

PARTY LIKE IT'S A PANDEMIC: EXPLORING A NEW STYLE OF  
CELEBRATION AMIDST THE ERA OF SOCIAL-DISTANCING

by

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Thank you to my parents for all the opportunities you have provided me and for constantly remaining my safe place. Thank you to my friends and family for your love and support.

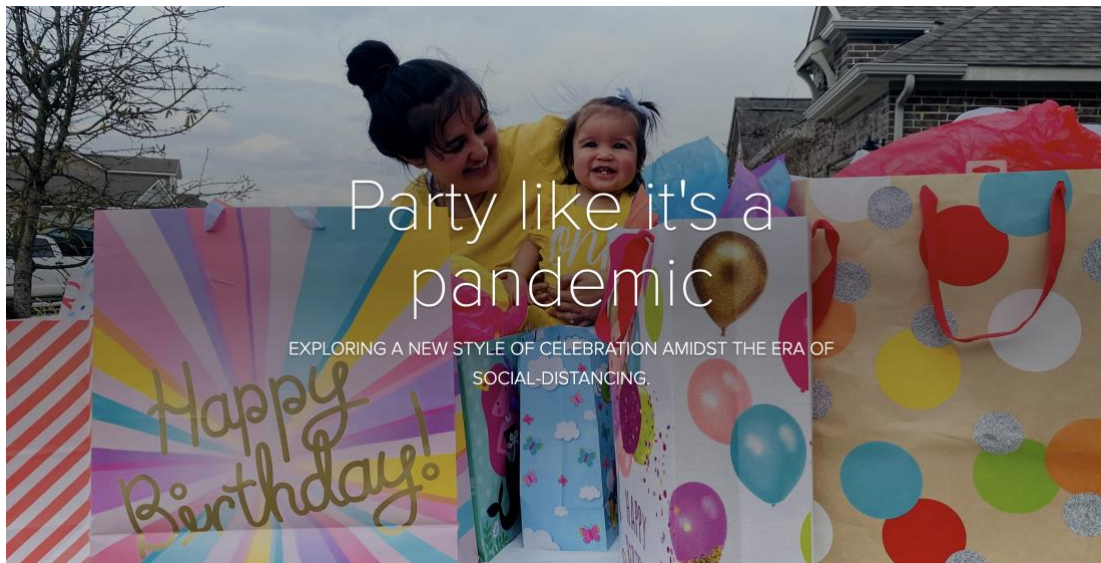
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the phenomenon of drive-by-birthday celebrations and virtual parties that emerged as a result of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. This new style of celebration provides for a social distance of 6-feet while engaging in social interaction. The term drive-by-birthday parades is defined as individuals gathered in decorated vehicles to celebrate a particular individual. The term virtual parties are broader as it represents the gathering of individuals over a communications platform such as zoom, for the purpose of social interaction outside of work. This thesis examines the pandemic celebration trends and the role the celebrations play in mental health. This thesis is in the form of a multimedia journalism project that illustrates the trend's impact. I documented this trend through a photo essay and *mini documentary* that will be published on a website. I conducted three interviews, two with subjects engaging in this trend of drive-by-birthday parades while further exploring the process and reasoning behind it. The third, with a mental health expert to explain the connection between the necessity of human interaction and this growing trend. The purpose of this project is to highlight some of the lighter events from the past two years while further exploring our need for socialization as human beings.

## I. Party like it's a pandemic!



Link to full project website: <https://spark.adobe.com/page/DuKAkyMy8uQMS/>

Whether you are celebrating your first birthday or 50th, life events have never felt more necessary to celebrate. With the trend of drive-by-birthday parades and zoom parties, society has found a way to adapt to the new normal.

With the cancellations of birthdays, weddings, and all other social gatherings for the time being. The constant isolation and technological advancements in communication came about the trend of virtual celebrations and drive-by parades. The trend spread nationwide with many businesses such as the local San Antonio birthday supply store [Get Bouncy](#), offering to organize free birthday parades for individuals whose birthday plans were put on hold during COVID-19.

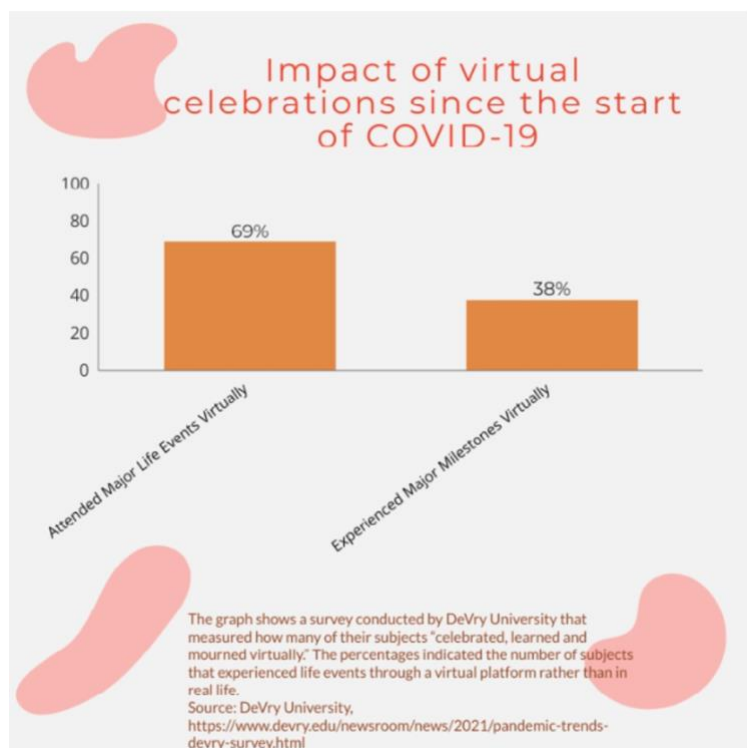
Birthday parades or Drive-by-birthdays have taken that status of social interaction by storm. The trend revolves around family and friends gathering in their decorated cars, blasting music and parading together to celebrate the special occasion of a particular individual. The trend has gained attention with major companies such as [Party City](#), who dedicated web pages to selling decor for this particular style of celebration. Categories such as car decor, giant yard signs and virtual party guides have been created within the company's website to adapt to this new way of celebrating.

Licensed social worker and psychotherapist Stephanie Cutler believes that the trend of drive-by-birthdays and virtual celebrations indicates a bigger theme about humans and our need for socialization.

“Well, the ~~human~~ race wasn't meant to exist as you know, very segregated, you know, not having contact with each other like we are...we thrive in connection with each other so they, a lot of studies have shown that general wellness exists in higher levels when human beings can be in contact with each other, work, and unity species,” Cutler said.

Technological advancements paved their own path to a new trend of virtual celebrations mainly involving the communication platform Zoom. Zoom Video Communications was founded in 2011 by Eric Yuan but did not see substantial profits until 2019. However, it was not until 2020, after the start of the Covid-19 era that Zoom would make its mark on society. According to [BusinessofApps](#) writer, Manor Iqbal, the new status of quarantine forced many individuals to use the communications platform, increasing the number of users from 10 million in December of 2019 to 200 million by March of 2020. The numbers continued to increase as the status of physical interactions began to decrease making it [Apple's most downloaded app of 2020](#), beating out social media competitor such as TikTok.

[DeVry University](#) conducted one of the few surveys on the topic of social gatherings over a communications platform. The survey sample consisted of 1,005 adults aged 18 years and older during February 2021. The survey found that "Over 70% of respondents," experienced important life events virtually. The survey results indicate that after a year of living with COVID-19 and participating in the standstill of quarantine, individuals are still using communications platforms; like zoom, to resume daily activities and maintain socialization.





Madilyn Paige Matlock was born during the beginning of the COVID-19 era. For her friends and family, celebrating her birthday is more than just cake and presents. The timing of her birth left her with the unfortunate circumstance of not getting to engage with loved ones. The absence of intimacy with her family is why her mother, Malorie Natal, believes this event is so important.

“When she was born, no one was wearing masks yet,” Natal said. “Even the nurses were like, this is still new to us so... A lot of people haven't gotten to really see her, they all have seen her grow up on Facebook or through photos I have to send.”

Whether it's the first birthday or the 50th, the milestone of turning any age is no less special during a pandemic. To properly celebrate the life span of half a century, friends and family of a real estate agent, Cynthia Gonzales, surprised her with a drive-by birthday this past June. The importance of this trend for Gonzales does not stem from the need for personal interaction rather it comes from a more public need.

“I think it's important to show love because if you didn't try to go out and participate, you would feel depressed with everything going on,” Gonzalez said,” I've done it for strangers when my sister and I were doing something, and we saw one happening. We're going to go and join you because you see how happy people are when this does come out. After all, once again you're showing them, love, even if it's for a stranger.”

## II. Photo Essay of Madilyn Paige Matlock 1<sup>st</sup> birthday



Madilyn Paige Matlock, born on the 13th of March, marked a period of uncertainty for her family. ***“When she was born no one was wearing masks yet,”*** Malorie Natal said. ***“Even the nurses were like, this is still new to us so... A lot of people haven't gotten to really see her, they all have seen her grow up on Facebook or through photos I have to send.”***



Madilyn's father, Jason Matlock gets into the birthday spirit by introducing Madilyn to her family and friends.



No muss, no fuss; the trend of drive-by-birthdays has boomed since the start of Covid-19 but has a good chance of continuing even after the pandemic is over. ***“It’s quick and easy process,”*** Malorie said. ***“It’s just way easier and we do cake and presents inside... so we actually get to spend the time with her instead of chasing kids and doing the whole party stuff.”***



Malorie’s grandfather has only seen Madilyn twice since she was born, which is rare for such a close-knit family. ***“He is very excited about seeing her, especially since he is finally vaccinated,”*** Natal said





*the one calling us and trying to figure out the situation while we were just trying to get home.”*

Malorie’s mother, Genevieve Nino Dean, has been the helping hand needed during this whole experience. *“My mom came home for the girls and was going to the store and getting what we needed,”* Natal said. *“You know we were still in the hospital trying to figure out what is going on, so she was*



Natal exchanges gifts as loved ones pull up to wish Madilyn a happy birthday. *“These are a lot easier, you don’t have to worry about food, you don’t have to worry about renting a place. These are so easy and we are together but not together too.”*

Genevieve Nino Dean



With Covid-19 tests and vaccines becoming more available, family and friends had the opportunity to take photos with Madilyn. ***“It’s just about letting people see her because when she was born they were only allowing two visitors at a time,”*** Natal said. ***“No one has seen her. That’s another thing, she doesn’t know people so when she sees***

***grandparents or someone new she freaks out.”***



Malorie’s best friend and college roommate, Nikki Sanchez, visits every month since the birth of Madilyn to remain close and be there for the family when needed.

***Madilyn’s older sister Ari and Sanchez enjoy a small game of soccer in between the arrival of loved ones.***





All three of the Matlock siblings have taken part in the drive-by-birthday trend in order to have a safe but fun birthday. Natal said, ***“For them to enjoy it then I guess it worked out cause they were exhausted after.”***



***“Everyone is involved and no one misses out.”***- Malorie Natal



With all the excitement, Madilyn takes a few moments to relax with her father and enjoy the celebration.

***“We have been singing happy birthday to her all week so she wouldn’t be scared.”-***

Genevieve Nino Dean



Madilyn’s older sister, Ellie, takes part in the celebrations.

Madilyn interacts with her guests as the drive by, greeting them with smiles and giggles. As simple and easy a drive-by-birthday might be, it is the impact the trend has on others

that makes it so important. For Madilyn, the concept of the pandemic might be hard to understand, but being surrounded by loved ones is not.





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The Matlock-Natal family takes advantage of the breaks in between visitors, to take a family photo. ***"That has been one of the best things. We have gotten so close as a family it's definitely something that I will take away from this."***- Malorie Natal



### III. Video Interview with Cynthia Gonzales 50<sup>th</sup> birthday plus her surprise baby shower for her daughter

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/jFB5pQJ5ANE>



An interview with Cynthia R. Gonzales about her experience with drive-by-birthday-parades and their lasting effect.

#### **IV. Audio Interview with Stephanie Cutler about the connection between this trend and our mental wellness**

Link to Audio Story: <https://soundcloud.com/user-237805055/party-like-its-a-pandemic-audio-story>



Licensed clinical social worker and psychotherapist, Stephanie Cutler, is located in Kyle, Texas.

Photo Cred: Matthew Harmon

An interview with Licensed clinical social worker and psychotherapist, Stephanie Cutler about the current state of society's mental wellness and how this new style of celebration; drive-by-birthday parades, and zoom gatherings are connected.

Sources:

<https://www.mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america>