majority of research internationally concerning university students and the COVID-19 pandemic to date has been quantitative, focused on online learning satisfaction and wellbeing (Ebrahim et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic instigated lockdowns and social distancing in many countries, designed to slow the spread of the disease, leading to in-person teaching being moved online (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Many university students found online learning to be a negative experience. Surveyed university students highlighted increases in workload (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Halliburton et al., 2021), lack of a quiet study space, (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Ellakany et al., 2022) and distractions (Idris et al., 2021) as considerable obstacles for online learning. Survey research consistently identifies the move to online learning created significant difficulties in accessing university education, with some university students lacking reliable internet access and internet-accessible devices (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Ellakany et al., 2022; Gómez-García et al., 2022; Halliburton et al., 2021). Online learning also increased university students' feelings of loneliness and isolation created by the COVID-19 pandemic (Birmingham et al., 2023; Dingle et al., 2024; Elmer et al., 2020; Gómez-García et al., 2022; Idris et al., 2021).

Much of the current literature agrees that university students' wellbeing was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways. Studies found that university students experienced an increase in reported depression (Dingle et al., 2024; Ebrahim et al., 2022; Ellakany et al., 2022; Elmer et al., 2020; Gómez-García et al., 2022), anxiety (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Dingle et al., 2024; Ellakany et al., 2022; Elmer et al., 2020; Gómez-García et al., 2022; Idris et al., 2021) and stress (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Birmingham

et al., 2023; Dingle et al., 2024; Ellakany et al., 2022; Elmer et al., 2020; Gómez-García et al., 2022; Halliburton et al., 2021; Idris et al., 2021). Halliburton et al. (2021) highlight that approximately two-thirds of participants reported moderate to severe anxiety and depression symptoms, with approximately one third of participants reporting suicidality. The findings discussed in this section indicate that it would be reasonable to expect university students in New Zealand to also have experienced academic and mental health challenges relating to the pandemic. I now examine the specific conditions pertaining to New Zealand's broader pandemic circumstances before considering how university students may have been impacted.

New Zealand and the COVID-19 Pandemic

New Zealand escaped a few of the significant health and mortality impacts that are described above, and the statistics indicate that measures taken in NZ - including closing borders, early and substantial lockdowns, and eventual high vaccination rates - contributed to low levels of deaths from COVID-19 in global context (NZ Royal Commission COVID-19 Lessons Learned-Te Tira Ārai Urutā, 2025b; Summers et al., 2025).

It is nevertheless important to acknowledge that each person in New Zealand experienced the COVID-19 pandemic differently, influenced by factors such as age, physical and mental health, profession, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, and that the COVID-19 pandemic was a traumatic experience for many New Zealanders (Cumming, 2022; NZ Royal Commission COVID-19 Lessons Learned-Te Tira Ārai Urutā, 2025a).

In 2020, New Zealand's geographical distance from other countries afforded a brief medical and political forewarning of the spread of COVID-19 globally; in February 2020, then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her cabinet proactively enacted their first safety precaution. On February 2, 2020, entry restrictions to New Zealand were created for

travellers arriving from China (Cumming, 2022). Despite this, on 28 February 2020 the first COVID-19 case in New Zealand was announced (Henrickson, 2020; Morrison et al., 2022; NZ Royal Commission COVID-19 Lessons Learned-Te Tira Ārai Urutā, 2025a). Nearly one month later, on 21 March 2020, after closing the borders (to all but returning citizens) and introducing self-isolation for travellers, the government announced a nationwide alert level system (Cumming, 2022; Henrickson, 2020; Morrison et al., 2022).

On 25 March 2020 at 11.59pm, New Zealand was moved to the highest level of the alert level system – Level 4 – and the entire country went into lockdown (Baker et al., 2020a; Cumming, 2022; NZ Royal Commission COVID-19 Lessons Learned-Te Tira Ārai Urutā, 2025a). Lockdown consisted of everyone staying in their homes, except for essential workers. People were advised to leave their homes only to go for socially distanced walks if they needed to (New Zealand History, 2025; NZ Royal Commission COVID-19 Lessons Learned-Te Tira Ārai Urutā, 2025a). All non-essential businesses, including schools and universities, were closed (Radio New Zealand, 2020; Tertiary Education Commission, 2021). People were also unable to leave their towns or cities, with police and local iwi (Māori (indigenous New Zealanders) tribal nation) monitoring major roadways. Supermarkets were open as essential businesses but could only allow in a small number of people to shop at one time (Cumming, 2022; NZ Royal Commission COVID-19 Lessons Learned-Te Tira Ārai Urutā, 2025a).

New Zealand moved back and forth through the alert level system until mid-October 2021. Different parts of the country were placed in different alert levels based on community outbreaks of COVID-19. On 18 October 2021, the alert level system was replaced by the COVID-19 Protection Framework, more commonly referred to as the traffic light system (Cumming, 2022; NZ Royal Commission COVID-19 Lessons Learned-Te Tira Ārai Urutā, 2025a). The traffic light system relied on the uptake of COVID-19 vaccines by the majority of the population (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), 2021). Vaccinated

people were given more freedom, with vaccine certificates being introduced and required by many businesses and organisations. Universities, for example, required vaccine certificates for students and staff to be able to study on campus (NZ Royal Commission COVID-19 Lessons Learned-Te Tira Ārai Urutā, 2025a; University of Waikato, 2021b).

Universities in New Zealand and COVID-19

Universities in New Zealand faced a particular challenge when the COVID-19 lockdowns were announced because their academic year begins in late February (following the New Zealand summer). Consequently, the commencement of the New Zealand university year in 2020, occurred only weeks away from far-reaching disruptions. To plan the best way to operate under lockdown conditions, most universities in New Zealand announced an initial study break of one to four weeks (Radio New Zealand, 2020). Both domestic students who were living in on-campus accommodation and international students were sent home where possible before the first lockdown. Online learning was set up, with live lectures being held over the online video conferencing platform, Zoom, recorded lectures were uploaded to online learning platforms, and other resources such as course readings were distributed accordingly (Universities New Zealand - Te Pōkai Tara, 2020). Most universities tried to ensure their students had internet access and other learning materials such as laptops. Hardship funds and other emergency support such as food deliveries and outbound calling services were also available for students in need at several universities (Keogh, 2020; University of Waikato, 2021a).

Research on New Zealand university students' experiences in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic largely mirrors findings from global research. In their global study of the COVID-19 pandemic impact on university students, Aristovnik et al. (2020) found that New Zealand university students reported higher satisfaction with their online learning experience than the global average (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Cameron et al., 2022). However, research by

Hartnett et al. (2023) emphasised that university students' experiences with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic were widely varied, highlighting a lack of a homogenous online learning experience. Further contrasting the findings of Aristovnik et al. (2020), several studies highlighted issues with online learning identified by university students, such as loss of structured, in-person learning environments (Clarke & Munro, 2021), absence of rapid feedback (Clarke & Munro, 2021; Forbes et al., 2023), lack of motivation (Cameron et al., 2022; Hartnett et al., 2023), and loss of social interaction (Clarke & Munro, 2021; Forbes et al., 2023; Gedera et al., 2023). Akuhata-Huntington (2020) found that Māori university students were significantly impacted by practical barriers to learning, such as unreliable internet access, poor communication from universities regarding their studies, and increased worries about their academic progress.

New Zealand university students did not fare better than their global counterparts when it came to their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies find an increase in reported depression, anxiety, and stress (Akuhata-Huntington et al., 2020; Cameron et al., 2022; Hartnett et al., 2023). A significant number of Māori university students described negative impacts on various aspects of their lives. These included loneliness, sadness, anxiety, and severe mental health struggles (Akuhata-Huntington, 2020). Aristovnik et al. (2020) also found that New Zealand university students had the highest levels of anxiety in comparison to university students from other countries surveyed. This was potentially due to the pandemic occurring at the beginning of the New Zealand academic year (Aristovnik et al., 2020). They also reported the highest levels of frustration in comparison to other countries surveyed (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Such findings in the research literature indicate negative self-reported mental health outcomes for some university students, as a result of COVID-19 pandemic experiences in the New Zealand context. The ability to explore how university students interpret and understand their own COVID-19 pandemic experiences could build

more nuanced knowledge about these experiences beyond the existing self-reported mental health studies, which tend to use surveys to collect data. While surveys can capture larger numbers of respondents, they rely largely on predetermined categories/definitions to filter how participants answer questions. Qualitative interviews offer this current thesis a less structured approach to investigating how university students recall their experiences during the pandemic, using their own words.

First-Year University Students, Emerging Adulthood, and Transition

In addition to the experience of university attendance, first-year university students represent a distinct cohort within the broader university student population. In 2020, the first-year students' entry into university coincided with both the usual challenges of transitioning into university and the unprecedented disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Transitioning into university typically involves academic adjustment, forming new social relationships, and developing independence (Arnett, 2016; Delle Fave & Leontopoulou, 2022). Studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that first-year university students experienced significant disruption to these foundational processes, including difficulty forming relationships with peers, a reduced sense of belonging, and challenges engaging with university structures and expectations (Bieniak et al., 2024; Gedera et al., 2023; McKay et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2023). These disruptions were not limited to academic learning but extended to a broader sense of themselves as university students, indicating consequences for identity formation (Delle Fave & Leontopoulou, 2022).

Existing research has largely focused on university students' immediate responses to disruption rather than how these experiences were subsequently remembered, interpreted, and consolidated into their personal and academic stories. While Easterly et al.'s (2026) longitudinal research identifies patterns of adaptation and resilience over time, it relies on structured measures and outcome-focused approaches. Such measures and approaches limit

insight into how university students who began study in 2020 make sense of their COVID-19 pandemic themselves, in retrospect.

Retrospective accounts are not simply a direct recall of past events, but an active process of remembering, sensemaking, and reinterpretation (Smith et al., 2009; Thomson, 2010; Weick, 1995). Memories are retold in the present to align with individuals' present sense of self and circumstances.

Reflection Over Time and Qualitative Insight

Despite extensive research documenting university students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, far less attention has been given to how these experiences are understood retrospectively, after the period of disruption has passed. Much of the existing literature captures university students' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in real time or shortly thereafter, prioritising immediacy and psychological impact.

There remains limited research exploring how first-year university students retrospectively make sense of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences. Research that explores how university students reflect on, interpret, and make sense of this period is needed to move beyond documenting disruption to gain greater insight into its long-term meaning and significance. This thesis seeks to address this gap with qualitative research focused on first-year university students who commenced study in 2020, investigating their retrospective accounts of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences. This thesis addresses this gap using qualitative methodology, IPA, retrospective-focused semi-structured interviews with participants who were first-year university students in 2020, and a theoretical framework consisting of phenomenology, double hermeneutics, sensemaking and memory. The choice of methods and how the methods shape the research design and analysis are further explained in Chapter Two. The aims of this research are as follows:

- Examine how university students' make sense of experiencing a world-wide pandemic;
- Explore the intersection between beginning adulthood via university and the pandemic;
- Identify how university students' frame their experiences and the possible implications of this framing;
- Analyse how university students' personal experiences of the pandemic influence their future outlook;

To address these aims, four research questions were conceptualised.

Research Questions

- How do university students make sense of their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do memory and reflection serve university students in coping with their COVID-19 pandemic experience now?
- In what ways do university students avoid, suppress, or reinterpret their pandemic experiences?
- Does the intersection of university and the COVID-19 pandemic make it easier to compartmentalise the pandemic?

These questions provide a structured framework to explore the study's aims in relation to university students' sensemaking, coping, and interpretation of pandemic disruption.

Thesis Structure

The following chapters form the structure of this thesis. Chapter Two: Methodology establishes the methodology used to guide and analyse this research. I introduce the ontological and epistemological positions and theoretical frameworks that form the

foundation for the thesis. Following this introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of this thesis, I outline the methods procedure, and how Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) informed the analysis of the research findings.

Chapters Three, Four and Five analytically present the findings of this research under experiential themes: Memory, Reframing, and Reframing Resisted. Each chapter is organised through subthemes or subheadings in relation to the overarching themes

Chapter Six discusses the findings presented in Chapters Three, Four and Five, deepening the analysis further and exploring the significance of the findings. Chapter Six also acknowledges some limitations of this thesis and suggests future directions for developing research, in light of my findings. The conclusion to this thesis highlights how foregrounding university students' lived experiences, and how they make meaning from their experiences, provides valuable information for the development of university support and prevention planning for possible future crises.

Chapter Two: Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology that underpins this thesis will be explored in detail, providing context for the way this research was undertaken. Ontological and epistemological positions are declared, theoretical frameworks are introduced, and the measures used to conduct this research are detailed. This chapter concludes with an introduction to the analytical approach of IPA that was utilised to analyse the research findings, and introductory summaries of the research participants.

Ontological Perspective: Critical Realism

Ontology is the study of reality – what it is and what it encompasses (Crotty, 1998). Critical realism offers a foundation for the approach to knowledge taken in this thesis. Critical realism refers to an approach to knowledge that views ‘reality’ as being comprised of three parts (Archer, 1998). Proponents of critical realism argue that reality is made up of the real, the actual, and the empirical. The real refers to an unobservable objective reality that exists. The actual refers to observable events that are created by unobservable structures. The empirical are people’s experiences and perspectives of events (Archer, 1998). In short, critical realism posits an objective reality which causes events to happen that are then perceived and experienced by people (Danermark & Ekström, 2019; Fletcher, 2017). Utilising a critical realism ontology in this thesis acknowledges that due to the unobservable world, the COVID-19 pandemic event undoubtedly occurred, however there is not one true experience or perspective of it.

In this thesis, the real refers to the structural mechanisms (e.g., government policy, university systems and practices); the actual refers to events that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., lockdowns, online learning); and the empirical refers to the participants’ stories of their experiences. While this thesis does not directly examine the structural

mechanisms themselves, they form the broader context shaping participants' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Critical realism therefore positions participants' stories as access points to the empirical domain, reflecting how events shaped by broader structural mechanisms were experienced and made sense of. As these underlying mechanisms cannot be directly observed, this thesis does not attempt to measure or verify the structural causes themselves. Instead, it focuses on how participants retrospectively interpreted and shared their experiences of these events. This ontological position supports the interpretive focus of the study, where participants' stories are treated as meaningful constructions of experience rather than objective direct recall of events. In this way, the analysis examines participants' sensemaking, recognising that their stories reflect how they made sense of their experiences within the structural context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Epistemological Perspective: Interpretivism

Building on the ontological approach of critical realism is the epistemological perspective of interpretivism. Epistemology is the study of how knowledge is created (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivism as an epistemological approach evolved from other philosophical traditions like hermeneutics and phenomenology and suggests that people create knowledge through their interpretations of the world. Interpretivism places importance on understanding, subjectivity, and depth. It does not focus on universal law-making or broad generalisations (Chandler & Munday, 2020).

In an interpretivist framing, participants reside in the expert role of their own experiences (Arthur & Clark, 2021). Researchers are not attempting to directly access an objective reality through participants' stories but instead seek to explore how participants interpreted and made sense of their experiences. In exploring participants' experiences of the

COVID-19 pandemic as first-time university students in 2020, interpretivism foregrounds the subjective meanings and nuances of these experiences within a specific context.

Interpretivism recognises that the researcher plays an active role in interpreting participants' stories. My own experiences as a university student therefore shaped how I engaged with and interpreted the data, and reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the research process.

Interpretivism therefore shapes the methodological approach of this thesis by positioning participants' stories as subjective interpretations of their experiences rather than objective reports of events. This supports the use of semi-structured interviews, which enable participants to share how they interpreted and made sense of their experiences in their own words. The analysis focuses on interpreting how participants retrospectively constructed and shared these experiences, recognising that these interpretations are shaped by both participants' perspectives and my interpretive engagement with the data.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Experience, Interpretation, and Sensemaking

The theoretical underpinnings of my research include three key theories – phenomenology, double hermeneutics, and sensemaking. I will explore these theories briefly, then share how they have been applied to my research.

Phenomenology: Focusing on Lived Experience

First developed by Edmund Husserl and reported in his 1900 work *Logische Untersuchungen (Logical Investigations)*, phenomenology is the study of conscious experience from a first-person perspective (Husserl, 1900-1901). It does not only concern itself with what we experience, but also how we experience the world. An example given by Dan Zahavi (2025) is that of an alarm clock. An alarm clock can be simply thought of as a clock that allows you to set an alarm for specific times of the day. But what does an alarm clock look like? There is no one answer to this. What time of day is it? How is the clock

illuminated? How is it positioned? Where is it positioned? What are its components? What is its purpose? Is it a nuisance or is it a helpful reminder? This is not the entirety of Zahavi's (2025) example, but it does show how phenomenology focuses on how we experience phenomena – through our senses, experiences, and prior understanding, for example, what shapes our perception of clocks.

Phenomenology is therefore concerned with how individuals experience events as meaningful, rather than treating experiences as objective occurrences that can be observed independently of the person. Central to this approach is the recognition that experience is always shaped by personal context, prior knowledge, emotions, and expectations. Experiences are actively interpreted.

In this thesis, phenomenology provides a framework for examining how participants experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. The study does not seek to establish an objective account of what occurred but instead focuses on how participants experienced and interpreted events such as lockdowns, online learning, and disrupted social opportunities. This aligns with the study's retrospective interview approach, whereby participants shared stories of their university experiences.

Phenomenology informed the analysis by directing attention to how participants described their experiences and the meanings they attached to them. Participants' stories were therefore treated as expressions of lived experience, reflecting how the COVID-19 pandemic was experienced and understood, rather than as objective records of events. This supports the interpretive focus of the study and provides a foundation for examining how participants later made sense of these experiences.

Double Hermeneutics: Interpreting Interpretation

Hermeneutics was originally created as a framework for scholars interpreting the texts of the Bible (Crotty, 1998) but was subsequently expanded by Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1805 (Schleiermacher & Kimmerle, 1978). Schleiermacher developed hermeneutics as a universal framework for interpreting all texts, not exclusively specialised or complex texts. He focused on ‘interpretation as understanding’, wanting to interpret the ‘grammatical’ and ‘psychological’ sides to discourse. The grammatical focuses on the language, structure, and grammar of the text, while the psychological focuses on the author, their intentions, style, and expressions. Hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation, exploring how humans understand and form meaning from language, actions, beliefs and cultural expressions (Crotty, 1998; George, 2025). Double hermeneutics, a term coined by Anthony Giddens in 1984, further extends hermeneutics to a double process of interpretation – the first being the interpretation of the person, and the second being the researcher’s interpretation of that person’s interpretation (Giddens, 1984). The first interpretation is already meaningful, but the second interpretation is employed to analyse and explain the first, using concepts and theories. The process creates a cycle whereby a researcher’s concepts and theories may then influence people’s future interpretations through these lenses (Giddens, 1984).

In this study, participants were already interpreting their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic as they shared their stories in retrospective interviews. Double hermeneutics informed the analysis by examining how participants constructed these interpretations through their language, explanations, and framing. The analysis therefore focused not only on what participants experienced, but how they presented those experiences, including how they justified events, minimised difficulties, or reframed challenges.

This approach positioned participants’ stories as interpretive constructions rather than direct representations of events. Attention was given to language choices, contradictions, and

shifts in framing as indicators of how participants made sense of their experiences over time. This was particularly important for identifying instances of reframing, where participants reinterpreted past experiences in ways that reshaped responsibility, meaning, or emotional impact.

Double hermeneutics therefore provided a framework for analysing how participants' sensemaking was expressed within their stories. The analysis represents an interpretation of participants' own interpretations, allowing examination of how their experiences were understood, reconstructed, and made meaningful retrospectively.

Sensemaking and Memory: Retrospective Reconstruction of Experience

The third key methodological theory I draw from in the present study is that of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking as a research tool refers quite literally to the making of sense (Ancona, 2011). The theory of sensemaking is that the world is complex and unknown, making it difficult to understand. Sensemaking allows people to change any unknown phenomenon into a situation they can explain, avoiding the fear of the unknown. Sensemaking is an ongoing process of refining understandings or changing our perspective to better explain the situation. Consequently, sensemaking prioritises a plausible explanation over an accurate one. There are no correct answers (Ancona, 2011).

Weick's (1995) model of sensemaking emphasises retrospection, positioning memory as a significant aspect of sensemaking. In this thesis, memory is approached as an active process through which participants make sense of past experiences, rather than as a direct or complete recall of events (Thomson, 2010; Weick, 1995). Remembering is treated as a situated and relational process, shaped by the context of the interview and the meanings participants sought to convey about themselves and their experiences (Thomson, 2010). Based on this definition, participants' interview data are referred to as stories throughout this

thesis. This terminology reflects the nature of participants' recollections, acknowledging that experiences are not simply reported, but are actively constructed through temporal organisation, selection and revision. The use of "stories" does not indicate narrative analysis, rather it aligns with the study's focus on retrospective sensemaking and interpretive reconstruction.

Sensemaking informed the analysis by guiding attention to how participants interpreted and explained their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This included examining how participants justified challenges, assigned responsibility, and reframed experiences over time. By analysing these sensemaking processes, this thesis explores how participants constructed meaningful interpretations of disruption, loss, and change within the broader structural context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Method

Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning this study, ethical approval was sought from and granted by the ALPSS Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato (FS2025-18).

While this research seemed unlikely to cause emotional distress, participants had the opportunity to pause or stop the interview at any time if they felt overwhelmed or emotional. They could also skip any question that they did not want to answer for whatever reason. Participants were not considered vulnerable and the likelihood of harm occurring was unlikely due to the interview questions not being overly personal or invasive.

Participants were sent their transcripts to review and could request changes. They were given up to 14 days after being sent their transcript to request changes, or to withdraw from the study completely. Participants were given the option to opt out of receiving their transcripts, in which case they would still have 14 days from the date of their interview to

withdraw completely. Participants also had the opportunity within these time frames to send me further information via email that they believed was relevant or important. Participants were given a \$20 koha (donation or gift) at the end of each interview as an acknowledgement of the value of their time. This was not advertised on the poster, to avoid it being considered coercive. Participants were also offered food during in-person interviews, in an attempt to create a more casual and welcoming environment.

Participants have all been anonymised and were given the identifiers ‘Participant A, Participant B...’ to protect confidentiality. The identifiers were not based in order of interviews.

Recruitment

Participants were purposively recruited, based on whether they were a first-time student at a New Zealand university during 2020. There was no other inclusion or exclusion criteria.

After gaining ethical approval (see Appendix A), I began the search for participants by advertising via poster (see Appendix B) on social media websites Facebook and Instagram, using my personal networks that contained a number of university students. Concerned that I would not reach enough participants, I received ethical approval for a subsequent amendment that allowed the social networking platform Reddit to be utilised in my search. I did not proceed with advertising via Reddit however, due to the potential implications of sharing contact details through this forum. Interested participants contacted me initially through my student email address, listed on the poster.

After enlisting two participants from the poster, I later relied on a snowball technique (Elliot et al., 2016) for recruitment, with my initial participants introducing me to three further participants. With limited time and a slowing of interest, I stopped recruiting at five

participants. Participants shared that they wanted to participate as they understood the difficulties with finding participants for research and wanted to help a fellow peer out, with some also finding the topic interesting. While my recruitment of participants was open to students who studied at any university in New Zealand during 2020, I was only able to recruit participants from the University of Waikato. Participants ranged from 17-23 years in age at the time of starting at university. There were no questions related to their demographics due to the research being based on memories and sensemaking as first-time university students. While participants' stories are undoubtedly shaped by their identities and sociocultural contexts, I chose not to collect demographic information to ensure the focus remained on how participants constructed their stories, not how these stories related to their demographics. Participants will be referred to using gender neutral pronouns due to not asking for their demographic information and not wanting to assume their gender identities.

Participants were sent consent forms and information sheets when confirming their initial interview times, and participants had the option of completing these forms in person before beginning the interview (see Appendix C and D). To ensure clarity, the consent form and information sheet were briefly discussed at the beginning of the first interviews, and questions were welcomed. Participants were then asked verbally again if they consented to having their interviews audio recorded, before commencing each interview.

Interviews

This study utilised a qualitative research design, consisting of semi-structured, open-ended interviews, either in-person or online through Zoom. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their focus on the participants lived experience and sensemaking, with the semi-structure providing participants with space to talk in-depth about what was important for them (Flick, 2018). The purpose of doing two interviews was to create an interim where participants could reflect on their first interview and use the time between interviews to

remember further details from their 2020 experience (Read, 2018). Participants were told that each interview would be approximately one to one-and-a-half hours long, however this was flexible and not a strict time limit. The first interviews sought a general overview of participants' experiences as university students during 2020, while the second interview was mostly an opportunity for participants to provide any additional information to their first interview, or anything they believed was relevant.

The interview schedule (see Appendix E) was created to guide the interviews, with questions aligning with phenomenology and sensemaking by focusing on how participants made sense of their COVID-19 pandemic experience in the past and present. However, with the questions being open-ended, each interview ended up being shaped by the participants and what they found relevant or important to share. Some participants made mention of topics that added new depths or context to their stories, and we often delved further into these to gauge what led to the participant mentioning that specific topic.

Participants had their interviews audio recorded (with their consent) to ensure no parts of their stories were missed. I transcribed each interview via manual transcription, and participants had the opportunity to review their transcripts and alert me of any amendments or changes they would like me to make.

Data Analysis: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Framing

In keeping with the theoretical foundations for this thesis, covered earlier in this chapter, the participants' interview transcripts were analysed using techniques developed for an interpretive phenomenological approach to qualitative data. I drew from an IPA study, based on Jonathan Smith's qualitative framework for researching individual experiences of phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). IPA incorporates phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Phenomenology and hermeneutics were discussed earlier in this chapter, but

idiography is the in-depth focus on a singular individual's experience, fully engaging with these experiences before trying to make general statements (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). An analysis deploying idiography techniques prioritises analysis that ensures each individual experience is examined in regard to its own uniqueness and context.

IPA emphasises the meaningfulness of an individual's lived experience, while also acknowledging the need to critically engage with their interpretations of it. It does not seek merely to describe individuals' interpretations of experiences but also explore how and why they came to these interpretations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

IPA provides this thesis with a useful way of analysing data, due to its links to my theoretical framework, its focus on depth over breadth and its emphasis on individual experiences rather than forming generalisations. IPA offers a process that painstakingly scopes each story in detail to ensure each participant's pandemic experience is captured as fully as possible. Only then are stories examined together to highlight experiential themes found across stories. The use of quotes to support experiential themes honours the participants' individual voices, adhering to IPA's commitment to idiography (Nigbur & Chatfield, 2025).

Also central to my analysis of how the participants made sense of their experiences was a recognition of how participants' reflections formed an active sensemaking process. The participants' stories demonstrated ways in which they shaped and reshaped their memories of 2020 in the retelling process of my interviews. The concept of framing, first theorised in the social sciences by Goffman (1974) in his influential work on frame analysis, provided this thesis with a valuable lens for examining how participants' stories were inflected by their social contexts. Goffman (1974) devised frames as interpretivist structures through which individuals organise and make sense of events. Social frames are constructed through

personal experiences, cultural resources, and social interaction. Small et al. (2010) broadly summarised Goffman's (1974) social frames as "a lens through which we observe and interpret social life" (p. 14). These frames act to highlight some aspects of social life while obscuring or minimising others (Small et al., 2010).

Framing is conceptualised differently throughout the social sciences, however this thesis aligns itself with Lanzi's (2024) synthesis of framing as a process through which individuals and groups organise, interpret and give meaning to their experiences and to reality itself. Lanzi (2024) suggests that framing becomes visible through how issues are discussed, what is highlighted as the issue and what is not, and who or what is considered responsible. In addition to Lanzi (2024), this thesis also draws from the work of Balconi et al. (2025) and Laryea (2023) in their definitions of reframing. Balconi et al. (2025) defines reframing as "a method of interpretation that offers an alternative meaning or viewpoint, steering perspectives in a constructive manner, frequently deriving beneficial implications from challenging situations" (p. 2). Laryea (2023) highlights the dynamic and temporal nature of reframing, with the creation of new frames and renewal of old frames that require "reflecting on the past and anticipating the future" (p. 2).

To conduct my analysis, I followed loose guides by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014) and Peat et al. (2019). I began with the transcription of the interviews. I read, re-read, and re-re-read each participant's interview transcripts, reading them with a small break in between the first and second interview transcripts. I ensured that I was approaching each participant's full story with a fresh perspective by taking breaks between participants and keeping notes about participants on pages dedicated to their transcripts only. These transcripts were continuously re-read, from the transcribing process through to writing up the thesis.

Once I had established a good understanding of each participant's full story, I printed off the transcripts and highlighted anything notable, such as specific quotes, framing language, and contradictions. After completing this, writing pages of notes, and going back over the transcripts again, I realised this was an inefficient way to conduct this step of the analysis. Using an Excel spreadsheet, I copied material from the transcripts that I found were relevant to the experiential themes identified earlier – from sentences to paragraphs. These parts of the transcript could then support the analysis as quotes.

In line with IPA's commitment to idiography, participant summaries were then created that gave a brief overview of participants' situations and context at the time of beginning university and the COVID-19 pandemic.

From there, I wrote notes about what these participants were telling me, and what experiential themes were leaping out from across the data. I deployed experiential themes to stay aligned with the principles of IPA that can identify shared themes across stories while still foregrounding the individual story (Nigbur & Chatfield, 2025). Three experiential themes were identified as appearing prevalently throughout participant interviews. These themes are memory (Chapter Three: The Retrospection of Remembering), reframing (Chapter Four: Painting a Positive Picture), and university (Chapter Five: Reframing Resisted).

Within this thesis, reframing is understood as a process through which individuals reinterpret their experiences by drawing on past memories and future expectations, consequently reshaping how situations are understood in the present. Instances of reframing were identified where participants explicitly expressed reinterpretations of the meaning of their experiences over time. The use of framing as an analytical concept is consistent with a critical realist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, recognising that while reality exists independently, it is accessed through sensemaking. Within this phenomenological, IPA-

informed thesis, participants are conceptualised as interpreting their experiences through particular frames, which are then interpreted by the researcher as part of the double hermeneutic (Carter, 2013). Framing and reframing are understood as sensemaking processes that reflect shifts in interpretation over time rather than changes in reality itself (Langenberg & Wesseling, 2016).

In the ensuing sections, I reflect on how my choice of methodology allowed me to adapt to how the participants recounted their experiences, when their own interpretation conflicted with terminology I initially chose to describe their post-pandemic feelings. Subsequently, participants are introduced via their identifiers to provide more context to the findings and analysis chapters that follow. These participant summaries detail the ages of the participants, living situations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reflection on Methodology

An important aspect of the methodological approach utilised in this research was the ability to move beyond my own assumptions about post-pandemic feelings and focus on the lived experiences described by participants. When designing this study, I initially assumed that participants would strongly relate to the concept of pandemic fatigue. Pandemic fatigue, unrelated to the physical fatigue associated with the COVID-19 virus, refers to a sense of fatigue with the COVID-19 pandemic and a reduced motivation to comply with recommended safety regulations (Chen et al., 2024). However, when participants were asked about pandemic fatigue and whether they felt it reflected their experiences, all participants indicated that it did not resonate with them. Rather than forcing participants' stories to fit this assumption, the rich stories they shared about their broader pandemic experiences allowed me to redirect my attention toward the stories they themselves emphasised.

Participant Summaries

Participant A was 17 when they began university in A trimester of 2020 directly as a school-leaver. They had little to no expectations when it came to being a university student. While they began the trimester living in student accommodation, Participant A moved back home with their parents when the first national lockdown resulted in the university closing for 7 weeks. While Participant A shared that they did not have an overly positive or negative experience of the pandemic, they expressed negative feelings towards the government-mandated safety regulations. While Participant A expressed understandings of the logic and science behind the COVID-19 pandemic regulations, they also spoke about personal experiences of friends and family experiencing adverse effects or negative consequences as a result of the safety regulations. Their overall experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increased scrutiny of the government response from the time of the pandemic to the present day.

Participant B was 19 when they began university in A trimester of 2020. They had hopes of living the student experience they had seen on rom-coms and coming-of-age movies, with many new friends and road trips. While Participant B is a domestic student, they were living in Thailand before moving back to New Zealand for university, living in student accommodation. When lockdowns were imposed, Participant B lost several new international friends, who rushed back to their countries. Participant B moved to Auckland to live with extended family, as their immediate family was still in Thailand. Travelling back to Thailand to family at the end of 2020 and studying online through A trimester 2021, Participant B made it back to New Zealand with their immediate family intact at the beginning of B trimester 2021. Participant B has an intriguing experience of the pandemic in two different countries, moving between home bases, all while beginning their university journey.

Participant C began university at 18, directly from high school, in A trimester of 2020. Planning on living with parents while studying, Participant C reflected that they already knew they would not have the ‘full’ student experience, such as living in student accommodation and participating in all first-year social events. They were excited about university, after spending their previous break between high school and university doing social things with their friends. Participant C describes the initial experiences of feeling proud of attending lectures and making friends, followed by lockdowns that forced their university experiences online. Participant C recalls their struggle with the lack of routine and accidentally missing classes, feeling unmotivated and lazy. They utilised their previous experience in retail to get an essential worker job that enabled them to socialise and feel productive during lockdown. Participant C had significant trust in the government’s approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, and despite some negative experiences of the pandemic that stood out, they regarded their experience as beneficial.

Participant D entered university at around 23 years old in B trimester of 2020. Participant D started with a pathway paper they would need to pass to enrol in their preferred degree and had already experienced the first part of the pandemic before study. They began the year working for the university but described feeling largely forgotten by the institution due to what they perceived as the chaos caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant D stated their understanding of the logic behind the government-imposed COVID-19 pandemic regulations and supported the rules but also recounted finding them personally very difficult.

Participant E also began university at 18, directly after high school, in A trimester of 2020. Participant E lived at home while they studied, but they were lucky to attend O-Week (orientation week events) and making some friends in person before the lockdowns began. While the initial transition was difficult, Participant E felt they did not struggle as much as other university students they knew. They preferred in-person learning, finding the online

learning slightly harder especially in their more hands-on field, and took a bit longer to understand what they were learning. However, Participant E characterised themselves as well-supported and passionate about their field of study, establishing a routine that resulted in meeting their academic goals. While Participant E did not get to do as much as they would have liked during their study, such as volunteering and participating in clubs, they found the COVID-19 pandemic regulations to be necessary and logical.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological justification of this thesis and how this research was conducted. Using qualitative interviews of participants who were first-year university students in New Zealand in 2020, participants' stories were collected and transcribed. Then, utilising an IPA approach for analysing transcripts, key information was identified and categorised into the themes - Memory, Reframing, and Reframing Resisted. The next chapters present the analytical findings of this research under those themes, beginning with Memory in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: The Retrospection of Remembering

This chapter examines how participants remembered and shared their COVID-19 pandemic experiences. Interviews were conducted approximately 5 years after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and therefore participants' stories are inevitably retrospective. This chapter focuses on how participants shared their experiences as temporally located, reinterpreted, and consolidated in memory. As outlined in the methodology chapter, participants' stories are treated as constructed and retrospective rather than direct recall (Thomson, 2010).

Then and Now

Across interviews, participants positioned their COVID-19 experiences temporally (in relation to time), contrasting how they understood their experience at the time it was happening, and how they interpreted it in the present. Using phrases such as “at the time” and “looking back”, or specific instances to organise their stories, participants showed that their stories were shaped by retrospective thinking rather than by recall alone.

One experience recounted early in interviews with participants was how their university trimester began unremarkably, but just as they were getting settled into a new routine, their stories shifted to describe a period of disruption. For example, Participant A recalled the moment they learnt about the lockdowns from their residential hall assistant at their university accommodation:

It was at the beginning of March [2020], and I think I was out during the time and just out doing shopping and then I got back to the halls and everyone was in the dining hall. I was like ‘God, what is everyone here for?’. And then finally the sort of Head RA [residential assistant] said “we're going to have to send everyone home”. Yeah. “Go home. You can't really stay here unless you really, really have to” sort of thing.

So, I was like “oh shit [sic], that's all happening”, so it was like I need to pack my stuff and go home.

Participant A later added that they had received warnings that this may happen, but they did not believe them:

Kind of leading up to that we had a few little talks, something with like our RA and stuff. It was just a third-year student looking after one floor at the time and they were sort of saying, “oh yeah, the university is talking about shutting down and sending people home”, and this was maybe about two weeks before the lockdown happened. You know, my thoughts were “that's not going to happen”. No way. Whatever. Well, yeah, it did happen in the end.

These excerpts show that, despite prior warnings, Participant A's story frames the lockdown as unexpected and unprecedented within their own experience. The lockdown announcement marks a sudden turning point for Participant A, going from an unremarkable beginning to university to a period of rapid change. Despite this initial disruption, Participant A recalls adapting quickly to their new situation:

It [the COVID-19 pandemic] just became the norm pretty quickly. Like going from, you know, high school straight to university where COVID [the COVID-19 pandemic] had become the norm. It was kind of going from just school to university, because university was pretty much just all COVID [the COVID-19 pandemic] from my experience anyway. I didn't really experience it beforehand.

In this excerpt, Participant A acknowledges that for them, university was a novel concept as well. Participant A seems to compartmentalise their COVID-19 pandemic experience alongside their university experience. Both beginning university and the COVID-19 restrictions are characterised by Participant A as new experiences that contained new

challenges and necessary adaptations. Describing the COVID-19 pandemic as “the norm” functions to reduce the extended and everchanging period into a single, stable period within Participant A’s story. This framing presents the pandemic as a consistent background to university life, rather than a series of ongoing disruptions.

Across these excerpts, Participant A’s story moves quickly from disruption to adaptation. The story describes in detail the announcement of the first lockdown and the need to leave the residential halls but rapidly moves to describing COVID-19 as having “become the norm”. The in-between period of adjustment is just briefly summarised. This retrospectively condensed story changes the extended period of uncertainty and confusion into a brief move from disruption to normalisation. Participant A’s story glosses over any emotions felt at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, positioning this time as distant from their present self.

Emotional distancing was especially evident in Participant E’s story, where they acknowledge strong emotions at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, but none at the time of the interview:

But now, looking back, because it's been so long, even though realistically it's only been like 3 years since the actual effects were felt, I can't really distinguish it. Like I've got an idea of like “oh this was before COVID, this was after COVID”. But the feeling I felt at the time, I can't recall those emotions. They were so strong at the time, but when I think back to how I felt then, I now think of it in a way that I think of it now.

Participant E explicitly divides their COVID-19 pandemic experience into “before COVID-19” and “after COVID-19”. This highlights a clear temporal boundary between past intense emotions and present emotional distance. While in this quote Participant E states that

they cannot recall those emotions, they did identify emotions they felt at the time throughout the interviews as “anxiety”, “stress”, “fear”, and “scared” (Participant E). Despite Participant E acknowledging that they had strong emotions at the time of the pandemic, they are positioned as belonging to an earlier period that is not emotionally accessible in the present.

Memory as Dynamic and Revised

Participants shared their COVID-19 pandemic experience as dynamic and open to reinterpretation. In presenting their stories, participants would retrospectively clarify their memories, highlighting that what they were sharing was through a contemporary lens and not just a fixed recall of events.

One way in which it was evident that participants acknowledged shifts in their understandings of their COVID-19 pandemic memories was in their answers to my interview question: “How do you feel about the COVID-19 pandemic now?”. These answers highlight a tendency to recall significant events or emotions from that period but quickly identify them as elusive or unemotional now.

When answering the aforementioned question, Participant C shared:

I think because I went through it [the COVID-19 pandemic] and I was thinking “oh, it's so simple”. Like, “I probably could do it again, anyone can do it”. But I think it only hit me when I actually read about your research, that and like a person was telling me, I was like “oh, it's actually a pretty big thing that's happened”.

While in this excerpt Participant C does acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic was a “pretty big thing that happened”, they allude to recalling the significance of it after being reminded by others. Participant C highlights that they have thought of it since it had ended by saying they thought it was “simple”. This excerpt shows multiple shifts in

Participant C's understandings of the COVID-19 pandemic, from how they felt at the time, to how they simplified it, to how they remembered it.

Participant C had shared earlier in the interview that they found the COVID-19 pandemic "incredibly hard" in multiple aspects. Participant C's reinterpretation of their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as "I probably could do it again" functions to downplay the emotions they felt at the time.

Similarly, Participant E acknowledges the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic, this time through recalling troubling events related to the pandemic:

I mean, that's a really funny question because I don't feel super strongly about it.

Which feels weird to say because it was such a prevalent time and was such a horrible thing and, I think, I don't know. You think back to some of the things that happened, you think of the mass graves, and I get quite upset with it, you know. But when I think of COVID [the COVID-19 pandemic] itself and the whole experience, I think I was a bit disappointed I missed out on certain things in life and it's really horrible what a lot of people went through, and I wish that that stress had never happened. I don't feel super strongly about it.

Throughout this excerpt, Participant E makes it abundantly clear that they once felt a range of different emotions towards the COVID-19 pandemic. However, their understanding now is that it happened and if any of those emotions do still exist, they have been largely dulled. Participant E also clarified after the interview concluded that although they said, "I get quite upset with it" regarding pandemic-related events such as the "mass graves", they were not presently upset. Participant E heavily emphasised that those were feelings from the time of the event and not how they feel at present.

The use of the word “funny” when referring to the question underscores Participant E’s retrospective clarity of their memories of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant E calls attention to an awareness they have that their feelings towards the COVID-19 pandemic now are almost unemotional despite the intense emotions they experienced at the time.

Participant B also used the word “funny” when referring to the time of the COVID-19 pandemic:

Yeah, it's quite funny to think about because it really was quite a global event that I feel like hasn't happened on such a scale that, like everyone was affected by it... So, looking back, it is quite a funny part in time.

In this excerpt, Participant B briefly recognises the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic, but clarifies that thinking about it now, they consider it to be “funny”. This descriptor for the COVID-19 pandemic diminishes the unprecedented, global event to a mere strange happening in time. Participant B ascertains that they no longer understand the COVID-19 pandemic as significant, only as odd. However, they also acknowledge that “everyone was affected by it”, not excluding themselves from the affected.

Seeking Closure in Memory

Participants’ stories commonly express that they sought closure to their COVID-19 pandemic experience. This was identified through participant’s use of phrases such as “moved on”, “got over it”, and that the COVID-19 pandemic was “something that happened”. This language used by participants to situate the pandemic in the past highlights a movement towards resolution of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences.

When answering the question “how do you feel about the COVID-19 pandemic now?”, three participants all stated a similar phrase towards the end of their answers: “it just feels like something that happened” (Participant B), “it happened” (Participant D), and “it

was just something that happened” (Participant E). These phrases, expressing the pandemic as simply having ‘happened’, appear unemotional and do not indicate any connection between the participants and the COVID-19 pandemic. They do not suggest that they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, “it” is not something that “happened” to them personally. By referring to the COVID-19 pandemic in this manner, these participants distance themselves from that period, while also placing it firmly in the past.

The simplicity of these phrases functions to convey that these participants are finished engaging with their COVID-19 pandemic experience, both emotionally and cognitively. They shut down the prospect of being asked to elaborate further on their thoughts and feelings about their COVID-19 pandemic experiences by framing them as complete and no longer open for interpretation.

While these participants are asserting closure, that does not necessarily mean they have ‘achieved’ closure (however that might be defined). This closure-focused language may reflect participants protecting themselves emotionally by denying further emotional engagement with their COVID-19 pandemic experience (Lamiani et al., 2025; Weick, 1995).

There were also phrases used by participants that shows they were seeking closure, but conditionally rather than in absolute terms. When discussing how they feel about the pandemic, Participant E said, “we’ve all moved on from it and there’s still bits that you see in everyday life from it”. In one sentence, Participant E juxtaposes emotionally moving on from the COVID-19 pandemic while also acknowledging that traces of it remain in everyday life. Participant E makes it clear that they have “moved on”, but they are not naïve to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has left a lasting residual imprint on everyday life. Participant E is still focused on closure, but they have made it conditional on not attempting to erase the residue, portraying Participant E as having asserted closure and as socially aware.

When asked whether they believe the COVID-19 pandemic had any lasting effects on their future perspective, Participant C shared “It was an experience. We made some memories during it, and you got over it, and it's something to talk about now.” In this quote, Participant C also conditionally seeks closure by changing their understanding of their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic from lived to conversational. By shifting their understanding of their COVID-19 pandemic experience from something that disrupted and impacted their life to a simple story to be shared, Participant C creates a safe emotional distance between themselves and their experience. While they state, “you got over it”, they recognise their COVID-19 experience as resolved emotionally, but still accessible to their present self in story form.

In contrast to other participants, Participant A does not seek closure to their COVID-19 pandemic experience. When asked if they felt they had to move on after the announcement of the pandemic ending, Participant A shared: “Maybe I didn't quite move on mentally, I don't know if I still have a bit of a gripe about the lockdowns and stuff like that, but I am moving on in terms of day-to-day life.”.

Despite the emotional distancing demonstrated by Participant A earlier in this chapter, they identify as “still moving on”. The emotional distancing therefore is not closure, but a part of Participant A's remembering that coexists with sense-making. Participant A may have been able to distance themselves from their emotions from their COVID-19 pandemic experience, but that same distance does not exist about their memories from the time. This highlights that emotional distancing does not lead to closure but acts distinctly differently from it. Participant A is working in the present to make sense of their COVID-19 pandemic experience through remembering.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the theme of memory as it appeared throughout participants' stories. By examining how participants contrasted past and present understandings of their experiences, engaged in retrospective clarification, and sought closure through memory, the chapter highlighted which aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic remained meaningful over time. Rather than offering direct recall, participants constructed dynamic and revised stories of their experiences as a way of making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic over time. This analysis establishes the foundation for the following chapters on reframing, demonstrating that remembering was an active interpretive process through which past experiences were revised in the present.

Chapter Four: Painting a Positive Picture

This chapter examines how participants made sense of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences through reframing. Across stories, participants frequently reinterpret their experiences in ways that emphasise positivity, resolution, stability and adjustment, even when their stories also contain moments of disruption, contradiction, and ongoing difficulties. These reinterpretations do not indicate an absence of distress (Gilbert et al., 2025). Instead, they highlight how participants made sense of their experiences over time.

Prevalence and Early Emergence of Reframing

Reframing is evident in each of the participants' stories. While some instances of reframing appear quite unambiguously, participants also subtly reframe their COVID-19 pandemic experiences while telling their stories. These more subtle reframing instances are occasionally signposted by words and phrases such as “but” and “I guess”. Quick shifts in participants' focus from negative or neutral aspects of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences to positive ones also highlight reframing. Positive reframing appears more frequently as the interview transcripts progress.

Reframing emerges most strongly when the interview focus shifted from the university context to the COVID-19 pandemic more broadly. For example, an important focus within stories that is not directly related to their university studies is family. Several participants frame their ability to spend time with their family as a very positive part of their COVID-19 pandemic experience.

Participant B shared within their first answer, “I went to live with my aunt and uncle during the [COVID-19 pandemic] lockdowns. That was in Auckland, and it was alright. It was lovely. I love my family”. Participant B very quickly rephrases their statement about living with their extended family during the lockdowns from “it was alright” to “it was

lovely”. This quick change in language repositions Participant B’s experience with their family from neutral to positive. The addition of “I love my family” foregrounds this aspect of their COVID-19 pandemic experience positively. Any negative or ambivalent feelings towards their family are not elaborated on. Reframing their pandemic experience as positive due to time spent with family continues throughout Participant B’s story.

Participant C similarly highlighted family early in their story of their COVID-19 pandemic experience in their statement: “Because I was with my family, it's always a positive experience there [sic] because we didn’t feel alone”. In this excerpt, Participant C positions their COVID-19 pandemic experience as “always” positive due to being with their family and not being alone. The use of the qualifier “always” highlights that Participant C presents their experience as uniformly positive, while the absolute sense of the phrase shuts down alternative interpretations.

In the initial introduction to Participant C’s COVID-19 pandemic experience story, Participant C shared “I was living at home, it was kind of self-explanatory that I won't have that uni experience. But either way, I don't think I missed too much out of the social aspect.” In this excerpt, Participant C recognizes that their university experience would have been different than what is considered a typical university experience in New Zealand due to living at home. Participant C refers to the social aspect of the university experience in New Zealand, which typically includes social orientation activities within and outside the university. Participant C acknowledges a loss in the form of not having “that uni experience” but quickly reframes it as insignificant because they would not have had the experience regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of “but” and “either way” signals an elusive shift from negative to a more positive interpretation.

Another example of how participants adjusted the way they characterise experiences is evident in participant D's story, where I offered my impression of what they had recalled in our interview. In reply to a suggested characterisation of Participant D's feelings as apathetic towards the pandemic now, Participant D strongly clarifies "it's not that I'm apathetic. It's just that I'm amenable to what happened." This excerpt shows Participant D actively adjusting their language describing their COVID-19 pandemic experience. By rejecting "apathetic" and replacing it with "amenable", Participant D shifts away from disengagement and towards acceptance.

When asked how they look back at the pandemic, Participant B said "I look back on it as maybe almost like a neutral thing" but later followed up in email:

I was reflecting on the use of the word "neutral" for my feelings in 2020 and I don't think that's quite accurate. I would probably say it's more of a mixed bag with more positive and warm feelings for the time I spent with my extended family.

This email addition shows Participant B's retrospection of their interview, highlighting how Participant B is actively reinterpreting their memories when sharing their story. As with Participant B's earlier quote regarding their family, Participant B emphasises the positivity of their COVID-19 pandemic experience, foregrounding this positivity in time spent with family.

While these findings highlight participants' tendency to reframe their COVID-19 pandemic experiences, often in a positive way, this reframing did not erase participants' struggles and difficulties.

Reframing, not Naivety

Despite the prevalence of reframing across participants stories, the reframing is not simply positive reinterpretations devoid of negativity. Participants share negative aspects of their COVID-19 pandemic experience while simultaneously positively reframing them.

Participant E related a curious analogy that combines an acknowledgement of their COVID-19 pandemic experience being anxiety-inducing, but much less concerned in the present:

It's the difference between hearing that there's a car crash and then hearing that a group of people got bitten by a shark. It's that thing of "oh that's so sad there's a car crash", and "OH MY GOSH a shark attack". It's no longer new. I feel like the media has a lot to do with that as well because they overdo things a lot. So it wasn't that I stopped caring, stopped following the rules or anything like that. I still felt like that general anxiety around it and still wanted to know everything, but it stopped being like that shock horror and started being that oh, it's happened again.

By comparing the COVID-19 pandemic with a shark attack and car crashes, Participant E presents these three situations as similarly negative. In Participant E's analogy, they emphasise an initial period of "shock horror", followed by describing an ongoing desensitisation to COVID-19 news. Participant E is reframing their COVID-19 pandemic experience as one that improved over time but is not ignoring the initial negative impact it had on them.

This form of reframing, where the shift in emotional response is acknowledged also emerges in Participant D's story. Reflecting on their current feelings towards the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant D shared:

I'm glad it's not still happening, but at the same time, I feel like at the time everything that happened was pretty necessary. I didn't have any major disagreements with how things happened or, I kind of just went with it and, not as [sic] happy with it in a sense, but it felt like the right thing to do.

Participant D acknowledges negative or uncomfortable aspects in saying they are “glad it’s not still happening” and sharing they did not have any “major disagreements” with how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled in New Zealand. However, Participant D does not elaborate on them, instead enveloping these aspects in a story that reframes the way the COVID-19 pandemic was handled in New Zealand as “necessary” and “the right thing to do”.

The following excerpt from Participant B’s story demonstrates how positive reframing forms part of participant B’s recollections, yet they do also briefly acknowledge difficulties:

I will say, even though it was a difficult first year experience, having COVID [the COVID-19 pandemic], obviously if I could choose to have it or not have it, I probably would choose not to have a global pandemic during university. But I'm also quite grateful it wasn't in my last years of high school, because one of my siblings is 2 years younger than me and they missed out on a lot of end of high school things like prom and graduation and all the grad trips. And I got to have all those lovely experiences with my high school friends, which I think I would have missed out on if the pandemic was at a different time. So, I think, I'm not sure how relevant that is, but I'm quite grateful for that at least.

Participant B clearly recognises that experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic during their first and following years of university was negative. Participant B then immediately qualifies that they are still “grateful” because they did not experience it during high school

where they would have missed out on important social events with friends. Participant B reframes their COVID-19 pandemic experience during university as a worthwhile trade-off for having a normal high school experience.

Reframing COVID-19 pandemic experiences in this way highlights that participants were not intending to ignore the seriousness and negativity of the COVID-19 pandemic, and understanding coexists with positive reframing. Participants also hinted at what reframing their experiences allowed them to do in their stories.

What Reframing Afforded Participants

Reframing experiences reflects certain functions that connect with how people understand and present their own experiences within the context of an interaction. In the case of this thesis, I am examining participants' responses that were produced within the specific context of a research interview where they were asked questions and retrospectively constructing answers. This is an active process of sensemaking, where participants can reframe experiences through identifying specific emotional thoughts and replacing them with neutral or positive ones (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995; Matuz et al., 2024). Reframing afforded participants a way to re-position themselves in their stories, move away from distress, and limit elaboration on negative experiences.

In discussing the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant D expressed:

It was sad and it was hard, but in the same way that I guess, like World War II for instance, like. That was pretty bad. It was really bad but yeah, life goes on and we keep moving forward.

In this excerpt, Participant D compares the COVID-19 pandemic to World War II in its sorrow and difficulty. This comparison reframes their COVID-19 pandemic experience as concluded. Despite the severity of both events, they are positioned as something that has been

relegated to the past. By closing the comparison with “but yeah, life goes on” and “we keep moving forward”, Participant D leaves the noted difficulties and sadness unexplored and then closes it off to elaboration on distress.

Reframing also afforded participants the opportunity to reposition themselves as having benefitted from aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant E conveyed this when discussing their social experience:

Even though initially COVID hindered me in that friendship thing, I think overall because of that, because we became so isolated, it showed how making those quick connections can be really beneficial. And as a result, I think I'm a little bit more open to meeting people and I think I also felt a lot more on the same playing field as people after COVID, if that makes sense. I always felt like, especially in high school I was always a bit insecure perhaps. So, that could have just been the age. You know, you are that age, but after COVID [the COVID-19 pandemic], I felt like “ohh well, no one knows what's going to happen”. And I felt a lot more, you know, on the same level as all of my peers.

Here, Participant E relates their socialisation during and after the COVID-19 pandemic to a renewed interest in socialising and their perception that the COVID-19 pandemic put them and their peers on “the same playing field”. Participant E repositions themselves as equal with their peers, emphasising the positive way they have continued to benefit from the COVID-19 pandemic.

A similar affordance of perceived benefit from the COVID-19 pandemic was presented in both Participant C's and Participant A's stories. Universities responded to challenges students experienced during the pandemic conditions by adapting their assessment approaches, for example, allowing more flexible assignment deadlines and applying grade

moderation processes to compensate for the upheavals in student learning (Cameron et al., 2022). Referring to the leniency, understanding, and grading changes at university prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant C shared, “present day, I'm actually a little bit glad that COVID-19 [the COVID-19 pandemic] did happen because I felt like it gave us a lot of benefits”. Participant C neutralises the difficulty of the COVID-19 pandemic with the perceived university benefits they gained from it. Meanwhile, the move to online learning required university students to study from home. While some struggled with the change and identified several barriers to studying effectively from home (Idris et al., 2021), others found the home environment to be beneficial for their studies (Curelaru et al., 2022). For example, Participant A shared, “A trimester in 2020, I was able to, that's really the semester I got the best grades, you know, just because the zero, or near zero distractions around”. Again, the negative aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic are compressed so Participant A can reposition themselves as academically advantaged in their university journey from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reframing as Incomplete, not Closure

This chapter has demonstrated that positive reframing of the participants' recollections of their experiences of university during the COVID pandemic can create affordances for participants in telling their stories. However, despite the ways in which participants reframe their memories to emphasise their own ability to remain optimistic, reframing is an incomplete and ongoing process.

In Participant A's story, there was recurring tension between reframing the COVID-19 pandemic government safety regulations as positive for the wider community in New Zealand and expressing personal grievances with these same regulations.

In one excerpt, Participant A reflects on their present feelings towards the COVID-19 pandemic:

Good that we probably got away with one of the least amount [sic] of deaths and sicknesses in the world. And then yeah, still a little bit annoyed that we were shut inside, like for quite a while, it felt like longer than it needed to be. But then again, if we didn't have all those lockdowns and stuff, we might have been worse off.

A recurring thread throughout Participant A's story is frustration with how the government handled safety regulations alongside a personal connection to family and friends who experienced negative ramifications from these regulations. In this excerpt, this tension is present, with Participant A reframing these frustrations as beneficial in a wider sense but qualifying it with "we might have been worse off". The use of "might" in that phrase highlights a hesitation in resolving dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as entirely positive. Participant A continued this thread in the latter part of their answer:

One thing that I didn't really like about the pandemic was sort of being kind of coerced into getting vaccines, like being able to study here we had to be vaccinated, and yeah, there were people in my year, and one person had a particularly bad reaction to the vaccine that meant they couldn't study for the next year. And yeah, that's probably what peeved me the most. Yeah sure, we were doing it for the greater good, getting the vaccine, but it cost a few people. And then again, it probably would cost a whole lot of people if no-one got the vaccine, so it's not really black or white my view on it.

Here, Participant A shows how they actively reframe parts of their experience, yet certain emotions and issues remain, highlighting that reinterpretation does not erase the

persistence of distress. Participant A's comment shows tension between their annoyance with vaccination requirements, a personal negative experience with required vaccines, and conceding the necessity of the vaccines for the safety of the wider community. Participant A plainly acknowledges this tension with the end statement "so it's not really black and white, my view on it".

Participant A does not characterise themselves as holding anti-vaccine views, stating later in their story: "Vaccines pretty much got rid of things like polio, rubella and all that sort of thing as well. Yeah, countless others I have no idea of". This quote positions Participant A as knowledgeable about the science and logic behind safety regulations. Combined with Participant A's earlier excerpts it is clear that their reframing is incomplete, unable to overwrite their distrust and negative personal experiences.

Throughout these excerpts, Participant A is clear in their understanding of the necessity of COVID-19 safety regulations, while simultaneously sharing parts of their experience where these safety regulations caused them personal distress. Participant A's story shows that reframing is not the same as closure, and that it is not an absolute process. Reframing is limited by its inability to erase emotional ties to experiences, coexisting with ongoing impacts rather than producing resolution (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored how participants made sense of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences through the process of reframing. Participants consistently reinterpret experiences to emphasise positivity, adaptation, and benefits, while still acknowledging disruption, challenges, and emotional tension. Reframing is expressed both overtly and subtly, with participants actively shifting focus from negatives to aspects they can control or appreciate. However, reframing does not erase distress or frustration but coexists with

ongoing impacts. This chapter demonstrates how participants dynamically make sense of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences, balancing acknowledgment of difficulties with positive reinterpretations.

Chapter Five: Reframing Resisted

This chapter focuses on participants' memories relating specifically to their university experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike broader COVID-19 pandemic experiences, participants did not reframe the university aspect as often. When reframing did occur, it often consisted of blaming themselves rather than seeking university accountability.

University Experiences Resisted Reframing

Throughout participants' descriptions of their university experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, instances of reframing were scarce. By reframing, I refer specifically to moments where participants reinterpret challenging experiences to soften, explain, or highlight any positive aspects, even subtly. In contrast, the examples presented here are situations in which participants conveyed difficulties without any such reinterpretation, maintaining the emotional intensity and perceived challenges of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences.

When discussing their university experience during COVID-19, Participant D highlighted a lack of support:

...It was rather daunting. Just all of a sudden going to online and not having, I guess the support that was needed for first time studies. Especially with a lot riding on it like this was my pathway to get into university.

In this excerpt, Participant D describes the insufficient support available for the paper that would enable them to enter their chosen degree, making the process daunting. Participant D does not soften the difficulty they experienced or introduce any positive reinterpretation, highlighting how their current telling conveys the challenges as they recall them, without reframing.

Later in the interview, Participant D continued describing an unsupportive university experience:

I definitely fell into a weird sort of category when I was here [at university], and I feel like a lot of adult learners do as well... So it's definitely a weird place to be, like you definitely feel a bit more alone, if that makes sense. Wouldn't say, not discriminated against. But like you feel like an outlier. And there's no social interaction catered to that group of people.

In this excerpt, Participant D highlights the barriers they faced as an adult learner, including fewer opportunities to socialise and build social support networks compared to first-year university students. Again, there is no reframing towards a more positive perspective, and the absence of qualifying language (e.g., “but”, “at least”) emphasises the ongoing intensity of Participant D's challenges as they perceive them, rather than suggesting any reduction in impact.

Participant C's story is similar to Participant D's story in emphasising a lack of support during their university experience:

Uni already is a big step and you're very scared, and then being by yourself kind of, even though you have your family and everything, it's just like a new step. And so you feel like you're not making it anywhere, like that sudden feeling of like “oh there's COVID”, and you have to sit at home, and we don't know how to do half this stuff without anyone's help.

In this excerpt, Participant C stresses that an already “big step” (beginning university) was made more difficult and confusing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, without any attempt to reinterpret or reframe the experience positively. Participant C's story maintains focus on

the lack of necessary academic and social support available, emphasising the persistence of perceived difficulties.

Across these examples, participants describe university during the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that are critically evaluative or reflective of difficulty, but not reframed. This contrasts with other parts of their COVID-19 pandemic stories (discussed in Chapter Four), where participants sometimes reinterpret experiences to highlight growth, learning, or adaptation. Here, the absence of reframing demonstrates that certain experiences – particularly those tied to university support and transition into university – retain their emotional weight and are recounted as enduring challenges.

University as a Symbol of Loss and Disruption

Students beginning university often have expectations about how their academic journey will play out. Some expectations students have of university are high levels of communication and support from teaching staff and the university in general, and improved academic and work prospects (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Tomlinson et al., 2023). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants described their university experience as disrupted, fragmented, and lacking support. Participants' stories detailed a university failing to function as expected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant C detailed how the COVID-19 pandemic led to university disruption and confusion from the very beginning:

Half the time I was emailing the uni asking “are we in lockdown, are we not in lockdown”, because I saw so many other unis like I think like, Waikato was one of the last unis to go into lockdown. Every other uni was like in lockdown [sic] or they had like the restrictions in place. And I remember emailing Waikato saying “hi, like workplaces are in lockdown, other universities on lockdown, are we in lockdown?”.

And I remember Waikato uni emailing back saying “ohh like [sic] our chancellor hasn't said anything, so you still have to come to uni”. And then like literally like a few hours later they sent a uni-wide e-mail going around like, “oh, we're actually locking down”. So I think that was really overwhelming.

In this excerpt, Participant C highlights difficulty in communicating with the university at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recalling repeated attempts to communicate with the university about the possibility of a lockdown, Participant C positions the university as inconsistent and unstable. In Participant C's story, the university created uncertainty by saying that they still have to come to university despite other New Zealand universities locking down. Later on in Participant C's story, the university contradicts themselves very quickly after confusing Participant C, making the decision to go into lockdown. When looking to the university for guidance, Participant C recalls feeling overwhelmed and confused by inconsistent communication, rather than finding the university supportive in their communications.

When discussing how their learning was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant D shared the challenges they faced:

So, the lack of face-to-face time with the lecturer to ask questions. I mean, I think for our paper we didn't even do like zoom meetings or anything like that. It was just recorded lectures. So, definitely, not having that live feedback and questions and answering is something that I really struggled with and, just watching lectures online, especially about maths, it's pretty hard to digest.

Participant D outlines a situation where they required more support from the university than they were able to receive. The university was constrained in their ability to

provide Participant D with face-to-face teaching and the possibility of asking questions about their course content, leading to Participant D struggling with their learning experience.

This university disruption was not limited to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants describe disruption as ongoing throughout their university experience, with Participant A noting that they were significantly affected towards the end of both the COVID-19 pandemic and their university experience:

I think that's one thing that I'm probably disadvantaged, probably a lot of students, but engineering students anyway, since in the industry, there was probably a whole lot of layoffs, the last thing they wanted to do was pay a second or third year [student] there over the summer months. And yeah, that's something I found a lot of trouble with, getting that industry experience. Which now is probably biting me in the backside, not really knowing what's out there. And yeah, having experience to put on my CV and that sort of thing.

Here, Participant A describes a scenario, years into the COVID-19 pandemic, where they feel disadvantaged by industry-wide layoffs resulting from the pandemic, leaving the university struggling to provide a suitable work experience opportunity. While they were able to find Participant A a work experience role “sweeping floors for a few hundred hours” (Participant A), this is insufficient for gaining the real work experience Participant A expected to get. While this work experience “somehow counted” towards their degree, fulfilling the work experience requirement, Participant A argues that the experience provided did not benefit them after the completion of their degree.

Reframing Through Self-Accountability

During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants described facing a range of challenges in their university studies. Many noticed disruptions in course delivery or changes in the

ways in which support and teaching were provided. In response, participants often reflected on their own role in managing these challenges, taking responsibility for how they navigated gaps or setbacks in their learning. Their stories reveal a pattern of reframing difficulties through self-accountability, shifting focus from circumstances beyond their control to their own actions and decisions.

In discussing the difficulties Participant D experienced with their university experience, Participant D excuses the teaching staff from being at fault:

I don't think it was the lecturer's fault. I feel like they did what they could. They were really nice. I think it was just a general lack of manpower that everyone was kind of facing, like it's hard to put it down to one person because everyone all of a sudden needed all this extra support, and admittedly it was a pretty small paper. There was only, I think 5 or 6 of us, so that's, yeah, I don't want to say not worth putting the time and resources into, but definitely lower priority compared to some of the papers that have hundreds of students.

Here, Participant D reframes their experience by removing accountability from teaching staff and the university, instead framing the lack of support as an unavoidable consequence of pandemic-related constraints. Participant D notes a “general lack of manpower” and describes the paper they were taking as “pretty small” and therefore “definitely lower priority”. With these opinions, Participant D’s story assumes that limited resources created a need to prioritise bigger papers, which shaped the level of support that was available. This reframing is particularly notable given that the paper was a bridging paper, meaning Participant D needed to pass this paper to gain admission into their chosen degree. Despite the high personal stakes, Participant D positions the reduced support as reasonable, minimising the university’s responsibility to provide adequate academic support.

Similarly, Participant C shifts accountability for what is offered by the university, away from the teaching staff and the institution:

Uni, I feel like you have to give it to them that they also were like, they're also doing it for the first time, so they couldn't be as supportive as they wanted because they don't know of this transition and they had to transition very quickly as well.

Obviously, it got better over the years, but I think that first initial 2020, it was just, it felt like there was, it was just, I don't know. So many gaps, not many [sic] support.

Participant C reframes the university as not being “as supportive as they wanted” due to the novelty of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, they downplay their own inexperience with both university and the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have increased their need for guidance and support from the university. The phrase “as supportive as they wanted” indicates Participant C’s belief that they would have received more support than they did had there not been a pandemic. By reframing the university’s accountability as limited due to the unprecedented pandemic, Participant C mitigates institutional responsibility. However, despite Participant C reframing a part of this experience, they still conclude with “so many gaps, not many [sic] support”.

Participant A reframes their experience of needing help in their papers as personal reluctance, rather than an accessibility issue on the side of the university:

Yeah, like a scared first year, I didn't really think about reaching out to lecturers. They were, you know all the way up there sort of thing so.

In this excerpt, Participant A describes themselves as a “scared first year” and positions lecturers and teaching staff as distant, “up there” people of power. In doing so, Participant A normalises non-engagement as an expected individual response. By reframing this non-engagement as normal, Participant A makes sense of their experience without

critiquing the university's accessibility directly. However, by doing this, Participant A also masks the structural power imbalance between university students and teaching staff, during the COVID-19 pandemic, where more proactive support may have been valuable for university students.

The University Experience That Never Was

University students that began their studies in 2020 experienced a loss of a typical university experience in New Zealand. A big part of this loss was the social aspects that usually go hand-in-hand with university. While these losses were not felt in the same way by all participants, it did have a significant effect on some participants.

Participant C recalled the feeling of beginning to make friends in classes before the first lockdown happened:

So, I was actually feeling really like proud of myself that I was making friends. And, like, you know, talking to people when you first go into a lecture. And all of a sudden, you're just seeing people on zoom and it's like "well, this is it", you just see them like for one hour and then you're out. So that part was hard.

In this excerpt, Participant C highlights the stark contrast between attending class in-person and online at university, going from an environment that was conducive to making friends and meeting people to an environment where this was near impossible. The pride Participant C felt in initially making friends underscores the social opportunities they valued and that they had been denied once classes shifted online.

Participant B began their story with a focus on social engagement and making friends:

I went [sic] to the dorm [student accommodation] at University of Waikato, and that was, you know, scary and exciting as a little 19-year-old. But then, yeah, I think it was

about 3 weeks in when university started when COVID happened. And the first thing that was a bit of a bummer, I guess, was a lot of the people I first became friends with were a lot of international students, a lot of exchange students, because I'm not sure, I think I felt a bit of a connection with people from overseas. I don't know if I was super, I didn't know much about New Zealand culture and all of that. I don't know, I just felt I clicked with those people more and they all got, like, deported [sic]. They all got kicked out kind of all back to their countries [sic]. So, it was a shame, obviously.

Here, Participant B quickly focuses on how early friendships that were being formed with exchange and international university students were disrupted, with the exchange and international students going back to their home countries. This quote highlights a compounded loss, where Participant B missed out on forming friendships with relatable or culturally similar university students, and their sense of isolation was intensified.

The loss of social opportunities extended beyond initial friendships, affecting Participant B's social expectations of university life. Participant B reflected:

I think, I like a lot of, this is gonna [sic] sound funny, rom-coms and like coming-of-age movies, so I definitely like saw road trips with new friends and stuff like that. There's [sic] probably like, some of the fun expectations I had. And, you know, obviously no one was going to predict a global pandemic. So yeah, definitely changed my social expectations of university a lot, cause obviously my, you know, my friends that were like American friends or you know, were kicked out early [sic]. And yeah, I think it was a bit of a bummer in terms of building those connections.

Here, Participant B's expectations are linked to coming-of-age movies, which illustrate what a "normal" university experience should look like. This reflection shows that missing out was not just situational, but also a disruption of anticipated social prospects.

Finally, Participant B mentioned via email that being unable to form as many friendships as they expected weighed heavily on them at present:

Although I have fond memories of university and spending time with my friends in 2020, I also feel a sense of, maybe not loss, but definitely a sense of lacking that it wasn't a full experience... And I think that feeling also sometimes manifested in embarrassment?

In this quote, Participant B described the lasting emotional impact of these missed opportunities. The use of language in the phrase "maybe not loss... definitely a sense of lacking" reveals a tension between positive memories and the recognition of missing out. Participant B's feeling of embarrassment shows how these gaps in experience created a retrospective negative self-perception.

These quotes reflect the broader theme of missing out on the typical first-year university experience, where social engagement and peer connections are fundamental. These losses were not simply arbitrary but negatively impacted participants' self-perception.

Chapter Summary

This chapter examined participants' experiences of university during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting areas where reframing was minimal or absent. Unlike broader pandemic experiences, participants seldom reinterpreted university challenges positively, and when reframing occurred, it often involved self-blame rather than holding the university accountable. Participants described disrupted course delivery, inconsistent communication, insufficient academic support, and a loss of expected social and academic opportunities. This

chapter illustrated how the university context resisted reframing, showing that certain structural and social disruptions created lasting impacts on university students' experiences and self-perceptions.

Chapter Six: Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of this study in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework of phenomenology, double hermeneutics, sensemaking and memory. The purpose of this study was to address the limited research exploring how first-year university students retrospectively make sense of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences. The findings demonstrate that participants' present-day stories were not simple recollections of past events, but reflective reconstructions shaped by current perspectives and broader social narratives.

Remember, Remember! – Memory and Reflection as Coping Mechanisms

Participants constructed dynamic and evolving stories of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences, demonstrating that their stories were shaped through retrospective reflection rather than simple recall. Rather than retrieving fixed records of events, participants actively reconstructed their experiences through memory, shaping their stories in ways that allowed the disruption of the pandemic to be understood from their current standpoint. These reconstructed stories enabled participants to position their experiences within a broader personal trajectory, transforming what had once been ongoing and uncertain disruptions into experiences that could now be narrated with coherence and meaning.

This finding reflects the reconstructive nature of autobiographical memory, in which individuals do not retrieve exact representations of past events but actively reinterpret experiences in ways that align with present understanding and identity (Fivush & Graci, 2017; Thomson, 2010; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking theory similarly emphasises that meaning is created retrospectively, with individuals relying on memory to interpret past events through the lens of current knowledge, perspective, and identity goals (Weick, 1995). In this process, “the past is reconstructed from the knowledge of the outcome” (Langenberg & Wesseling,

2016, p. 234), not from the outcome itself, highlighting that participants' current interpretations shaped how their pandemic experiences were remembered and narrated. Participants were therefore not simply describing what happened during the pandemic but were actively reconstructing its significance in regard to how their lives had since unfolded.

This reconstructive process also reflects the close relationship between memory and identity. Autobiographical remembering is not solely concerned with accuracy but is a dynamic and socially influenced process through which individuals construct stories and identities that make sense of their lived experiences (Fivush & Graci, 2017). Memory and identity operate in a cycle, whereby memories contribute to the construction of identity, while identity simultaneously shapes how memories are recalled and interpreted (Langenberg & Wesseling, 2016). Participants' stories reflected this process, as their memories were organised around an identity that had lived through the COVID-19 pandemic as university students, but which had since transitioned into new life stages associated with careers and adulthood. This shift in identity shaped how participants interpreted their past experiences, allowing them to view pandemic disruptions from the perspective of who they had since become rather than who they were at the time. This temporal distance allowed participants to position the pandemic as a past chapter rather than an ongoing disruption, demonstrating how memory supports the creation of a coherent life story over time.

Through this reconstructive remembering, memory functioned as a key sensemaking resource, enabling participants to interpret and emotionally process their pandemic experiences. Participants' stories reflected a sense of order, clarity and rationality, consistent with the view that an important goal of sensemaking is the subjective feeling of order, clarity and rationality rather than objective resolution (Langenberg & Wesseling, 2016). This was evident in how participants positioned themselves as largely understanding of government safety regulations, such as lockdowns, framing them as logical and necessary responses to the

COVID-19 pandemic. Even participants who experienced personal hardship in relation to these measures often retrospectively framed them as justified for the greater good. This suggests that participants' memories had been reconstructed in ways that allowed their experiences to be integrated into a coherent story of collective crisis and response, reducing (but not erasing) emotional tension and enabling psychological distance from the disruption. This distancing suggests that memory reconstruction allowed participants to integrate the pandemic into their broader life story without it continuing to define their present identity.

The reconstructive nature of memory therefore provided the foundation for later reinterpretation, as participants drew on these reconstructed memories to further reshape the meaning of their experiences in ways that protected identity and facilitated sensemaking. This process of reframing is explored in the following section.

These findings extend sensemaking literature by demonstrating how reconstructed memory plays a foundational role in shaping how participants understand and share their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This highlights memory as an active mechanism in sensemaking, rather than a passive record of events, demonstrating how participants used reconstructed memory to integrate large-scale social disruption into coherent personal stories.

She'll Be Right – The Influence of Collective Narratives on Individual Stories

Participants often made sense of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences through reframing, consistently reinterpreting their experiences to emphasise positivity, adaptation and benefits, while still acknowledging disruption, challenges, and emotional tension. Reframing was expressed in overt and subtle manners, with participants actively shifting focus from negatives to aspects they could control or appreciate. Reframing did not erase emotional tension and existed simultaneously with it.

This finding reflects the role of collective and individual experiences on reframing. Collective social narratives can facilitate reframing by providing interpretive frameworks that individuals may draw on for sensemaking (Georgiou & Murillo, 2023; Matos-Castaño et al., 2025; Weick, 1995). In New Zealand, collective social narratives emerged early in the COVID-19 pandemic – the “team of five million”. This phrase was spoken by Jacinda Ardern for the first time in a news briefing early on in the COVID-19 pandemic and was associated with New Zealand’s strong interest in sports. The phrase referred to New Zealand as one collective team fighting against the COVID-19 virus, encouraging New Zealanders to look out for each other and do what is best for the “team”. This collective social narrative continued throughout the pandemic, and a new collective social narrative was created once the immediate crisis had calmed. New Zealand celebrated their efforts at limiting the spread and impact of COVID-19 as “successful” (Baker et al., 2020b; Cumming, 2022; French et al., 2025), and suggestions that New Zealand should “move on” from COVID-19 like the “rest of the world” were made (McConnell, 2022; Radio New Zealand, 2022). These social narratives gave individuals a ready-made storyline from which to construct their own sensemaking, essentially doing part of the sensemaking for individuals (Matos-Castaño et al., 2025). This is consistent with sensemaking theory, which proposes that individuals retrospectively construct meaning using available social and cultural resources rather than generating interpretations entirely independently (Weick, 1995). Therefore, participants’ broader COVID-19 pandemic experiences may have been more easily reframed in positive or neutral ways because collective social narratives made these interpretations more available and culturally reinforced.

Reframing was less visible or even absent in participants’ recollections of their university experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite university typically being a collective experience. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants’

experiences of university were more individualised than they would be otherwise. As Langenberg and Wesseling (2016) eloquently stated, “if an existing, collective structure does not provide stability and order in a dynamic world, the people in this organisation will start behaving more individually” (p. 234). In the university context, participants did not have widely shared collective social narratives to draw upon, potentially making reframing more difficult. Participants appeared to have greater interpretive resources available for making sense of their broader pandemic experiences than their university disruption.

Reframing is not automatic but involves active interpretive work that requires cognitive and emotional effort. Studies have shown that reframing is implemented by individuals when they feel it is emotionally beneficial and cognitively manageable (Scheffel & Gärtner, 2025; Troy et al., 2018). For participants, the lack of external cues (such as collective social narratives) to support sensemaking meant that reframing had to be constructed almost entirely internally (Weick, 1995). This made reframing more difficult, requiring more effort. Participants’ university experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic were left only partially reframed, if reframed at all. Some participants attempted to reinterpret university challenges by self-blaming rather than positively reframing the experience, but the tension remained unresolved, leaving these experiences emotionally salient. This suggests that sensemaking remained ongoing, rather than reaching the temporary feeling of closure that typically characterises successful sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

While the emphasis on collective social narratives seems to contradict phenomenology, which prioritises lived experience, these findings highlight the importance of recognising that experience is always socially situated. Zahavi (2025) highlights that individuals are “socially and culturally embedded” (p. 1), meaning that sensemaking does not occur in isolation but within shared sociocultural frameworks. Participants’ reframing of their broader COVID-19 pandemic experiences was potentially therefore shaped not only by

personal reflection but also by collective social narratives that provided interpretive resources. This reflects the double hermeneutic nature of meaning-making, in which participants interpret their own experiences using socially available frameworks, which are then interpreted within the research process. Rather than contradicting phenomenology, this highlights its central concern with understanding how individuals experience and interpret events within their lifeworld (lived experience). Phenomenology therefore does not assume that sensemaking occurs in isolation but recognises that individuals construct meaning within socially structured lifeworld contexts.

These findings extend sensemaking literature by demonstrating that reframing is not solely an individual cognitive process but is potentially shaped by the availability of collective narratives that scaffold reinterpretation. Beyond enabling participants to make sense of disruption, reframing also appeared to serve an important identity-protective function, allowing participants to preserve a coherent and positive sense of self while integrating these experiences into their life stories.

Mea Culpa – The Individualisation of University Disruption

Reframing acted as a form of identity protection and coping, allowing participants to reinterpret disruption in ways that preserved a coherent and positive sense of self while creating psychological distance from the emotional intensity of their experiences. Because these reinterpretations occurred through retrospective remembering, this finding reinforces that reframing was not simply a reaction to the pandemic itself, but an active process of reconstructing memory in ways that protected the present self. From a phenomenological perspective, this highlights how participants' remembered experiences were shaped by their current identity needs and interpretive standpoint, rather than functioning as fixed representations of the past.

This finding reflects the role of sensemaking and reframing in identity protection. Identity protection refers to psychological processes through which individuals defend their sense of self against information or experiences that threaten identity coherence, continuity, or self-esteem (Petriglieri, 2011; Sedikides, 2021). These defences include minimisation, avoidance, and reframing, and failure to protect the identity from identity threats can lead to decreased self-esteem and wellbeing (Petriglieri, 2011). When participants reframed their COVID-19 pandemic experience, they moved away from identity-threatening feelings, such as disruption and negativity, and towards identity-affirming feelings of resilience, adaptability, and positivity. This positive and neutral reframing acted as a defence against identity threats, helping participants maintain a coherent and positive sense of identity while supporting psychological adjustment. Sensemaking and identity are intimately intertwined, with sensemaking playing a central role in maintaining identity coherence, as sensemaking functions to stabilise the self-concept rather than to produce an objectively accurate representation of events (Langenberg & Wesseling, 2016). This suggests that reframing was not primarily about resolving what happened, but about preserving who participants understood themselves to be in relation to what happened. In this way, reframing functioned as an identity-maintaining process, allowing participants to integrate disruption into a coherent life narrative without fundamentally destabilising their sense of self.

Reframing also acted as a coping strategy, reducing distress and stress, and creating emotional and psychological distance between themselves and their COVID-19 pandemic experiences. Reframing has been found to be an effective way of increasing positive emotions and decreasing negative emotions, however it is not an easy emotion regulation strategy to deploy (Scheffel & Gärtner, 2025; Troy et al., 2018). Findings from Hjuler et al. (2024) found that memories high in negativity and factual information about individuals' experiences of COVID-19 predicted worse psychological wellbeing over time. Reframing

was one of the adaptive coping strategies identified with being helpful towards countering negative effects of the pandemic on wellbeing (Lohani et al., 2022; Prasath et al., 2021). This aligns with the present findings, where participants' reframed memories appeared less emotionally intense and more psychologically manageable, suggesting that reframing shaped not only how experiences were understood, but how they were emotionally carried forward over time.

Psychological distance in this case refers to the process whereby an individual attempts to pull back from a psychologically immersed point of view to reinterpret their experience from a wider and more detached perspective (Abraham et al., 2023; Dicker et al., 2022). This distance can be spatial, temporal, social, and hypothetical. This distance allows individuals to interpret experiences in an abstract manner, reducing the emotional response to the experience. The temporal aspect of psychological distance can also allow individuals to exert some degree of control over their relationship with the past and meanings derived from it (Abraham et al., 2023). Psychological distancing is effective at reducing stress and regulating other negative emotions related to experiences such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Dicker et al., 2022; Lau & Tov, 2023). This was reflected in participants' narratives, which often positioned the pandemic as a completed chapter of their lives rather than an ongoing disruption. Positioning the pandemic as temporally bounded allowed participants to symbolically contain its impact, further supporting identity continuity by separating their present self from their past disrupted self. This demonstrates how temporal distancing worked alongside reframing to protect identity and emotional wellbeing.

Nevertheless, reframing was not universally possible, with reframing being partial or resisted altogether when it came to the university aspect of participants' COVID-19 pandemic experiences. This suggests that reframing is not an automatic outcome of sensemaking, but a selective and constrained process shaped by what is at stake for identity. When it did occur, it

was often in the form of self-blame. This seems contrary to the purpose of reframing as a coping strategy that enhances positive identity, however self-blame can function as a coping strategy despite its assumed negativity (Le Vigouroux et al., 2025; Lohani et al., 2022; Prasath et al., 2021). By reframing university disruption as self-blame, participants maintain a personal sense of control over their university experience. By attributing disruption to their own actions, participants were able to maintain a sense of personal agency and responsibility, preserving their identity as capable and independent individuals rather than positioning themselves as powerless or failed (Jacobsen & Petersen, 2023). This may have been particularly important given the strong identity investment associated with being a university student, where success is closely tied to personal ability, effort, and future aspirations. Attributing disruption to external university failures may have posed a greater threat to participants' sense of competence and control, making self-blame a psychologically safer explanation despite its emotional cost. Self-blame was a common maladaptive coping strategy identified across the literature regarding university students COVID-19 pandemic experiences (Le Vigouroux et al., 2025; Lohani et al., 2022; Prasath et al., 2021).

While self-blame does function to protect identity, it is potentially harmful. Self-blame as a coping strategy is often associated with negative emotions and psychological distress (Prasath et al., 2021). This suggests that while self-blame protected identity coherence, it did so at the expense of emotional wellbeing, highlighting the complex and sometimes contradictory role of identity-protective coping strategies. This suggests that identity protection and psychological wellbeing do not always align. While reframing and self-blame allowed participants to preserve a coherent sense of self, these strategies could simultaneously prolong distress, demonstrating that sensemaking involves compromises between maintaining identity stability and fully acknowledging emotional harm. This indicates that reframing was not simply beneficial or harmful, but functioned as a strategic

psychological process shaped by participants' need to preserve identity while managing emotionally disruptive memories.

Limitations

There are three main limitations of this study. The first limitation is the relatively small group of participants. A small group of participants limits the ability to make broad statements about first-year university student experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as limiting how many experiences were represented in the study. However, due to the nature of IPA, the guiding framework of this thesis, the small group is appropriate reflecting the IPA focus on depth over breadth.

The second limitation is the geographical context of this study. Research was limited to students who first attended a New Zealand university in 2020. Additionally, while participation was open to students from any New Zealand university, only participants from the University of Waikato responded to recruitment efforts and snowball sampling. As such, the findings of this study are not generalisable to all New Zealand first-year university students in 2020.

The third limitation of this study was the choice to exclude demographic data. While it was a deliberate choice not to collect demographic data, this choice meant I was unable to unpack different experiences as inflected by sociocultural variation. It also meant that I am unable to know how my positionality as a Pākehā female researcher may have influenced the interactions I had with the participants. However, while the exclusion of these demographic factors limits my findings in relation to such factors, the sample size of this study was too small to make generalisations based on demographic information in any case.

Future Directions

While conducting this research, many questions and issues have arisen that should be researched further. One area that requires immediate attention is university preparedness for future crises. It is possible that universities do have crisis response plans, however, as illuminated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this thesis suggests that more thought needs to go into how to reduce the psychological impact on university students. Specifically, vulnerable university students, such as first-year students who do not have an established community or student identity, need to have protections put in place to better support their mental wellbeing in crisis.

It would be pertinent for future research to explore how different demographics may shape university students' experiences and understandings of the pandemic. This aspect is particularly important, given the well-documented inequities for some groups in the New Zealand context, which textured experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Akihata-Huntington, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020). Extending research with a community psychology lens would highlight the potential differences between university students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. While I deliberately did not collect demographic information from participants, future research should endeavour to address this gap to see if the themes of memory, sensemaking, and reframing are similar to those found in this study.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, two recommendations on how universities could better support their students in times of crisis are as follows:

1. One of the biggest challenges for university students during the pandemic was the lack of social interaction. This was especially difficult for first-year students, who struggled to form connections in an online environment. A peer support network

facilitated by the university could make social interaction more accessible, providing a way for students to connect safely and meaningfully. The network could include one-on-one conversations as well as larger group discussions, offering a casual, friendly space rather than a formal, staff-led environment. It could also help students find additional support if they are struggling, and importantly, allow them to build relationships that last beyond the immediate crisis, rather than offering only temporary, interim support. In this way, the network could bridge immediate social needs with longer-term connections.

2. Another key finding was the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants. Building on this, the second recommendation is that universities should be prepared to acknowledge the experiences students went through after a crisis. Providing students with a safe outlet to share and reflect on their experiences—whether through discussion, support groups, or peer networks—may help students to work through these challenges collectively. When students feel that their experiences are shared or part of a broader, collective context, they may be more comfortable opening up and processing what they went through, rather than internalising it alone.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of first-year university students in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how they remembered and made sense of these experiences. Using an interpretive qualitative approach, the research aimed to understand not only what university students experienced but also how they interpreted and made sense of the challenges of a highly disrupted university experience, around five years after the events.

The findings show that the impact of university disruption persisted well beyond the initial disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. University students in this thesis evoke their university experiences as fragmented, unpredictable, and often lacking support, affecting both academic engagement and social development. While participants reflected on their experiences in different ways, the disruption continues to shape how they understood their university journey, demonstrating that the effects of the pandemic were enduring rather than temporary.

These findings highlight the ongoing consequences of university disruption for university students and the importance of focusing on lived experience when planning support or policies. By documenting how disruption continues to influence sensemaking and reflection, this study provides insight into how significant events can leave lasting marks on university students' experiences.

Facing another pandemic is not a case of *if*, but *when*. Universities have an opportunity to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic and plan to better protect and support students in the future.

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Appendix A

Ethical Approval

Te Wānanga o Ngā Kete | **Division of Arts,
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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Shannon Makuch

Dr Kimberly Jackson

School of Psychological and Social Sciences
Psychology Programme

9 April 2025

Dear Shannon

Re: FS2025-18: Exploring New Zealand university students' experiences of pandemic fatigue: Sense-making, memory, and long-term impact

Thank you for submitting your application to the ALPSS Human Research Ethics Committee. The Committee is pleased to offer formal approval for your research activities.

We encourage you to contact the committee should issues arise during your data collection, or should you wish to add further research activities or make changes to your project as it unfolds. We wish you all the best with your research. Thank-you for engaging with the process of Ethical Review.

Kind regards

Dr Amy Bird, Convenor
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences Human Research Ethics

Appendix B

Recruitment Poster

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Were you a first-year university student in New Zealand in 2020? Help with University of Waikato Master's research on student experiences during & after COVID-19!

Eligibility Criteria:

- ✓ Began an undergraduate degree at a New Zealand university in 2020
- ✓ Willing to do two interviews (1–1.5 hours each)
- ✓ Can participate in person or online (Zoom)

✉ If you are interested in participating, please email Shannon at [REDACTED]

This study is approved by ALPSS Human Research Ethics Committee.
If you have any questions, please contact them at
alpss-ethics@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix C

Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO

DIVISION of ARTS, LAW, PSYCHOLOGY & SOCIAL SCIENCES

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

[A completed copy of this form should be retained by both the researcher and the participant]

Name of person interviewed: _____

I have received a copy of the Information Sheet describing the research project. Any questions that I have, relating to the research, have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation. I understand that I will have up until 14 days after I receive the transcription of my interview to request any changes to be made.

I can withdraw my participation at any time up until 14 days after I receive the transcription of my interview. If I opt out of receiving a copy of my transcribed interview, I will have up until 14 days after the date of my interview to withdraw.

During the interview, I understand that I do not have to answer questions unless I am happy to talk about the topic. I can stop the interview at any time, and I can ask to have the recording device turned off at any time. I also understand that I reserve the right to decline for the interview to be recorded entirely.

When I sign this consent form, I will retain ownership of my interview, but I give consent for the researcher to use the interview for the purposes of the research outlined in the Information Sheet. I understand that my identity will remain confidential in the presentation of the research findings.

Please complete the following checklist. Tick [✓] the appropriate box for each point.	YES	NO
<i>I agree to provide my email address to receive a copy of my transcribed interview.</i>		
<i>I want to opt out of receiving a transcript.</i>		
<i>I understand my rights as an interviewee.</i>		

Participant :

Researcher :

Signature :

Signature :

Date :

Date :

Contact Details :

Contact Details :

Appendix D

Participant Information Sheet

Exploring New Zealand university students' experiences of pandemic fatigue: Sense-making, memory, and long-term impact

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email alpssethics@waikato.ac.nz.

Supervisor: Dr. Kimberly Jackson – [REDACTED]

Researcher: Shannon Makuch – [REDACTED]

Research Topic

This qualitative research will explore how NZ university students make sense of their experiences of being a student during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, their memories of being a student during that time, and long-term impacts they identify. The research will investigate post-pandemic outlook, resilience, and future choices of people who studied in NZ universities during COVID-19. This study addresses a gap in research on the lasting effects of COVID-19 on students' identity, education, and social development.

Participation

Participants will take part in two 1-1.5-hour one-on-one interviews, with their choice of doing the interviews in-person or online (e.g. Zoom). Participants will be asked a series of questions regarding their experiences as a student during the COVID-19 pandemic, any barriers faced, changes experienced, and ongoing impact (if any). Participants can opt out of answering any

questions at any time. They can pause, take a break, reschedule or stop the interview completely. If the participant consents, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. If participants do not consent to being audio-recorded, notes will be taken by the researcher during the interview.

Findings

The anonymised interview transcripts will be analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is used to explore how people make sense of their personal experiences. Findings will be published as part of my Master of Applied Psychology (Community) thesis. Once published, the thesis will be accessible on the University of Waikato Research Commons website - <https://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/home>.

Participant Information and Rights

To protect confidentiality, all participant data will be anonymised. Only the researcher will know who you are and what you share. Participants will be emailed their transcript once the transcribing has been completed. Participants will have 14 days from receiving the transcript to review their transcript and me know whether they want any changes made. Participants will have 14 days from receiving their transcript to withdraw from the study. After this period, it will not be practical to withdraw from the study. If you opt out of receiving a transcript, you will have 14 days from the interview date to withdraw from the study.

What are the possible risks?

It is unlikely but some interview questions may evoke an emotional response. The researcher will minimise the risk of emotional harm by forming questions that are respectful and non-intrusive and by giving participants the freedom to stop the interview at any time without consequences, take a break, pause or to reschedule the interview.

What will happen to my information during and after the study?

During the research, all documents will be stored digitally on a password protected laptop only accessible by the researcher. At the completion of the research, all physical data will be destroyed or scanned into a digital format, and digital files will be uploaded by my supervisor onto the University of Waikato's server. Supervisor Dr. Kimberly Jackson will be responsible for storing the research data as per the University of Waikato guidelines. All research data will be in digital format. Any relevant hard copies of data or notes will be scanned into digital format and the original hard copies destroyed using a secure onsite shredding waste bin managed by the University of Waikato. Digital data will be stored on the secure server managed by the University of Waikato and will be deleted at an appropriate date.

Appendix E

Interview Schedule

Interview 1:

1. Can you please walk me through your experience as a student when the COVID-19 pandemic hit?
2. What, if any, barriers did you face as a student during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How did you cope with the changes in your daily life caused by the pandemic?
4. What role did your university or community play in supporting you during the pandemic?
5. What, if any, barriers did you face once you finished studying?
 - a. Do you attribute these barriers to the COVID-19 pandemic?
6. To what extent do you believe COVID-19 has impacted your current situation?
7. Did you feel that you had to move on from COVID-19 once the pandemic was declared over in 2022?
8. How do you feel about the COVID-19 pandemic now?
9. Do you feel that the pandemic has altered your perspectives on your education or career in any lasting ways?

Interview 2:

10. Are you aware of the phenomenon “pandemic fatigue”?
 - a. What does the term “pandemic fatigue” mean to you, and how do you feel it applies to your experience?

11. How do you think you would respond to public health rules (such as social distancing and mask-wearing) in a future pandemic, and how might it differ from your response in 2020?
 - a. Why?
12. Looking back, do you believe you feel different about the pandemic than you did at the time?
13. What changes, if any, do you hope to see in society or education systems based on what you've experienced during the pandemic?