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LSE GROUPS takes place during the final fortnight of the LSE summer term. Undergraduate students are placed in small groups; these are cross-year, interdisciplinary, and group members do not know one another in advance. Each group must then devise its own research question, and carry out every stage of a small-scale research project in less than two weeks.

LSE GROUPS is part of the LSE commitment to students learning through enquiry, and developing the skills for knowledge creation.

The overall theme of LSE GROUPS 2022 was *Resilience and the 'New Normal'*.

This paper was submitted on the final Thursday afternoon of the project. Students then presented their work at a conference, on the closing Friday.

More information on LSE GROUPS, and other papers.

Papers are presented as submitted by the students, without corrections.

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The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Diversity within Friendship Groups among LSE Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected university students immensely, considering that most universities in the UK had imposed significant covid restrictions in line with government regulations. We seek to understand how the restrictions affects the composition of friendship groups in relation to ethnicity and nationality at the our own university, the LSE. This study was conducted through a survey of 116 undergraduate students at the LSE, and five one to one interviews. The survey data was analysed on STATA using an OLS regression model. We find that a lack of lockdowns increases diversity of friend groups. Since there is no limitation on physical interaction, whether it is on or off campus, this subsequently results in increasing the opportunity of making friends of different cultural backgrounds. First year undergraduates have a 3.34% increase in their diversity index, with a 0.88% decrease in their nationality index, compared to third year undergraduates.

Acknowledgements:

1. Introduction

We aim to investigate whether the Covid-19 pandemic, through lockdowns and social distancing measures, has had a negative impact on the level of diversity within friendship groups among LSE undergraduates. We define diversity according to two metrics: ethnicity and nationality. We have surveyed 116 undergraduates over 5 days and regressed the data to find any correlation between the year of entry, which implies the level of Covid restrictions at that time, to the percentage of friends with different ethnicity.

The paper begins with a review of current literature which follows our motivations for this research topic and then provides a description of our methodology, with subsequent regression analysis of the survey and semi-structured interviews we conducted from which we conclude.

1.1 Motivations

There is a body of literature that explains the myriad of negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the overall population in the world. Authors such as Polyakova et al., (2020) report that the malignant effect varies across races, ages, and social status. Yet, despite the broad focus on populations in general, they fail to isolate the impact on a particular community restricted to a certain age group, such as university students.

Despite some London universities such as UCL easing on-campus restrictions, others such as the LSE still imposed the mandatory lateral flow test until April 2022. Whilst this may not seem like much, Li et al. (2021) affirmed that uncertainty behind tests might increase pandemic-induced anxiety, which hinders socialising. Moreover, with more than 70% of LSE students being comprised of internationals, the differences in knowledge, attitude, and beliefs towards Covid also vary, which leads to a difference in social interaction (Reiter & Katz, 2021)

1.2 Why diverse friendships matter

Considering the isolation of young students, it is important to understand how friendships change as a result of the pandemic. One important factor of this, however, is how ethnic diversity is rising significantly in universities. The percentage of UK undergraduates defined as "white" has fallen 8.3 percentage points, while the percentage of every other minority group has risen (ONS, 2022).

In general, diversity tends to result in a vast array of benefits for individuals and groups. Diversity helps individuals attain better mental health (Erickson, 2003), improves career outcomes (Burt, 1992), and makes students more socially adjusted, academically driven, and improves communication skills (Yoshinaga, 2016).

For friendship groups, diversity indirectly raises commitment to racial understanding as well (Chang, 1999 as referenced in Banh, 2010), helps groups gain a broader range of network resources (Erickson, 2003), and enables the exchange of ideas and resources (Derex & Boyd, 2016).

2. Literature Review

We review the nuances within the literature that imply the pandemic would affect the formation of diverse friendships. We then consider the importance and prevalence of diversity in universities, to ground the conclusions we draw from our findings in the academic literature.

2.1 University students are further isolated from their social networks due to the pandemic

Drawing on insights from Kulcar et al. (2022), university students struggle with forming new acquaintances due to the limitation of online meetings and lack of physical contact with peers during

the pandemic, yielding a significant reduction in the quality and intensity of forming meaningful relationships with other people. To further support this notion, Dinic's YouGov[1] (2021) study found that the pandemic made it harder for Britons to maintain relationships where 20% of Britons have become more distant from their close friends and 40% have experienced losing contact with friends since the pandemic began. More importantly, the youngest age group (16-24) has been the age range most affected, with 27% of them choosing not to regain contact with their former friends. However, volunteering during the pandemic has raised social cohesion and diversity in friend groups, (APPG, 2021) meaning students who volunteer may have expanded the diversity in their friend circle.

Once more, Ayers (2021) highlights how participants in his study believed that the pandemic has negatively affected their friendships, especially among younger people. These findings reinforce insights from Deeker (2022), who outlines that people with more pandemic-induced stress,[2] which tends to be teenagers, are more likely to feel isolated and lonelier than those with less.

2.2 The formation of diverse friendships is affected significantly by the pandemic

Diverse friendships require an individual to have greater flexibility to make and break social ties, which are affected by psychological tendencies like "general trust, intimacy, self-esteem" (Thomson et al., 2018). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has mixed effects on forming diverse friendships. To those that have pandemic-induced stress, it has reduced generalised trust in people (Shrira et al., 2018).

According to the WHO, the global prevalence of anxiety and depression has increased by 25% since the start of the pandemic (WHO,2022). Moreover, Berry et al. (2006) asserted that an increase in

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[1] YouGov is a British international research data and analytics group, based in the UK

[2] The pandemic-induced stress encompasses infection-related suffering, economic and professional loss, social isolation caused by lockdowns, information-induced anxiety, need to integrate work and life—from earlier balancing them, and stress-o by sudden changes in the routine

stress can negatively influence cross-cultural adjustment which is particularly apt in our research given the multi-cultural community that LSE possesses.

Perez (2020) stated that usage of WhatsApp, an online chat platform, increased by 40% at the start of the pandemic, whereas online nonverbal communication increased, and heterogeneity within society is further amplified.

2.3 Our study in relation to current literature

The existing literature as outlined above demonstrates that the pandemic had a malignant effect on mental health, especially increasing isolation in younger people. Consequently, it seems to negatively impact the formation of diverse relationships. Considering the immense importance of diversity in students' life, as well as trends that show rising diversity in universities in general, it becomes highly important to reflect on the pandemic's effect on university students.

Our objective is to compare whether the studies that we have found above reflect the experiences of LSE students and understand the relationship between the lockdown and the formation of cross-racial/national friendships. Our research will focus on years of entry to LSE as an undergraduate and investigate whether they influence the level of diversity within close friendship groups. Our rationale behind the year of entry to act as a proxy for the pandemic is because current third-year undergraduate students have faced all three national lockdowns whilst studying at LSE. In contrast, current first-year undergraduate students are the first cohort of the post-lockdown period, experiencing no lockdowns since their arrival at the LSE, with current second years experiencing two of the three national lockdowns. Thus, given the greater exposure to online classes for third years as opposed to current first years, it is assumed the former may have greater difficulty in attaining more culturally diverse friendship groups due to limited in-person exposure, driving our hypothesis that the pandemic has had a negative impact on diversity within friendship groups.

3. Methodology

We adopt a regression model to examine the correlation between the year of entry into LSE as an undergraduate, which would reflect the Covid restrictions in place at that time, and the percentage of friends coming from different ethnicity and nationality.

3.1 Survey

The student survey comprises questions about the participants' ethnicity, cultural background, and year of study, and asks about their percentage of friends from different backgrounds before and after joining the LSE. 116 LSE undergraduate students completed the survey and represented several nationalities coming from a proportionate mix of quantitative and qualitative courses. To ensure the sample was representative of the LSE undergraduate population, we sent the survey to various societies including those with a cultural, sports and academic focus in addition to current undergrads within our social network. Though this latter method using our social network limits the extent to which pure randomisation took place, the proportionately large response from societies mitigates the weight of this concern. Once more, to ensure anonymity amongst respondents we outlined clearly that all data will be discarded once utilised and no contact information was required throughout, therefore, allowing us to meet ethical requirements.

We also recognise the fact that there may be systematic overreporting in the dependent variable – respondents may naturally be inclined to overestimate the cultural diversity within their friendship groups in aim to appear more diverse than the reality yielding potential non-classical measurement error.

3.2 Qualitative Interviews

An important part of our research consisted of semi-structured interviews, to gain a deeper insight into how students' socialising experience was affected by the pandemic. This allowed us to ask about specific topics like their upbringing, background and get more accurate insights into their experience as a student at LSE (Mathers et.al., 2000), overcoming one limitation associated with our quantitative data of the inability to understand general causality. More specifically, the interviews

gave us the ability to 'follow up' on answers to our survey questions and delve into themes we could not do in our quantitative study due to a limited maximum number of questions and the breadth of these themes falling outside of a numerical understanding.

Our main findings included that first years were insignificantly affected by the lockdown, making friends comfortably in halls or in-person classes. In contrast, second and third years found that lockdown had harmed their friend-making experience, with one interviewee stating, "I think it really changed my personality, I became more introverted." Additionally, the pandemic seems to have reduced the importance of student societies in making friends, as first and second years mentioned them less than third years who seemed to think they were quite important to their friendships. This may be due to the online status of societies making them more isolating, as a second-year interviewee mentioned, with a knock-on effect on the freshers next year.

We are aware of limitations that have occurred with the use of this qualitative method. First, our data collection process is not standardised, as follow-up questions vary for the interviewee, this may affect the reliability of the research, i.e., it is hard to repeat the interview process.

Second, due to time constraints, we have a small sample size (n=5). Within this sample size, only 1 of our interviewees represented 'first-year undergraduates'. This means that the results of our interviews may not be representing the whole picture of our targeted population (all LSE students), affecting the representativeness, and external validity of our study.

Third, holding the interviews in the English language means that our interviewees who have English as a second language may not be able to express themselves as intended. However, we have attempted to circumvent this by creating a casual atmosphere with semi-structured interviews. Additionally, as students at an English-speaking university, our interviewees were under the assumption that the interviews would be in English, and they would already have a good grasp of the language.

4 Survey results, regression models, and discussions

4.1 Variables

From our survey of LSE students, we investigated several possible independent variables, such as whether the person is in the first or second year, level of confidence, and income, and their impact on the dependent variables, such as level of diversity in ethnicity in friendship groups before and after joining LSE. All of the labels and descriptions for dependent and independent variables are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Independent and Dependent Variables

Coefficient	Label
Dependent variable	
afteth	The level of ethnically diverse friendship groups after starting LSE on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest
aftnat	The level of nationally diverse friendship groups after starting LSE on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest
Independent variables	
firstyear	1 if Starting LSE in 2021, 0 otherwise
secondyear	1 if Starting LSE in 2020, 0 otherwise
thirdyear	1 if Starting LSE in 2019 or before, 0 otherwise
Controls	
befeth	The level of ethnically diverse friendship groups before starting LSE on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest
befnat	The level of nationally diverse friendship groups before starting LSE on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest
eu	1 if student EU fee status, 0 otherwise
uk	1 if student has domestic fee status, 0 otherwise
international	1 if student has international fee status, 0 otherwise
leisurespending	The level of monthly spending on leisure on a scale from 1 to 6, 1 denoting spending 0-100 pounds monthly, and 6 denoting spending more than 500 pounds per month
confidence	The level on how comfortability of making diverse friends, on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the least comfortable, 5 being the most comfortable

4.2 Regression models

We have two regression models, the former taking *afteth* as the dependent variable, denoting the level of ethnic diversity in close friendship groups after joining LSE with the latter denoting the level of diversity in nationality, afnat, in close friendship groups.

We use the following model:

$$\text{afteth}_i = \alpha i + \beta_1 \text{firstyear}_i + \beta_2 \text{secondyear}_i + \gamma_1 \text{confidence}_i + \gamma_2 \text{leisurespending}_i + \gamma_3 \text{eu}_i + \gamma_4 \text{uk}_i + \gamma_5 \text{befeth}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$$\text{aftnat}_i = \alpha i + \beta_1 \text{firstyear}_i + \beta_2 \text{secondyear}_i + \gamma_1 \text{confidence}_i + \gamma_2 \text{leisurespending}_i + \gamma_3 \text{eu}_i + \gamma_4 \text{uk}_i + \gamma_5 \text{befnat}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where:

α_i	=intercept for level of ethnicity or nationality for the baseline group (thirdyear and international)
β_1	=partial effect of firstyear
β_2	=partial effect of secondyear
γ_1	=partial effect of confidence
γ_2	=partial effect of spending on leisure per month
γ_3	=partial effect of being EU student
γ_4	=partial effect of being domestic student
γ_5	=partial effect of level of diversity or nationality, before joining LSE
ε_i	=error term

4.3 Results and discussion

Our empirical findings assert a negative correlation between the year of study as an undergraduate at LSE (first to the third year), and the level of diversity of friend groups' ethnicity. However, there is a positive correlation between year of study and the level of diversity of friend groups' nationality, as summarised below:

1) Being a first-year student as opposed to a third-year student is, on average, associated with a 0.167 increase in ethnic diversity ceteris paribus (holding fixed all control variables)

2) Being a second-year student as opposed to a third-year student is, on average, associated with a 0.017 increase in the ethnic diversity index.

3) Being a first-year student as opposed to a third-year student is, on average, associated with a 0.044 increase in the national diversity index ceteris paribus

4) Being a second-year student as opposed to a third-year student is, on average, associated with a 0.106 increase in the national diversity index ceteris paribus.

We find results are statistically insignificant at the 5% significance level for all years with the direction of the relationship being coherent with the literature. More specifically, we find the pandemic has had a negative effect on diversity within friendship groups which supports our initial hypothesis as

those in the third year as opposed to the first year have lower ethnic diversity in friendship groups. Nevertheless, there are limitations in our findings given the low R-squared of 0.144 and 0.123 in models 1 and 2 respectively suggesting the proportion of variance explained by our models is 14.4% and 12.3% respectively. This highlights how we have been unable to control for all potential confounders extending to VanderWeele's (2019) general concern that including every good control possible is very difficult logistically. Thus, we recognise that despite trying to include as many potential confounders as possible it is highly likely some have been omitted.

We include the variable confidence as a control for how comfortable students are in making friends from different backgrounds, transforming qualitative results of "strongly disagree- strongly agree" to a quantitative scale from 1 to 5 respectively. The motivation behind this is to avoid potential selection bias that arises by omitting key variables. Here, we find confidence is positively correlated with the level of cultural diversity in friendship groups and this result is statistically significant at the 5% significance level given a p-value of 0.027. Intuitively, as one's confidence rises they are more inclined to be expressive about their interest in learning about other backgrounds and are thus more inclined to communicate with peers of different diversity.

 Similarly, the variable leisure spending has been converted to a quantitative scale from 1 to 6, with 1 representing a monthly expenditure of up to £100 on leisure and 6 denoting more than £500. Likewise, we find the effect on ethnic diversity and national diversity within friendship groups are both independently statistically significant at the 5% significance level with p-values of 0.016 and 0.007 respectively.

 Lastly, we also control for the level of diversity in friendship groups before students joined LSE to particularly isolate the impact of students' experience at LSE on cultural diversity in friendship groups as opposed to in general. This, therefore, allows us to attain the partial correlation between the pandemic on cultural diversity. We find a positive correlation here implies that students who already had nationally diverse friendship groups before coming to LSE had a higher chance of making friends from different nationalities which is congruent to the paper by Nicolaisen et al. (2016) who outline a key behavioural insight that humans to be less inclined to terminate old friendships than they are of forming new ones.

Table 2: Regression Table[3]

	Model 1 (*afteth*)	Model 2 (*aftnat*)
firstyear	*0.167*	*0.044*
	(0.298)	(0.344)
secondyear	0.017	0.106
	(0.296)	(0.338)
confidence	0.202**	0.258***
	(0.090)	(0.102)
leisurespending	0.1534**	0.143*
	(0.0737)	(0.083)
UK	0.348	-0.345
	(0.281)	(0.314)
EU	-0.471	0.016
	(0.295)	(0.327)
Constant	1.314	1.603
	(0.530)	(0.579)
i	116	116

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[3] Standard error in parentheses
*** Significant at 1% significance level

** Significant at 5% significance level

 * Significant at 10% significance level.

4.3 Descriptive statistics

4.3.1 Analysis of mean and change of means among three-year groups

We asked participants questions about the ethnic and national diversity of their close friendship group before and after coming to LSE with 5 possible responses, with each value (1-5) representing the range of percentage of ethnical and national diversity of their friends.

Table 3: Values and their corresponding range of percentage

Value	Percentage of ethnic and national diversity within a close friendship group
1	0-20
2	20-40
3	40-60
4	60-80
5	80-100

Table 4: Arithmetical mean of variables *befeth, afteth, befnat,* and *aftnat*

| 2019 and before		2020		2021	
befeth	*afteth*	*befeth*	*afteth*	*befeth*	*afteth*
2.185	2.926	1.809	2.734	2.125	3.05
befnat	*aftnat*	*befnat*	*aftnat*	*befnat*	*aftnat*
1.778	3.148	1.659	3.106	2.231	3.75

We observed that coming to LSE has a clear positive effect on diversity within friendship groups, as highlighted by the means of ethnic and national diversity increasing over all years. Specifically, a rise in the mean by 1.25 for nationality (standard error 1.65) and 0.877 for ethnicity (standard error 1.51) suggests that diversity among close friends increases by around 20% while starting studies at LSE.

Students who began their undergraduate programmes in 2020 were affected the most by the pandemic and have the lowest diversity compared to the other years both before and after coming to LSE. Yet the increase in the diversity in their friendship groups isn't lower than the other years, pointing to how they have less diverse friends in general, but coming to LSE still helped to increase it.

## 4.3.2 Significant factors for diversity within friendship groups

In our regression model, we found several factors that were of both economic and statistical significance for diversity within friendship groups. To begin, confidence in making friends has a positive relationship with diversity. We found that the majority of our respondents are comfortable making friends (70%). To further this, another significant factor as outlined above was leisure spending which is also positively related to diversity despite over half of respondents (57%) spending under £200.positive relationship with diversity. We found that the majority of our respondents are comfortable making friends (70%). To further this, another significant factor as outlined above was leisure spending which is also positively related to diversity despite over half of respondents (57%) spending under £200.

How confidenct are you making friends?
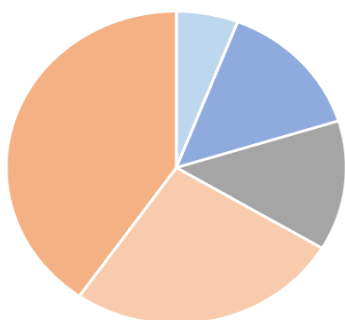
- Extremely uncomfortable
- Somewhat uncomfortable
- Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Extremely comfortable

Leisure Spending
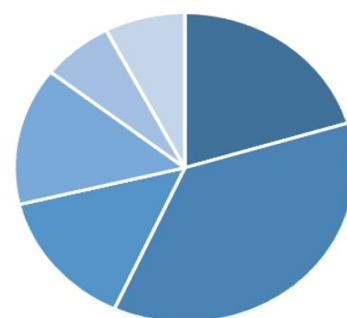
- £0-100
- £100-200
- £200-300
- £300-400
- £400-500
- more than £500

5. Conclusion

Our regression analysis leads us to the conclusion that being in the first year as opposed to the third year is positively correlated with cultural diversity within friendship groups with our descriptive statistics analysis supporting this. This supports the hypothesis that the COVID-19 lockdown has had a negative impact on the level of diversity within friendship groups. Once more, as highlighted in the literature review, the notions of increasing social isolation are fortified where students seem to be losing diversity and its related benefits.

We understand that given the resource and time constraints the probability of observing a causal relationship will be low, despite attempting to mitigate sources of bias by including controls. Nevertheless, we recognise the importance of our research in highlighting key cultural trends at the LSE and how its students are affected. We believe this calls for further research into how other universities have been affected by the pandemic. If similar methodologies reveal significant differences, it could shed light on what types of university structures nurture resilience to shocks like the pandemic, and vice versa.

Considering the growing trend of diversity in universities, and the importance of the benefits it provides students, it is imperative that we ensure students maintain their relationships with people of different backgrounds, to grasp benefits common to all of us. Steps to mitigate the effects of online learning that the pandemic gave rise to are critical. Whether such an effect is long-lasting could be further discussed in the following years to come.

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7. Appendix

7.1 Survey questions

Consent question:
I have read this message and had the opportunity to ask questions.
I understand that my responses will be kept confidential and anonymous and that my personal information will be kept securely and destroyed at the end of the study
I agree to participate in the survey

Q1. What year did you start your undergraduate study?

2019 or before
2020
2021

Q2. What is your ethnicity?

White
Black
Chinese
Asian (Non-Chinese)
Latino
Other

Q3. What is your gender?

Male
Female
Non-binary / third gender
Prefer not to say

Q4. What is your religious orientation?

Atheist
Christianity
Judaism
Islam
Hinduism
Buddhism
Sikhism
Other

Q5. What option best describes your course?

Quantitative (e.g., Economics, MSB, Accounting and Finance)
Qualitative (e.g. History, Sociology, Politics)
Interdisciplinary (e.g., Politics and Economics, PPE)

Q6. Which society (if any) at university do you feel most strongly connected to?

Q7. Are you an international or domestic student?
EU (International)
Other (International)
UK (Domestic)

Q8. On average, how much money do you spend on leisure activities? (in one month)
£0-100
£100-200
£200-300
£300-400
£400-500
More than £500

Q9. "I met the majority of my close friends at LSE" To what extent do you agree?

Strongly disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Strongly agree

Q10. before you came to LSE, what percentage of your close friends group are of a different ethnicity to you?

0-20%
20-40%
40-60%
60-80%
80-100%

Q11. Before you came to LSE, what percentage of your close friends group are of a different nationality to you?

0-20%
20-40%
40-60%
60-80%
80-100%

Q12. After coming to LSE, what percentage of your close friendship group are of a different ethnicity to you?

0-20%
20-40%
40-60%
60-80%
80-100%

Q13. After coming to LSE, what percentage of your close friends group are of a different nationality to you?

0-20%
20-40%
40-60%
60-80%
80-100%

Q14. To what extent are you comfortable with making new friends of different ethnicities at LSE?
Extremely uncomfortable
Somewhat uncomfortable
Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
Somewhat comfortable
Extremely comfortable

Q15. How often do you hang out with your close friends? (1: Very rarely to 5: Very often)
1
2
3
4
5

Q16. "I met most of my close friends from my course" To what extent do you agree?

Strongly disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Strongly agree

Q17. "I met most of my close friends from societies/clubs that I joined" To what extent do you agree?

Strongly disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Strongly agree

Q18. Any other comments that you wish to make on your close friends with respect to diversity?