

Measuring Relationship Changes During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This study draws on data gathered from an undergraduate student sample to understand perceptions of how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted relationship functioning and how those perceptions are associated with current individual and relational well-being. Drawing on the stress process model and life course theory, we surveyed an online sample of 160 undergraduate students enrolled in Canadian universities who were in an intimate relationship during the onset of the pandemic (March 2020). Results showed that the three most common areas of couple functioning that were affected by the pandemic were time spent together, communication, and their sex lives. Those who reported the pandemic having a greater positive impact on their relationship reported higher life satisfaction, positive affect, positive relationship quality, and relationship confidence compared to those who reported the pandemic having less of a positive impact on their relationship. Results are consistent with other findings on intimate relationships during the early days of the pandemic.

Introduction

In the beginning months of 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) spread across the world prompting countries to initiate lockdowns and various public health orders aimed at limiting viral spread that drastically changed the lives of people across the globe. The pandemic brought many challenges in all aspects of life, including to intimate relations, as couples suddenly had to navigate their relationship in a markedly different context. Many couples found themselves being sequestered alone together while others were separated. Disruptions to daily routines, lack of social interaction, decreased physical activity, and overall anxiety about the pandemic are all factors identified as potential contributors to couple dissatisfaction and conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic (Luetke et al., 2020). Yet, research conducted early during the pandemic pointed to diverging trajectories dependent on pre-pandemic relationship dynamics; well-functioning couples experienced increases in relationship satisfaction and decreases in maladaptive attributions in March and April 2020, whereas couples struggling before the pandemic experienced decreasing satisfaction and increased maladaptive attributions (Williamson, 2020).

While the initial response to this global health crisis provides important information about couple adaptation at the onset of a stressor, as the pandemic continued over a two-year period (as of the time of this writing), this study seeks to answer two key questions: (1) How did the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic impact couple relationships? (2) How is the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic associated with current individual and relationship well-being, this study draws on data gathered from an undergraduate student sample to understand perceptions of how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted relationship functioning and how those perceptions are associated with current individual and relational well-being.

Theoretical Perspective

This research is guided by concepts from the stress process model (Pearlin, 1989) and life course theory (Elder, 1994). Stressors are conceptualized either as disruptive events or as arising from the chronic conditions of an individual's

daily life (Pearlin, 2010). COVID-19 is undoubtedly a disruptive event impacting all aspects of society. The stress process model focuses on stressors and factors that mediate stress and outcomes of stress. The model can be broken down into three main sections; the stressor, coping with the stressor, and individual well-being. Importantly, Pearlin notes the importance of individual differences in the stress process, as coping is impacted by different life experiences and circumstances such as social class, belonging to a minority or marginalized group, age, or gender. According to the stress process model, individual interpretations of stressors influence their downstream adjustment to that stressor. Thus, the perceived impact of COVID-19 on one's intimate partnership may influence relational functioning later on, such that those who perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as a contextual stressor that led the couple to communicate more openly with one another and be more intentional about their relationship, should exhibit high relational and individual well-being as the pandemic has progressed. Individuals who believe COVID-19 strained their relationship, such as by creating financial stress and limiting the amount of time the couple could spend together, may either dissolve their partnership or be mired in a low-quality union and suffer poor individual well-being.

This study is also motivated by concepts from life course theory, namely the need to consider continuity in human development, where prior experiences help shape the unfolding life course, and the focus on particular cohorts of individuals who occupy a shared historical and contextual position. An important aspect of continuity is timing in that, depending on the place people are in their lives, the impact of the event will differ (Elder, 1994). Understanding how an event (or stressor) impacts a human at the time of its arrival, depending on the individual conditions someone might already be dealing with helps to navigate the impact it has on their development at the time and how it continues to impact them over time. This concept can be applied to the pandemic as it is a stressful event that may exhibit long term impacts on individual wellbeing. Another important idea is that of cohorts. Cohorts can be understood as "... different age groups with a historically distinct set of experiences and distinguished attributes" (Pearlin, 2010). The cohort concept is relevant to our study because young people navigating their intimate relationships during a global pandemic represent a unique group not commonly observed in modern history. As such, studying their perceptions of how the pandemic impacted their relationships and how those perceptions are associated with current individual and relationship functioning is important.

Literature Review

A number of studies have already been published documenting the impact of COVID-19 on couple relationships, generally showing that the more couples communicated effectively and worked together to mediate stressors, the more relationship satisfaction was experienced. All studies acknowledged the effect of individual vulnerabilities on perceptions and experiences of the pandemic. One study published by Lillie et al. (2021), analyzed survey data from a community sample of 561 married individuals to assess the utilization of resilience communication during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that resilience communication, such as crafting normalcy, relying on communicating with social networks and upholding identity anchors by enhancing or reinforcing salient values, were associated with greater stress management as a couple and less relational uncertainty. Goodboy et al. (2021) examined relationship turbulence, transitions that involve partners adapting to changing identities and circumstances, during the early phases of the pandemic. Based on survey data gathered from university students in romantic relationships, results showed that the pandemic was associated with increased relationship instability, an uptick in negative emotions, and lower interdependence in the partnerships of university students. These findings revealed the pandemic presumably increased relationship turbulence, as pandemic stressors, such as social isolation, financial strain, and perceived stress, were all associated with lower relationship quality and heightened instability.

Findings from these studies speak to the diverging pathways couple relationships could take during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who communicated constructively were better able to manage the pandemic stress and experienced more clarity on their relationships (Lillie et al., 2021), whereas those who experienced more negative emotions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic also had less interdependence, mutual dependence between two partners, and were more likely to experience a break up. Such findings align with those of Williamson (2020), who

surveyed 654 individuals in relationships before the onset of the pandemic and twice during the early stages (March and April 2020). Results showed that individuals who engaged in positive coping strategies and were able to avoid conflict experienced a small increase in relationship satisfaction and adaptive attributions, which further enhanced already high functioning. The inverse was also true, as those with poor coping and high levels of conflict experienced a small decrease in satisfaction and more maladaptive attributions, ultimately eroding already low functioning.

Explicating the diverging trajectories of couple relationships during the pandemic was a major focus of a recent review article (Pietromonaco et al., 2021). Based on theory and research in relationship science, it is anticipated that couples with few external resources (e.g., low socioeconomic status, job insecurity), greater individual vulnerabilities (e.g., high neuroticism and mental health problems), and worse adaptive processes (poor problem solving and communication skills) would be more likely to experience declining relationship quality and heightened instability. In contrast, couples with an abundance of resources, enduring strengths, and adaptive ways of interacting were more likely to maintain a high-quality relationship and possibly even experience relationship growth (Pietromonaco et al., 2021).

Studies have also examined personal well-being, including indicators of positive and negative affect and life satisfaction, in the early stages of the pandemic. For example, a study by Zacher et al. (2021) surveyed a sample of German adults at four time points prior to and following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Results showed no evidence for changes in subjective well-being between December 2019 and March 2020 (prior to the start of the pandemic), but from March to May 2020 average life satisfaction and positive and negative affect significantly decreased. Individual differences in life satisfaction were predicted by active coping strategies (e.g., changing behaviour) and positive reframing (e.g., finding something to be grateful for in the face of a challenging situation), whereas individual differences in positive affect were also predicted by active coping and using emotional and religious supports. Negative affect was positively related to denial, substance abuse and self-blame. Collectively, the literature converges on the conclusion that relationship and personal well-being exhibited much variability following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, where some couples and individuals experienced stable or improving functioning depending on their pre-pandemic circumstances, while others experienced deteriorating well-being.

Present Study

The current study examines perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced one's relationship during the onset of the pandemic and how those perceptions are associated with current individual and relational well-being. Given the unique context in which university students were navigating their intimate ties when the pandemic began, such perceptions may shape their unfolding relational trajectories throughout their life course and bestow this cohort of young adults unique challenges and strengths compared to cohorts forming and navigating non-marital partnerships during different non-pandemic periods of time. Such notions are in accordance with the life stage principle of cohort, where "the personal impact of any change depends on where people are in their lives at the time of the change" (Elder, 1994). Additionally, such perceptions influence one's adaptation to stress (Pearlin, 1989) and could provide information about one's current functioning relative to others.

Method

Participants were recruited through an online polling firm, *Prolific*, that maintains a sample of 130,000 pre-screened research participants worldwide. From this pool of participants, undergraduate students enrolled at any university in Canada were eligible for the study as long as they were in an intimate relationship during the onset of the pandemic (March 2020). A total of 368 participants initially had access to the survey (all were Canadian undergraduate students) and 160 people completed the survey. The remaining 208 participants who accessed the survey were not in a partnership in March 2020 and were not eligible for the study. The survey was launched on February 10, 2022, and closed

on February 17, 2022. As an incentive to complete the questionnaire, all participants were paid \$2.10 through the website of the polling firm. As a measure of quality control, participants who completed the questionnaire in less than one minute were removed from the sample ($n = 38$). This study received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (Protocol number 0015773: Measuring Relationship Changes During COVID-19).

The sex of participants was roughly equal, with 50% males, 47.6% females, and 2.4% who did not report their sex. For gender, 1.2% identified as non-binary, 0.6% identified as gender fluid, 1.8% did not answer the question, 49.4% identified as a man and 47% identified as a woman. The majority of participants were third year students (28%); 15.2% were in year one, 18.3% were in year two, 23.8% were in year four, and 13.4% were in fifth year or higher. Most (83.5%) were full-time students. Participants were enrolled in 45 universities from across Canada, with the largest percentage attending the University of British Columbia (7.9%), University of Alberta (7.3%), and University of Toronto (6.7%). Participants were also studying a variety of majors, with the highest percentage enrolled in psychology (6.7%), computer science (5.5%), and kinesiology (3.7%). Participants were 23.62 years, on average ($SD = 5.69$ years), with the youngest being 18 and oldest being 50 years.

Measures

Initial Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Intimate Relationships

We assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their intimate partners in March 2020 with a number of questions developed for this study. We gained an understanding of various relationship domains potentially impacted with one item: "These are some areas of couple relationships that might have been impacted by the onset of the pandemic. Please check all areas of your relationship with this partner that were impacted by the pandemic in March 2020." Responses were "communication," "commitment," "conflicts and problem solving," "time spent together," "overall happiness in the relationship," "confidence in relationship," "our sex life," "housework/chores," "handling finances," "individual differences (different personalities, etc.)," "how you support each other," "relationships with family and friends" and "other." An open-ended item allowed participants to narratively describe the pandemic's impact on their relationship: "After considering the different areas of couple relationships that could be affected by the onset of the pandemic, please describe how the pandemic impacted your relationship with this partner in March 2020." Finally, two questions assessed the positive and negative impact of the pandemic: "To what extent did the onset of the pandemic positively/negatively affect your relationship with this partner?" Responses ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*.

Current Individual Well-Being

We assessed current individual well-being through assessments of life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. The five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale developed by Pavot & Diener (1993) was used to assess life satisfaction. Participants were instructed to: "Please indicate your agreement with each of the following items." Items were: "In most ways my life is close to ideal," "The conditions of my life are excellent," "I am satisfied with my life," "So far I have gotten the most important things I want in life," and "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." Responses ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Cronbach's alpha reliability was $\alpha = .884$. A shortened positive and negative affect scale, developed by Watson et al. (1988) was used to assess positive and negative affect. The scale consisted of 10 items prefaced by "During the past 30 days, how much of the time did you feel..." Items for negative affect included "So sad nothing could cheer you up," "Restless and fidgety," "Hopeless," "That everything was an effort" and "Worthless." Items for positive affect consisted of "In good spirits," "Extremely happy," "Calm and peaceful," "Satisfied" and "Full of life." Responses ranged from 1 = *None of the time* to 5 = *All of the time*. Cronbach's alpha reliability was $\alpha = .866$ for negative affect and $\alpha = .915$ for positive affect.

Current Relationship Well-Being

Positive and negative relationship quality, relationship confidence, and relationship risk were used to assess current relationship well-being. We measured positive and negative relationship quality with four-item scales from the Positive-Negative Relationship Quality scale (Rogge et al., 2017). Each scale is introduced by “Considering only the positive/negative qualities of your relationship and ignoring the negative/positive ones, please rate your relationship on the following.” Items for positive relationship quality were “Enjoyable”, “Pleasant,” “Strong” and “Alive.” Items for negative relationship quality were: “Miserable,” “Bad,” “Empty” and “Lifeless.” Responses were 1 = *Not at all true*, 2 = *A little true*, 3 = *Mostly true*, 4 = *Almost completely true* and 5 = *Completely true*. Cronbach’s alpha reliability for positive relationship quality was $\alpha = .925$ and for negative relationship quality was $\alpha = .871$. For relationship confidence, five items from the Confidence Scale (Stanley, Hoyer, & Trathen, 1994; Whitton et al., 2007) were used. Items reflecting global confidence consisted of “I believe we can handle whatever conflicts will arise in the future” and “I feel good in our ability to make this relationship work.” Items reflecting skill-based confidence consisted on “We have the skills a couple need to make a relationship last,” “I am very confident when I think of our future together” and “We can handle anything that comes our way.” Participants rated their level of agreement with each statement with responses ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*. Cronbach’s alpha reliability was $\alpha = .942$. One item was used to assess relationship risk. Developed by Johnson et al. (2014), the item asks “How often have you thought your current relationship with your partner might be in trouble.” Responses ranged from 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Almost always*.

To answer the first research question, we computed frequencies and descriptive statistics on the fixed-response items (I.e., areas impacted and positive and negative impact of the pandemic) and a thematic analysis of the open-ended question where participants described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their relationship. To answer the second research question, we computed correlations between the items asking about the positive and negative impact of the pandemic on their relationship in March 2020 with the scales assessing current individual and relationship well-being.

Results

In response to the first research question about the impact of COVID-19 onset on couple relationships, reports of the areas of their relationship most impacted by the pandemic are shown in Table 1. The three most commonly endorsed areas were time spent together (82.5%), communication (60.6%), and their sex lives (45%). The three areas least affected by the pandemic were housework/chores (13.1%), handling finances (15.6%) and individual differences (21.9%). Participants rated the pandemic’s positive impact on their relationship with a mean of 2.33 (SD = 1.19) which corresponds to less than “somewhat” on a scale ranging from one to five. Participants rated the negative impact of the pandemic on their relationship with a mean of 3.42 (SD = 1.18) which is more than “somewhat” on a scale ranging from one to five. Taken together, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a dramatic positive or negative impact on intimate partnerships, despite influencing several important relationship domains, such as time spent together and communication.

Table 1. Areas in their relationship impacted by the pandemic

Variable	Frequency (%)
Communication	60.6
Commitment	24.4
Conflicts and problem solving	35.0
Time spent together	82.5
Overall happiness in the relationship	37.5
Confidence in relationship	23.1
Our sex life	45.0
Housework/chores	13.1
Handling finances	15.6
Individual differences	21.9
How you support each other	31.3
Relationship with family and friends	35.6
Something else	0.6
Pandemic positive impact*	$M = 2.33, SD = 1.19$
Pandemic negative impact**	$M = 3.42, SD = 1.18$

* To what extent did the onset of the pandemic positively affect your relationship with this partner

** To what extent did the onset of the pandemic negatively affect your relationship with this partner

To further understand how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted intimate relationships, participants provided an open-ended narrative response to describe the pandemic's impact on their partnership. We conducted a careful review of these responses and identified two themes: struggles balancing extremes in time spent together and difficulties with communication. For the first theme, participants grappled with extremes in time spent together at the onset of the pandemic, either spending almost all their time with their partner as participants were thrust into quarantine together or hardly ever seeing one another if participants resided in different households. Regardless of their situation, it had a large impact on the relationship for better or for worse. The following quotes illustrate the negative impact of too much time together.

Honestly, spending too much time together started to show me his true colours which ultimately led to us breaking up. Being in quarantine together wasn't beneficial for our relationship. (ID 156)

During the lockdown period, we had to spend a lot more time at home. We are both young and also working from home whilst studying as well as living with each meant that we would get easily flustered. This led to us growing apart because we were both irritable which led to us having minor conflicts. (ID 632)

We spent all day, every day, with each other due to our work becoming virtual. This led to us become combative with one each other as we did not have any space to ourselves. (ID 709)

But quarantining together was not uniformly negative, as several participants reported positive outcomes from more time spent together:

Overall it strengthened the relationship as we had to work through things we probably wouldn't have had to otherwise. Also taught us better communication in terms of when we need space since we spent an increasing amount of time together working and doing school from home. (ID 435)

We decided to isolate together. Our relationship was recent at the onset of the pandemic. Thus, isolating together helped us spend more time together and get to know each other. We also realized that it was going well, so decided to officially move in together. However, we barely know each other's friends or foreign family members (we however mattered to spend time with close family

members at lowest pandemic times). As a result, our communication—and our relationship, I believe—significantly improved. (ID 418)

The consequences of extreme time spent apart, however, were more uniformly negative for the participants in this study.

We started dating in January 2020. At the beginning, we were communicating frequently and going out together to explore the area whether that be eating at new restaurants, hiking trails, etc. Then once the pandemic hit in March with all the restrictions, he started pulling away and it got to a point we hardly spoke over text anymore, so we broke up in April 2020. I think having that abrupt break in face-to-face communication when we were just starting to get to know each other is what killed the relationship. (ID 274)

It was very depressing not to be able to meet face to face and have intimate contact with my partner, especially since the lockdowns would last for weeks at a time. At times it felt like the connection between us was distancing and we had to work twice as hard to make each other happy in such a depressing situation. Also, the pandemic gave me copious amounts of time to introspect and I realized that she was not the right fit for me. Such a realization might've occurred in a different way, if at all if the pandemic ceased to happen. (ID. 588)

My boyfriend and I spent less time together, largely impacting our connection. We had just started dating a month prior to the pandemic so it was quite difficult to form a connection. We spent more time with our families and developed on our own. We were changing without each other. (ID 547)

The second major theme in participants' responses centered around managing changes in communication. Many participants described challenges due to having technology-mediated communication (e.g., text messaging, video calls) become the primary medium of communication. This led to miscommunication and conflict for many participants. In this quote, the participant details how their communication was affected by not being able to see each other face to face.

Not being able to see each other really made us unhappy and caused a lack of communication which made it hard to sort out any small issues as we couldn't talk things out properly (ID 472)

Due to being from different places, we were both impacted by being back in our home towns which meant long distance relationship. Video calls weren't the same as in person meet ups and because of that our communication, sex life and overall relationship degraded (ID 405)

During the pandemic, especially at the start (in March) when regulations caused daily activities to become more limited, it became difficult to find time to meet and connect with my partner. This caused quite a bit of stress because we valued spending time together and communicating face to face - rather than through a screen (so adjusting to a virtual lifestyle was quite difficult and I believe it created a burden on our relationship). (ID. 504)

In sum, the narrative responses provide further insight into why average ratings of the pandemic's positive and negative impact on their relationship were near the middle category: there was much variability in how the pandemic impacted intimate partnerships. Some unions were strengthened during the pandemic, while others were strained or dissolved. Such diversity necessitates further exploration of how the COVID-19 pandemic's initial impact might be associated with current individual and relational well-being.

Regarding the second research question on the initial impacts of COVID-19 on current individual and relationship well-being, results are summarized in Table 2. We computed correlations between the pandemic's positive/negative impact and participants' current life satisfaction, positive/negative affect, positive/negative relationship quality, relationship confidence and relationship risk. Those who reported the pandemic having a greater positive impact on their relationship reported higher life satisfaction, positive affect, positive relationship quality, and relationship confidence compared to those who reported the pandemic having less of a positive impact on their relationship.

The positive impact of the pandemic was not associated with negative affect, negative relationship quality, or relationship risk. Those reporting the pandemic having a greater negative impact on their relationship reported lower life satisfaction, positive affect, positive relationship quality, and relationship quality and higher negative affect, negative relationship quality, and relationship risk compared to those who reported less negative impact of the pandemic.

Table 2. Correlations Between the Positive and Negative Impact of COVID-19 at the Onset of the Pandemic and Individual and Relationship Well-Being (n = 160)

	Positive Impact of COVID-19 on Partnership in March 2020	Negative Impact of COVID-19 on Partnership in March 2020
Correlations with Current Individual Well-Being		
Life Satisfaction	.29**	-.29**
Positive Affect	.27**	-.24*
Negative Affect	-.15	.29**
Correlations with Current Relationship Well-Being		
Positive Relationship Quality	.29*	-.30*
Negative Relationship Quality	-.06	.31*
Relationship Confidence	.20*	-.24*
Relationship Risk	-.00	.28*

* P < 0.05, **P < 0.001

Discussion

The key aims of this study were to understand how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 impacted university students' intimate relationships and whether the initial impact was linked with individual and relational well-being nearly two years later. The results of this study demonstrate that the pandemic impacted many aspects of intimate partnerships, especially time spent together and communication, for better and worse, and also supports the hypothesis that perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on their partnership was associated with current individual and relational well-being.

Our first striking set of findings involve the fact that perceptions of the pandemic's positive and negative impact on intimate relationships was robustly associated with current individual and relationship well-being. According to Pearlin's stress process model (1989), individual interpretations of and adjustment to stressors seemed to influence their downstream adjustment. This is reflected in the results of this study as participants' perceptions of the pandemic impacted their current well-being. People who rated the pandemic as having a positive impact on their relation also tended to report better functioning in several dimensions of personal and relational well-being compared to those who reported less of a positive impact. Those who reported a greater negative impact were doing worse on all dimensions of well-being examined compared to those who experienced less of a negative impact. Baumeister (2001) contended that negatively valenced events will have a far greater impact than positive events. Overall, negative information is more heavily weighted in information processing and contributes more strongly to final evaluations than positive information. In the context of relationships, harmful effects of negative perceptions, such as how the onset of the pandemic impacted their relationship, will have more influence over relationship outcomes than do the beneficial effects of positive perceptions. Given that in our sample, only 43% of participants identified a positive impact of the pandemic (score of "somewhat" or higher), it is not surprising that the negative impact of the pandemic was more robustly associated with current well-being than the positive impact.

Despite the fact that nearly half of the sample identify some positive impact of the pandemic on the fixed-response scale, only 6% of respondents described a positive impact of the pandemic in their open-ended narrative responses. These positive responses highlighted how being quarantined together strengthened their relationship or that they learned how to communicate better. These are benefits, for sure, but 94% of responses described negative impacts of the pandemic. Overall, people struggled with the amount of time spent together and communication. Being completely isolated from one another seems to have a more negative impact than time spent together as some people who quarantined together were able to develop a stronger partnership. However, as this research was conducted using undergraduate students, intimate partnerships for university students are likely less committed than older couples who are married or living together. For university students navigating newer partnerships, they would perhaps function optimally with time spent together balanced against time apart. In terms of challenges with communication, the data suggests that technologically mediated communication is not ideal. Through video call, people are unable to fully understand the nuances of human connection and this leads to miscommunication and conflicts. While video calls and texting may be important supplemental forms of communication, they are a poor substitute for in person communication in the context of an intimate partnership.

In understanding the lasting impact of the pandemic on relationships, life course theory notes that prior experiences help shape the unfolding life course. To understand the impact of the pandemic on this cohort of individuals who were in an intimate relationship at the onset of the pandemic, participants were invited to respond to a final open-ended item: "Based on your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, what, if anything, are you going to do differently in your intimate relationships in the future?" Responses predominately centered around changes in communication with participants wanting to set clear boundaries and express their feelings more clearly.

Make open and honest communication more of a priority and to put more effort into regularly checking up on my partner to see how they're feeling/what they're thinking about us and our future. I really didn't like the instability that was brought into my relationship because of the pandemic and I do not want to repeat that ever again. (ID 58)

Make sure to communicate whenever possible. Always check up on each other and make time for each other whether that be in person or over phone call. Cherish every moment together and thrive together. (ID 578)

Based on my experiences with the pandemic, I think I would spend more time getting to my point and not beating around the bush. Covid, I think, has taught a lot of us the lesson that everyone has heard but thankfully fewer have experienced, that time is short and that there is no point in wasting it. (ID 649)

Other responses were focused around a more balanced relationship, in that participants explained wanting equal effort put into the relationship, a need for more compromise or a more compatible partner.

I would try to be a calmer person, I would avoid conflict as much as I can. When I'm talking about issues I wouldn't turn it into nagging. I would not get into a relationship with someone if I feel like they wouldn't put in the effort as much as I do. (ID 153)

In the future, I would try to be more flexible and recognize that the pandemic is affecting both of us and that I should be more willing to accommodate for those needs (even if I wouldn't have accommodated for those needs in a non-pandemic setting). I think it's also important to express how much time who need/would like to spend with your partner, to ensure that the relationship is maintained and strong. (ID 504)

Other responses were divided between participants wanting to focus more on their own personal wellbeing, spending more time together when possible and even not wanting to be in a relationship ever again (or just until the pandemic is over.) Although participants primarily perceive the pandemic as negatively impacting their partnerships, they have learned lessons they hope to apply in the future. In this regard, perhaps the

heartache and pain endure may set the stage for future relationship success built on openness, honesty, and clear communication.

This study also has limitations that must be acknowledged. As participants were collected across Canada, regional differences in pandemic policies such as lockdowns, masking policies, and gathering restrictions could have impacted relationships in different ways. Additionally, since we are asking people to reflect on their experiences two years after the onset of the pandemic, the data is subject to retrospective bias. Future studies could benefit from collecting a larger sample size and assuring equal representation. Although diverse options were available for gender and sexual orientation, the sample largely consisted of cis-gender, different sex relationships. In using quota sampling, a future study could assure equal representation of LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships. In addition, a limitation of this study is that it sampled undergraduate students and may not generalize to non-university attending young adults. Future studies would benefit from sampling the general population. This study focused on partnerships that existed prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; it would be interesting for future studies to see how intimate partnerships are faring post-pandemic. Also, future studies might analyze how the pandemic impacted relationship formation during the pandemic.

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