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Romantic and Sexual Intimacy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By

Brooke E. Weinmann

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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In

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Romantic and Sexual Intimacy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies show that pandemics have an impact on individual's health, social life, finances, livelihood, and overall well-being. But how do pandemics impact intimacy? Very little research has sought to examine the ways in which a pandemic impacts sexual and romantic intimacy, precisely the aim of this study. Through an online Qualtrics open-ended survey (n=229) and a convenience sample of three in-depth semi-structured interviews, this thesis seeks to answer, "How have people managed romantic and sexual intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The data collected shows that respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened loneliness and difficulty to engage in both romantic and sexual intimacy, along with an increased craving for non-sexual physical touch. Overall, I found that among my sample, people in committed, cohabitating relationships self-reported being the most impacted by the pandemic. The most common sentiment was that their romantic and sexual satisfaction decreased due to the increased amount of time confined with their partner. People in non-cohabitating, committed relationships self-reported a bit less of an impact, but still experienced strain with not being able to as frequently or readily see their partner in-person. Single participants expressed feeling the least impact, largely because the pandemic did not hinder their romantic or sexual life being that they were single both before the pandemic and during.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, mine, along with many others' sexual and romantic lives have been impacted, whether for better or worse. Prior to the emergence of the pandemic, I was living five hours away from my significant other. We were both finishing our senior year of undergraduate degrees at different universities. Though a sense of sexual isolation came from the distance, it was made up for when either of us paid a visit. The suspense and spontaneity of seeing one another made intimacy that much better. When the reality and severity of the pandemic began to set in, our classes were moved entirely online. With no further need to attend classes in person, we decided to cohabitate.

With all the time in the world and not much to do, initially sexual interaction was frequent. Over the months, this frequency decreased, and sex became repetitive and predictable. The honeymoon phase had faded. This is common within long-term relationships, pandemic or not. But this was different; it happened so fast. Not only was our sex-life dwindling, we grew irritable toward each other. The minor annoyances were no longer minor. We would avoid each other, which is difficult in a one-bedroom apartment. Having sex became the last thing on our minds, but our sexual drive did not disappear. It came to the point of only satisfying our sexual needs on our own. The pandemic that once was a blessing to my sex life became a curse to it. A nagging question emerged: are the problems we are experiencing the result of a mismatch coupling, an unanticipated and possibly temporary outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic, or some combination thereof?

Initially believing that this meant our relationship was doomed, I was distraught by how this could have happened so quickly. Just a few months prior, we were all over each other. Where did we go wrong? After making it a goal to restore our relationship, things began to

drastically improve. It was especially instructive to observe that, once mandatory quarantine lifted and he was able to go back to work, we both had personal time and space that was not possible during quarantine, and we especially grew closer. At that point I wondered whether the trouble my partner and I experienced was an isolated incident. Research suggests it is not.

The issue of managing sexual intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a problem for cohabiting, committed partners—this is affecting everyone. From discussions with my single friends, I discovered that they too are frustrated and confronting significant problems. They are no longer able to find actual or potential partners in the usual activities that *used to be* their taken-for granted everyday life, and endless swiping on dating apps became discouraging. Regardless of relationship status, the pandemic has significantly limited the sexual experiences and opportunities for, presumably, a large portion of our population.

Due to the limited research on this issue, and inspired by my own experiences, in this study I aim to better understand how people manage the impacts that the pandemic has had on their sexual and romantic lives. I was fortunately able to gradually restore mine, but what are the experiences others are having? In this chapter, I will consider the historical relevance of this topic, look into how prior pandemics may have impacted people's sexual practices, and discuss how people might be managing sexual intimacy during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Historical Context of Pandemics and the Impact on Sexual Intimacy

Pandemics have literally plagued human populations throughout history. From historically recent viral diseases such as the 1918 Influenza, the 1957 Asian Flu, the 1968 Hong Kong Flu, 1981 HIV/AIDS, 2002 SARS, 2009 Swine Flu and most recently, the 2019 COVID-19, global deadly infections have likely impacted every aspect of people's lives. Not so commonly understood, however, is how these pandemics have influenced individual's sex lives.

Given the historical context of many of these pandemics, impacts on sexual intimacy was not sufficiently reported, if at all. Topics around sexual satisfaction and activity may not have been appropriate to disclose, along with a possible lack of scholarly interest in these topics. With the limited data available, it is evident that the motives and means of finding sexual partners, managing romantic/sexual relationships, and keeping oneself sexually satisfied during the pandemic has required some creativity.

It is reasonable to suggest that the pandemic has brought about a number of conditions that will influence both sexual desire and activities: a sharp increase in overall anxiety may well have decreased libido in general; social isolation likely decreased opportunity to find sexual partners; the effects of quarantine will likely affect sexual desires and activities among cohabitating couples while simultaneously providing less privacy to non-cohabitating partners that would like to get creative. In these, and probably many other ways, the pandemic has altered the way people engage in sexual pleasure during these dark times in history. Although limited research supports these suggestions, one study overwhelmingly found that couples avoided having sex during the 2009 Swine Flu pandemic due to concerns of contamination (Cirhinlioglu and Cirhinlioglu 2010).

One significant variable that will most likely influence how a pandemic will affect intimacy within a population is the manner in which the disease is contracted, as well as the global severity of the outbreak. SARS, for example is contracted through droplets in the air, similar to COVID-19. HIV/AIDS, on the other hand, is contracted through the exchange bodily fluids. Respiratory diseases spread quickly and easily, possibly resulting in the death shortly after contracting it. Finally, pandemics prior to COVID-19 have not always virally spread within every country. With respiratory diseases such as COVID-19, this limits the safety of even

standing within six feet of another person, much less engaging in sexual intimacy. When masks, social distancing, and frequent handwashing are necessary in limiting the spread of COVID-19, relatively worry-free intimacy is likely challenged. Thus, discovering how people are adapting to these obstacles will be compelling.

More mainstream is the impact of HIV/AIDS on sexual interactions. The still prevailing existence of this disease has influenced how people talk, think about, and engage in sexual activity. Fortunately, with regular testing and significant developments in treatments, HIV/AIDS has become a manageable factor in people's sex life. The adaptation people made in accordance with the HIV/AIDS epidemic shows an adaptive response to maintaining sexual and romantic intimacy that is applicable to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the practice of frequent testing, taking necessary contraceptive precautions, and disclosure of HIV/AIDS status, similar practices were likely implemented during the most recent pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, testing, regular social isolation, the use of masks, increased hygiene and, more recently, being vaccinated are defenses against the disease. These precautions are stricter, but possible ways of managing intimacy during COVID-19 may stem from some strategies used in relation to HIV/AIDS.

COVID-19 and Sexual Intimacy

COVID-19 has uniquely altered the everyday life we previously knew. In the U.S., the pandemic has become a breeding ground for political strife, unemployment, food insecurity, domestic abuse, depression, anxiety, among other disturbing realities. Less distressing, but still significant is the increase in potential sexual frustration. This pandemic has cornered individuals into isolation, though for good reason. Isolation and remaining quarantined is advised and from

time-to-time, legally enforced in efforts to slow the spread of the disease. The way we work, socialize, and have sex had to be transformed to accommodate to the pandemic.

Due to the limited information on how people managed sexual and romantic intimacy during prior pandemics, we can assume that it would reflect strategies enacted during COVID-19. The major differences, however, are developments in technology. Technological developments have provided an array of resources for managing intimacy. From relatively accessible COVID-19 testing to an abundance of online and technological options for satisfying sexual desires, and to manage sexual satisfaction and health. The more recent pandemics such as SARS and Swine Flu also emerged in the technological age, but those technologies may not have been so commonly used or available for the general public as it is today. For these reasons, I anticipate that this study will reveal that, at least among privileged population within the U.S., the pandemic resulted in an even greater reliance on technological means to manage sexual desires and romantic relationships. Additionally, among cohabitating partners, there may be different implications on intimacy, while younger people who may be confined with their parents are experiencing less privacy to engage in sexual intimacy alone or with others. It is plausible that the heightened anxiety caused by the pandemic has impacted people's sexual desire. Given these obstacles, and likely many more, the pandemic has created challenging circumstances for managing sexual and romantic intimacy.

Goal of This Thesis

There is little information about the creative and active ways that individuals manage sexual and romantic intimacy in general, and even less specifically within the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will offer more in-depth accounts on the motives and means of managing sexual intimacy during this time of extreme isolation. This will offer supplemental data to the

available quantitative literature. Furthermore, I aim to specifically understand the adaptive and goal-oriented ways in which sexual intimacy is being enacted. More specifically, I aim to understand the means and motives in which people are finding sexual and romantic partners, maintain such relationships, and meeting personal sexual desires during the pandemic.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Analyzing how people are managing sexual intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic is a subject that has not yet been heavily explored in the social sciences. Due to the recent nature of this pandemic and the ever-expanding use of technology to satisfy certain needs, there is no question that technology is being more excessively relied on to find partners, maintain intimate relationships, and meet personal sexual desires. It is also plausible that during the COVID-19 pandemic cohabitating partners experienced lessened sexual or romantic intimacy due to increased irritability of being with their partner constantly, particularly during quarantine. Furthermore, younger people who lived with family or roommates during the pandemic likely dealt with compromised privacy and opportunities to satisfy sexual desires alone or with a partner through technological means. Given that COVID-19 brought about a new set of standards and norms to ensure the safety of individuals and communities during this time, sex and intimacy became an increasingly potentially risky and challenging interaction.

Using Technology to Manage Committed Relationships

Beyond using online¹ means to find a partner, the internet may also serve as an essential tool for maintaining a satisfactory relationship (Sullivan et al. 2020). Among predominantly heterosexual relationships between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one, online communication between partners is correlated with relationship satisfaction and closeness among individuals who heavily valued and depend on online means of communication (Sullivan et al. 2020). On the other hand, degree of online communication had little-to-no correlation with relationship satisfaction/closeness among individuals who do not value online means of communication

¹ Use of the word “online” is meant to encompass a variety of technologically mediated forms of interaction and communication (cell phones, texting, FaceTiming, etc.).

(Sullivan et al. 2020). This finding supports the assumption that online communication between romantic/sexual partners may be essential for long-distance relationship/non-cohabitating partners outside of a pandemic. Given the mandates to isolate and quarantine, many non-cohabiting relationships likely had to put their co-present physical romantic/sex life on hold. Hence, this study examines the extent to which the value of, and dependence on, online means of sexual and romantic communication and interaction was utilized as an alternative during the pandemic.

Due to the predominance of people obtaining sexual and romantic satisfaction with others through online means prior to the pandemic, it is reasonable to suggest that these services may prove even more useful during the pandemic when other opportunities are limited. In this thesis I seek to understand how and why people engage in online sexual activity as a convenient alternative and the influence of those interactions on people. Given that the dependence on online dating sites and online means of communication were prevalent and arguably essential in people finding partners, maintaining existing relationships, and satisfying sexual desires, it is reasonable to suggest that the isolation and lack of opportunities to meet people in face-to-face situations has only accelerated these trends. My goal is to also understand the impacts the pandemic has on existing cohabiting relationships, and individuals' opportunities to satisfy sexual desires, along with the ways in which people act in intentional and adaptive ways to overcome obstacles in satisfying desires for sexual and romantic intimacy.

Using Technology to Achieve Sexual Intimacy

As previously discussed, technology has greatly influenced the ways in which people find partners and maintain sexual intimacy. Being that the focus of the current study is to examine how sexual and romantic intimacy was managed during the pandemic, understanding how people

used technology to achieve sexual satisfaction prior to the pandemic is helpful in guiding this thesis. This section focuses more closely on how and why people use technology explicitly to meet sexual desires.

A study surveying thirty-three people between the ages of nineteen and twenty-seven found that twenty-one participants have used the internet for sexual purposes, whether to look at pornography, participate in sexually active chat rooms, or use video chat to sexually engage with others (Waskul 2014). That contemporary ubiquity of sexual uses of technology is what Waskul (2014) refers to as “technosexuality,” or the ever-present use of technology to acquire sexual information and content, along with engaging in sexual acts and expressions of desires. The exploration into sexual imagery and online sexual engagement started in the pre-teen/early teen years of the participants, which Waskul (2014) suggests is a part of anticipatory sexual socialization as respondents sexually prepare for future encounters. These findings clearly indicate the level of comfort younger generations likely have when navigating and relying on technology for sexual pleasure.

Waskul (2014) also discusses the pragmatic use of technology to satisfy sexual needs and desires. Also notable, Waskul (2014) found that the pragmatic use of technology to achieve sexual needs is especially prevalent within existing relationships. Consistent with Waskul’s (2014) finding, Castro-Calvo et al. (2018) found that 82.4% of online sexual contact occurs between committed romantic partners. Furthermore, in a study examining the motives and processes of seeking sexual partners on sex-oriented websites, ten out of seventeen participants used these websites for the purpose of finding in-person sexual partners (Sevcikova and Daneback 2011). The remainder of participants reported using sex-oriented websites strictly for online sexual activity (Sevcikova and Daneback 2011). Both studies thus offer insight into how

motives to engage in online sexual activity have likely transitioned from supplementary to necessity during the pandemic. Sevcikova and Daneback's (2011) research especially suggests that, during the pandemic, the use of sex-oriented websites may be likely less relied on for meeting sexual partners in-person, and more heavily relied on to satisfy sexual needs remotely.

Given that online sex practices are not a new means for enjoying pleasure, understanding the motives behind this practice is essential for better understanding how they are utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the start of the pandemic, 20% of people have incorporated at least one new sexual fantasy or activity into their sex life (Lehmiller et al. 2021). People that added these new sexual activities into their repertoire were also three times as likely to have improvements in their sex lives. (Lehmiller et al. 2021). Engagement in online sexual activity can involve non-arousal activity (such as sexual research), solitary arousal (viewing online pornography), or partnered arousal activity, such as sexting and sexual video chats (Castro-Calvo et al. 2018). Castro-Calvo et al.'s (2018) systemic review analyzed thirty studies to examine the motives behind online sexual activity, which is useful for understanding similar, yet unique motives that may have influenced people to participate in online sexual activity during the pandemic. The authors found that the motives behind online sexual activity include to simply achieve sexual arousal and satisfaction, to "enhance online and offline sexuality," a means of anonymous fantasizing, and for mood management (Castro-Calvo et al. 2018: 504-505). All of these motives are likely applicable to the engagement of online sexual intimacy during the pandemic, given the increase of stress, isolation, and boredom.

The motive from Castro-Calvo et al.'s (2018: 504-505) study to "enhance online and offline sexuality" is relevant to the current study due to its social nature. This motive includes the engagement of online sexual interaction between partners, either to delve into sexual interactions

among strangers, or to manage and sustain sexual intimacy among existing co-present romantic partners. The former suggests the pursuit of instant sexual gratification without emotional engagement, while the latter is likely to include emotional intimacy (Castro-Calvo, et al. 2018).

Furthermore, gender also correlates with differences in online sexual activity (Shaughnessy, Byers, and Walsh 2011). Shaughnessy, Byers, and Walsh (2011) found, consistent with the Castro-Calvo et al. (2018) study, that the motives for partnered arousal online sexual activity was relatively the same between genders. Although, men had much higher rates of solitary arousal online sexual activity (Shaughnessy et al. 2011).

As these studies indicate, prior to the pandemic, sexual partners who partake in online sexual activity together may do so to “spice things up.” Consequently, if prior to the pandemic it was relatively common for couples to engage in online sexual activity as an additional means of exploring and expressing their sexual desires, during the pandemic an additional motive may be out of necessity. Long-distance relationships (and a pandemic) likely influence non-cohabiting romantic partners to rely more heavily on online sexual activity to maintain sexual intimacy. One situation comes from a supplemental purpose, while the other emerges out of adaptation.

Not only has partnered sexual intimacy been impacted by the pandemic, solitary sexual activity has likely also been affected. Opportunity is usually a factor that influences one’s quality and frequency of sexual satisfaction. During quarantine, people are confined with those who they share a living space with. Due to this, for many people there may be less opportunity to comfortably masturbate (i.e., in quarantine with the constant presence of roommates, family, children, etc.). Of course, people often rely on pornography and online sexual activity to enjoy solo sexual pleasure outside of a pandemic, and during the pandemic it is equally likely some people lack the privacy to do so (Castro-Calvo et al. 2018). Additionally, those who do not

consume pornography online often times rely on other technological means to masturbate such as use of vibrators and other sex toys, especially among women. The sex toy brand Womanizer had a 50% rise in sales since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hunt 2021). Again, sex toy users (and those who go manually) still must worry about being disturbed when not given an adequate amount of privacy, which can be quite the turn-off. Perhaps during the pandemic, people had more time to masturbate (what else is there to do?), but did not necessarily have quality opportunities to do so. Interestingly, user traffic worldwide has increased significantly on Pornhub since the emergence of the pandemic (PornHub Insights 2020). Although, with less opportunity to engage in masturbation among cohabiting individuals, this may be a pressing factor during the pandemic. With limited research on this within a pandemic, I aim to further explore these concepts in my thesis.

Stress and Sex during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Stress can impact many facets of one's life, and certainly one's sex life. In a recent Kinsey Institute study, nearly 44% of survey respondents reported a decline in the quality and satisfaction of their sex lives during the pandemic (Lehmiller et al. 2021). It is safe to assume that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased stress-levels in the average person. It has been found that social distancing during COVID-19 have resulted in reports of lower quality of life and sexual functioning among women who live with their partners (Schiavi et al. 2020). Also, 22% of respondents of a survey in China reported decreased sexual desire during the pandemic, 41% reported decrease in frequency of sex, and 30% reported increase in masturbation (Li et al. 2020). Schiavi et al. (2020) also found that general anxiety related to the pandemic, along with concerns about contracting COVID-19 from a partner who works outside the home, correlates

with a decrease in sexual activity. Therefore, it is important to note how this stress can relate to one's sex life.

Studies suggest that a dyad's sex life correlates with stress within the dyad, which correlates with stress outside of the dyad (Bodenmann, Ledermann, and Bradbury 2007). Furthermore, a study of 198 heterosexual marriages found that higher stress levels among couples who are relatively *dissatisfied* in their relationship showed a correlation with less reported sexual activity (Bodenmann et al. 2007). However, men reported an increase in sexual activity in conditions of higher stress levels (Bodenmann et al. 2007). The authors infer that when men experience higher stress levels, they are more likely to seek out an emotional connection with their partner, thus possibly leading to sex. Women on the other hand, may not feel as comforted or supported by their partner when experiencing high stress, ultimately leading to less reported sexual activity (Bodenmann et al. 2007). The authors conclude that their findings align with transactional stress theory which looks at how daily sources of stress (however small) bleed into various facets of social life and therefore, affect them (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). The authors also found that outside stressors do not alter the amount of sexual activity among *satisfied* couples (Bodenmann, et al. 2007). Since literatures on the influence of stress on sex show that it negatively influences sexual satisfaction, it is reasonable to suggest that the stress of the pandemic may have brought about similar effects, potentially even more severe.

It is also likely that similar results will arise within the pandemic, in which sexual activity is dependent on the levels of relationship satisfaction and severity of external stress. A recent study confirms this suggestion by examining the likelihood of infidelity among long-term partners during the pandemic (Coop Gordon and Mitchell 2020). The pandemic has caused an increase in daily stress and has caused many couples to be with each other twenty-four hours a

day, seven days a week, making them grow tired of one another (Coop Gordon and Mitchell 2020). According to the Kinsey Institute, 13% of people in committed relationships reported contacting an ex-partner during quarantine for a multitude of reasons including to check in on them, being bored or lonely, to rekindle a relationship, or to have sex (Coop Gordon and Mitchell 2020). Notably, during the pandemic 17,000 new members (an increase from 15,500 members) have been added daily to a dating site *Ashley Madison*, which is largely marketed to people in committed relationships looking for discrete hook-ups; *Ashley Madison's* tagline is “Life is Short. Have an Affair” (Takahashi 2020). This finding gives insight into how cohabiting, committed relationships are managing (or not managing) sexual intimacy, and how this is influenced by the pandemic. However, it is important to note that thought research indicates the significant influence of external stress on a couple's sex life, it does not thoroughly examine various ages of participants, LGBTQIA+ couples, as well as people in polyamorous relationships, and for non-marital couples.

Stress caused by the pandemic is not specific to people who partake in sexual activity simply for pleasure. This pandemic has had an (arguably harsher) impact on sex workers due to the increased risk of in-person work. Due to the difficulty of solely relying on online means for income, many sex workers transitioned to in-person services with stricter safety precautions. These precautions include a greater emphasis on hygiene, limiting in-person services, regular COVID-19 and STI testing of clients and service providers, and use of protective equipment against COVID-19 and STI's (Callander et al. 2020). The guidelines that are suggested and implemented by sex workers may equally mirror many of the practices of participants in this study.

When considering the varying factors previously mentioned, a fuller picture emerges of how people may have managed sexual intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a recent study on the sex practices of gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men during the COVID-19 pandemic, Stephenson et al. (2020) found that participants generally did not perceive a great need to lessen their number of sex partners during the pandemic. A contradicting study surveying men who have sex with men about how COVID-19 has impacted their well-being, sexual and substance abuse behavior, and their STI and HIV prevention and/or treatment, found that majority of participants reported fewer sexual partners and sexual encounters during the pandemic (Sanchez et al. 2020). However, though many participants reported a decrease in usage of dating/hook-up apps, a large amount reported an increase in online sexual activity (Sanchez et al. 2020). Another study examined how COVID-19 influenced changes in the sex lives of Taiwanese people found that the majority of the respondents indicated a decrease in sexual satisfaction (Ko et al. 2020). Ko et al. (2020) conclude that the risk perception of contracting COVID-19 and general anxiety accounted for the decrease in sexual satisfaction. These findings suggest that participants in this study may equally report a similar overall decrease in sexual satisfaction during the pandemic, and likely for similar reasons.

Connections to Sexual Intimacy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Understandably, the literature relevant to the ways in which people manage and negotiate sexual and romantic intimacy during the pandemic is very limited. Most of the studies are narrow in participant demographics, limited to cultural populations that may not be generalizable to other populations, and lacking a diversity of gender, age, ethnicities, and sexual identity. For the goal of understanding how people are managing sexual and romantic intimacy during the pandemic, the present literature does not offer specific, in-depth analyses or possible

generalizable conclusions. The literature focusing on online sexual activity and the impact of COVID-19 on sexual health provide some cues to how people of various relationship statuses are managing sexual and romantic intimacy during the pandemic. These findings illustrate how technology facilitates sex due to convenience and efficiency, which is likely to be the case during a global pandemic, especially among younger generations. Yet it is still largely unknown precisely *how* people manage sexual and romantic intimacy during the pandemic, the specifics of their *motives*, and the degrees of *satisfaction*. This study aims to answer those questions.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND DATA

To thoroughly understand the ways in which people managed sexual and romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, we must acknowledge the varying circumstances that necessitate unique adaptations to engage in intimacy. With limited literature on the specific strategies used to maintain intimacy during the pandemic, we must utilize previous literature on the use of technology to create and maintain romantic and sexual intimacy outside of a pandemic. What are the specific motives and strategies behind online usage for finding romantic or sexual partners, maintaining existing relationships, or enhancing sexual intimacy during the pandemic? Furthermore, how has the stress and isolation caused by the pandemic contributed to the challenge of maintaining such intimacy? This study gathered qualitative data to discover the unique ways in which people have adapted to this pandemic to achieve sexual and romantic intimacy.

Research Strategy

To gather this data, I administered a qualitative online survey while using convenience sampling to recruit three interview participants to supplement the survey. The online survey was administered through Qualtrics. The Qualtrics survey includes minimal close-ended questions regarding participants' demographics, relationship status, and living situation (see Appendix A). The remaining questions were open-ended asking participants to describe how the pandemic has impacted their sexual and romantic intimacy, in addition to various questions regarding the means and motives for managing their sexual and romantic intimacy. Questions are formatted in a manner that prioritize the intentional and creative ways that participants manage sexual and romantic intimacy, as well as other possible changes in sexual and romantic interest and activity. The survey provides anonymity for voluntary participants.

For the interviews, I used convenience sampling to gain three participants who I knew that showed interest in participating in an interview. I arranged to conduct a Zoom meeting with these participants. Notably, these participants did not take the survey. Prior to participating in the survey, participants will be given my contact information, as well as the contact information for my thesis advisor (Dr. Dennis Waskul) for the opportunity to reach out with any concerns or questions. Interviews were scheduled with the volunteer and administered via Zoom. The interviews were semi-structured with the goal of obtaining candid responses from the participants. I asked questions similar to the Qualtrics survey, but with an emphasis on elaboration and detail (see Appendix B).

Prior to the interview, I emailed each participant the consent form to fill out prior to the interview (I recorded the audio and video of the Zoom interviews for transcription. After transcribing the interviews and use a pseudonym for the participants, I immediately deleted the recordings. Transcriptions and other data were kept on my secured, password encrypted computer. Their contact information was kept securely on the Qualtrics questionnaire where they first provided their contact information for a follow-up interview. Once the interview was over, their data and transcripts were only connected to a pseudonym. Their informed consent forms were also kept on my password-encrypted computer under a file name named after their pseudonym.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants in this thesis were recruited through convenience sampling. For the survey I posted my survey link on Reddit groups (see Appendix C). Recruitment for the survey was administered via Reddit, in which I first got permission from moderators of various Reddit communities to post my survey(Appendix D). I used convenience sampling to target Reddit

communities that would likely have potentially interested participants. This also allowed me to target groups of varying genders, sexual orientations, relationships statuses, ages, etc. As will be discussed in the Survey and Interview Sample Demographics section, this did not allow for as diverse of a sample as I was hoping for. The survey data is anonymous and saved on my Qualtrics account.

Survey and Interview Sample Demographics

My total survey sample was 229. This was split up into three categories: participants without a consistend partner during the pandemic (n=64), participants in a non-cohabitating, committed relationship (n=37), and those in a consistent, cohabitating relationship (n=90). The demographics for each are laid out below. For my interview particpatins, I had three participants of similar demographics, which is also laid out below.

Survey Respondents Without a Consistent Partner During the Pandemic (n=64)

Ages 18-55, Mean Age: 25

Gender:	Race/Ethnicity:	Sexual Orientation:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Women (26)• Men (22)• Nonbinary/Genderqueer (6)• Trans Women (2)• Tran Men (7)• Not Specified (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• White (46)• Asian (7)• Latinx/Hispanic (2)• Biracial (4)• Native American/Alaskan Native (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Heterosexual (13)• Gay/Lesbian (3)• Bisexual (2)• Asexual/Aromantic (42)• Demisexual (1)• Pansexual (3)

Survey Respondents in Committed Non-Cohabiting Relationships During the Pandemic

(n=37)

Ages 18-54, Mean Age: 28

Gender:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Women (18)• Men (15)• Nonbinary/Genderqueer (3)• Trans Men (1)

Race/Ethnicity:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• White (27)• Black/African American (1)• Asian (5)• Biracial (2)• Middle Eastern (1)• Not Specified (1)

Sexual Orientation:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Heterosexual (13)• Gay/Lesbian (4)• Bisexual (3)• Asexual/Aromantic (13)• Demisexual (1)• Pansexual (1)• Queer (1)

Survey Respondents in Committed, Cohabiting Relationships During the Pandemic

(n=90)

Ages 18-63, Mean Age: 35

Gender:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Women (51)• Men (36)• Nonbinary/Genderqueer (2)• Not Specified (1)

Race/Ethnicity:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• White (76)• Black/African American (1)• Asian (5)• Latinx/Hispanic (3)• Biracial (4)

Sexual Orientation:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Heterosexual (57)• Gay/Lesbian (4)• Bisexual (10)• Asexual/Aromantic (6)• Demisexual (1)• Pansexual (6)• Queer (2)

Interview Sample Demographics

I interviewed three women between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-three using convenience sampling. One participant is White and two are Latinx. All three are heterosexual, single, and either live with parents or roommates.

Data Analysis

Close-ended survey question responses were recorded. These mainly consisted of questions about demographics (gender, race/ethnicity, age, sexual identity, etc.). Some close-ended questions were followed by an open-ended question that correlates with their previous response to the close-ended question. Open-ended question responses were coded using open coding. After coding, I calculated the frequencies of each code or theme found to obtain descriptive statistics and used memo-writing to make conclusions surrounding each theme that emerged.

The interviews were also coded using an open-coding and memo-writing approach. I hand-transcribed the entire interviews and coded after transcriptions. I utilized interview quotes to offer more meaningful and rich data that the surveys lacked. All three interview respondents were single women in their early 20's, so that data largely only offered to fill in some potential gaps within the survey findings of single participants.

Limitations and Implications

There are limitations within this thesis. Being that I used convenience sampling, external validity was compromised, and findings were not generalizable. This is especially the case for the three participants who volunteered for an interview in which there is sampling bias, since it's

reasonable to anticipate that people who willingly agreed to an interview are probably different from those who do not. Being that I knew the interview participants, there was the benefit of them possibly disclosing more information to me compared to what they would have shared with a stranger. However, the opposite could have also happened – their proximity to me may have influenced them to share less with me. There is also the limitation that this sample of interviewees had similar demographics, geographical location, views, and interests due to the convenience sampling. I did not have the goal of obtaining representative findings of a certain population, but I aimed to gather valuable and descriptive data that will result in candid findings.

Furthermore, the survey required open-ended, thought-out responses that may not be desirable to participants. It was very common for survey respondents to give short, incomplete answers or to simply answer “N/A” or one-worded answers, rather than offering nuance or depth to their answers. Finally, the often-uncomfortable nature of this topic may have deterred many potential participants from completing the survey. This is especially true for the interview, given that it is considerably more uncomfortable disclosing information about one’s intimacy in an interview, than it is in an anonymous questionnaire.

Among the survey participants, I had disproportionate amount of asexual and aromantic participants under the sample of single people. Though it was useful to obtain data on how the pandemic impacted asexual and aromantic people’s intimacy, most of them reported minimal impact, thus skewing the findings among single participants towards their being minimal impact of the pandemic on single people’s intimacy and satisfaction.

Additionally, a flaw in the survey design did not account for that fact that some participants in committed relationships were not in that relationship prior to the pandemic. Many of the questions asked respondents to contrast their intimacy satisfaction prior to the pandemic

compared to during, in which many respondents could not adequately report on due to them not being in that relationship before the pandemic. Furthermore, there were some participants who were not in monogamous relationships during the pandemic, rather they were in open or polyamorous relationships. The survey design accounted for this fact, though many questions also alluded to the assumption that respondents would be in monogamous relationships. Finally, despite my initial intention to focus heavily on use of technology and online means to maintain or manage intimacy, I ended up not prioritizing that piece as much in my survey design. When questions about reliance on technology did come up in the survey and interviews, participants did not suggest as much of a reliance on online means of managing intimacy like I had predicted.

Ethical Considerations

Ethicality and anonymity were maintained throughout the survey and interview process. Prior to a participant opting into taking the online Qualtrics survey, the potential participant was required to pass through an informed consent webpage by agreeing to participate after reading what the survey entailed and the purpose of the study. The informed consent page also indicated that the participant may close out of the survey at any time. The participants were also required to electronically check a box that indicates being eighteen years or older to participate (see Appendix E).

Ethicality was also kept within the open-ended interviews by administering an informed consent form that the participant electronically signed prior to beginning the interview (see Appendix F). The participant was given a copy of the signed informed consent for their records. I also explained that the signed informed consent form will be kept secure on my password-encrypted computer and will be deleted one year after the interview. The informed consent communicates the assurance of confidentiality and that their names and other identifying

information will be changed and omitted in the thesis. Prior to the interview, participants were informed and agreed to the recording data during the Zoom interview that I later transcribed. Volunteers were also informed of the personal and possibly uncomfortable nature of the study, and that they may skip questions and/or quit the interview at any time. They also were informed of the study's usefulness in gathering new and valuable data about managing sexual and romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. They had the option of disclosing information, concerns, or questions that was not recorded in any way.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

For clarity and organization, I report the survey responses divided up by participants' responses to question six (see Appendix A), asking about their romantic/sexual partner status and whether they lived with that partner. The options respondents could choose from included (a) not having a consistent partner during the pandemic, (b) having a partner but not living with them, or (c) having a partner whom which they lived with at some point during the pandemic. Because I used display logic based on respondent's answer to this question, it makes sense to display the findings according to this layout.

Not Having a Consistent Partner During the Pandemic

For participants in this study that did not have a consistent partner during the pandemic, opportunities to engage in sexual activity (whether partnered or alone) were largely unaffected. In fact, 67.3% of respondents reported that this did not apply to them or that they experienced no change at all. This may be due to this sector of respondents being single and not living with a partner, along with this group having a large percentage of asexual participants. Among this theme, participants mention not having opportunity to meet others to hook up with, but largely did not mention any change in frequency of masturbation. A few outliers mentioned having more time and desire to masturbate due to not being able to have sex with others safely during the pandemic. Many respondents in this study are aromantic or asexual, so the pandemic did not impact them as far as desire for, or ability to, engage in intimacy. However, for the many participants that do desire romantic intimacy, several mentioned a decline of non-sexual intimacy, such as holding hands and hugging—one even referred to feeling “touch-starved.”

Regarding respondents who did not have a consistent partner during the pandemic's general desire to engage in partnered sexual intimacy, 62.7% of respondents mentioned not

having that desire due to identifying as asexual. 15.7% replied that they do have this desire, while 21.6% mentioned being on the fence about it. One respondent explained their concern about hygiene, which was likely exacerbated with the pandemic, by replying a “decline to do anything un-hygienic like kissing on lips.”

Privacy and Opportunity to Engage in Partnered or Solo Intimacy

When asked more broadly about any changes in privacy to engage in sexual intimacy, most respondents who did not have a consistent partner during the pandemic (67.3%) reported there being no change or it not being applicable to them (again, likely because of the large number of asexual respondents in my sample). 16.4% noticed lessening partnered activity, but not much change in solo activity. As one respondent describes, “The opportunity to have partnered activity decreased, but I tap into that opportunity very infrequently anyways, so I noticed little change. There was no change in opportunity for solo activity.” 5.5% mentioned an increase in masturbation paired with a decrease in partnered activity. As one respondent wrote, “Yes it has changed. I think having more opportunities to be home alone more often, combined with the decreased opportunities to be spending time with friends and family outside and in-person, has granted me more time along to engage in sexual activity with myself (alone).”

Being that 63.3% of responses indicated relying predominantly on masturbation, sometimes paired with pornography, to satisfy their sexual intimacy *prior* to the pandemic, when asked specifically about privacy changes to engage in any kind of sexual activity, the most common response was having no change in privacy at nearly 30% – likely because they either live alone or do not have a partner to get in the way of any privacy to masturbate, which had not changed since the pandemic. Nearly 15% reported having less opportunity for masturbation due to privacy issues. As some respondents report: “My mom and dad work from home so pretty

much”, “Nobody leaves ever now, so things are more tense than in the past”, and “Less personal time to masturbate/watch porn/engage in fetish stuff.” Roughly 9% of participants had increased opportunity to engage in sexual activity and explained that they have more free time during the pandemic and are isolated more often, thus correlating with an increase in privacy to masturbate. Again, these responses are highly dependent on living situations, whether they had more people living with them, and being home more often.

Reliance on Masturbation During the Pandemic Among Interview Participants

Among the interview participants, Scarlett, Cindy, and Rachel all agree that they would rather have intimate relations with someone rather than rely solely on masturbation. However, Rachel (23, Latinx, straight, lives with parents) indicates that she “could take it or leave it” when referring to masturbation.

I think for me it's been like a pattern of on and off. Probably masturbation is the only thing. I, uh, discovered it at a young age. Haha. But I've also gone really long periods of time without doing it.

Due to Rachel’s religion, she plans on waiting until marriage to have sex. So, when she meets a man, she tends to just “fool around lightly” and leave it at that. She occasionally masturbates, but seems to feel some shame with that because of her religion. As Rachel explains

Well, it's obvious. It's a part of my belief that we shouldn't do it [masturbate]. But when I have noticed that I don't do it, it doesn't cross my mind—like I just have a bazillion other things on my mind that I need to get accomplished. So, that's just hanging out on the back burner. I completely forget about it.”

Throughout Cindy's (22, Latinx, straight, lives with roommates) interview, she indicates that she relies more heavily on masturbation than in-person sexual intimacy. Though she has some sexual encounters, she finds that during the pandemic, having sex with people from bars needs to be few and far between in order to avoid recklessness related to COVID-19. She prefers to satisfy her sexual needs through in-person encounters, but that is not always accessible, as she said:

I would rather [have sex] with someone in person, not that they know where the clitoris is anything. Regardless, I just lay there as a vessel (as she imitates a motionless body), but with COVID, I really don't want to be reckless. But I still did it [have partnered sex] here and there.

Similarly for Scarlett (22, White, straight, lives with a roommate), she explicitly says she would rather have sex than just rely on masturbation:

I would definitely rather have sex with someone just rely on masturbatin because [pauses and laughs], I think you can pleasure yourself and get what you like out of it. But at the end of the day, it's just plastic [referring to virbators]. I always use a tool now [vibrator]...but there is more intimacy with having a partner. There are just certain things a person can give me that a silicone rabbit just cant. I [laugh] have been so dry bro. I needs some loving.

She explains that prior to the pandemic, she used to have sex regularly, while also incorporating masturbation. When asked about her typical means of satisfying herself sexually during the pandemic she said, "Um, my vibrator. Well, currently. I mean, a year and a half ago, whatever it was, it was other people and my vibrator, but now it is all my vibrator."

Scarlett also expresses missing having sex with men. She likes the feeling of being with someone sexually, rather than relying just on masturbation. She said, “Honestly, my favorite thing about sex as being filled...Not with semen necessarily.”

Interview participants also contest to how frequency of masturbation has or has not been impacted by the pandemic with increased time at home. Though we know that interviewees would rather engage in partnered sexual activity, we see that that option has been more limited due to the pandemic. Increased time at home correlated to at least relative increased masturbation among two participants, Cindy and Scarlett. Perhaps, this also correlated with venturing into new means of masturbation, especially in the sense of acquiring new sex toys during the pandemic. Not only are they relying on masturbation more, but they mentioned seeing an increase in frequency of masturbation as well.

It really depends on honestly, if I'm drinking or are high because if I'm drinking or high, I love masturbating—it's a great time, and it really helps me center my soul. So, it really just depends on those factors. Honestly, on a good week, if I'm not being a raging alcoholic, I would say probably two nights (Scarlett).

As the above data quote indicates, Scarlett's overall masturbation may have decreased since the pandemic, unless she is drunk or high, of which she increased alcohol and marijuana usage during the pandemic. When she drinks or smokes marijuana, she finds that she masturbates more and is something she looks forward to. Outside of being under the influence, she does it sporadically; she estimates about two times a day on three days of the week.

Cindy's masturbation increased because she ventured into the world of sex toys during the pandemic. As Cindy said, “I think I went up. Because a dear old friend once gave me a code to buy...[a sex toy]...Yeah. Now [during the pandemic] there's more time and now I know more.

So probably more.” Prior to the pandemic Cindy, before she had a sex toy, she masturbated a bit less. Now that she made some purchases, she enjoys masturbation more. That, on top of being home more with more time on her hands, her frequency of masturbation has increased.

Cindy and Scarlett both purchased one or more new sex toys during the pandemic. Cindy bought her first sex toy ever, while Scarlett incorporated a Rabbit vibrator, which is new to her. As indicated in Lehmiller et al. (2021), 20% of people have incorporated at least one new sexual fantasy or activity into their sex life during the pandemic, which is consistent with the findings with two interview participants, in which they both incorporated a new sex toy.

Scarlett explains that her vibrator took the place of porn for her. She used to rely more heavily on porn when masturbating, but since picking up her new vibrator, she doesn’t “need” porn. Although, she did mention that her new vibrator is starting to fall apart on her, so her porn consumption went up again. In Scarlet’s words:

I would honestly say I haven't really been watching porn so much... but I think that's honestly because of my vibrator that I got...well now I fucking do [watch more porn], because the part where it's like the actual dildo that moves back and forth broke. So, it's just...haha

Rachel, on the other hand experienced a decrease in masturbation. She found that being home with her parents all day rarely fostered a comfortable environment to masturbate. Though, she also emphasized that she was in and out of the game of masturbation prior to the pandemic due to not being very interested in it, and her beliefs that it is wrong. However, lessened privacy also contributed to a decrease in masturbation. As Rachel said:

Honestly, I think it was the opposite because I was at home with my parents. So, I didn’t really do too much with that [masturbation]... but I was also going through a period of not

doing it anyways. Because like I mentioned, it's just kind of like—it's really, really sporadic and I can go long months without doing it. Like a lot of months. I can go all year.

Impacts on Romantic Intimacy

Participants who did not have a consistent partner during the pandemic predominantly reported experiencing little to no impact of the pandemic on romantic intimacy (just over 50% of single respondents). This is largely due to majority of these respondents being aromantic or having little experience with romantic intimacy prior to the pandemic. Aside from the aromantic participants, the pandemic had a substantial impact on both access to romantic intimacy and satisfaction within it. Respondents experienced the pandemic as a circumstance in which it was increasingly difficult to obtain romantic intimacy. As one participant replied, “It has impacted my romantic satisfaction slightly, because I prefer to meet people in person, and I now feel more pressured to use online dating apps.” For some participants, the isolation of the pandemic also resulted in a greater desire to engage in romantic intimacy. These barriers were also paired with general anxiety and caution around the virus and lack of privacy to freely engage in any kind of partnered intimacy: “It [the pandemic] has prevented me from meeting people romantically due to fear of the virus and the lack of privacy at home.”

However, 21.7% of respondents reported that the pandemic negatively impacted their romantic satisfaction, while 15.2% mentioned that they felt the pandemic only had somewhat of a negative impact. Only a little over 4% reported a positive effect from the pandemic on their romantic satisfaction. One person explains their struggle with romantic intimacy due to the pandemic:

I believe on some level my romantic satisfaction has decreased because of the pandemic. The pandemic has caused college to be all online, so I have very little chances to interact with others and get a feel for potential romantic partners. It's hard to gauge whether someone can be a good romantic partner through Zoom and chats, especially when most of my classmates keep their cameras off as well.

Two of the interview participants mentioned that their romantic satisfaction was not largely impacted by the pandemic. Being that they were single prior to the pandemic, they found that they were relatively content being single during the pandemic. As Rachel said:

I think it was better for me to be single. Either way it's not different from anything else that I had done. But I just think that it was...it was fine. Like I was able to not worry about going out or doing anything.

Cindy expressed similar sentiments when she said:

I don't like—sometimes— especially I guess during the pandemic, you're inside, your secluded, you can't do that many things. So, your circle is very limited. So, it'd be nice to have somebody—like a partner. But I do like just not having to worry about anything or anyone.

It seems as though these single participants enjoy being single and appreciate the freedom and independence of that. However, being isolated during the pandemic has heightened any desire to engage in intimacy with another person.

Not only is the typical and often most preferred way of finding a romantic partner in person hindered by the pandemic due to restrictions around school, work, public venues, etc., but

participants also mentioned increased loneliness and less satisfactory means to potentially meet a romantic partner. As stated by one respondent, “although I didn't have a romantic partner to begin with, because of the lockdown I feel more alone which makes me urge more for any kind of interaction, including romantic.”

Impact on Sexual Intimacy

Consistent with the other results mentioned regarding how the pandemic impacted their sexual satisfaction, explicitly, a little over 70% of respondents who did not have a consistent partner during the pandemic reported no change or that this was not applicable to them. This sentiment is summed up well by one participant:

[The pandemic resulted in] no major changes in my perceived levels of sexual satisfaction. Generally speaking, before and after the pandemic I have rarely if not ever felt the need to sexually satisfy myself. And that has continued throughout the pandemic.

17% of participants reported an increase in masturbation, but not necessarily being satisfied with masturbation alone. As explained by one participant: “Yes. I engage in masturbation more often, and I don't feel as satisfied as before.” As this participant suggests, routine and frequent masturbation may have negatively impacted sexual satisfaction. It is possible that an increase in more “down” time has influenced an increase in frequency of masturbation, parallel with a decrease in opportunity to engage in partnered sexual intimacy.

Of the people that indicated masturbating (some do not), 26.7% reported an increase in frequency since the start of the pandemic, yet almost 37% felt that their frequency of masturbation remained the same. One person replied, “I bought a vibrator (finally) so [frequency of masturbation] increased.” Various people also reported using masturbation more frequently to

mitigate their increased anxiety and stress, and additionally to help with sleep, as indicated by these participants, “Increased. It helps me to sleep and relax” and “[Masturbation] increased slightly, mainly to help with stress relief and because I was spending more time at home alone.” More people indicated a slight increase more-so than a steep increase in frequency.

Five participants who did not have a consistent partner during the pandemic mentioned a decrease in masturbation along with fluctuation in frequency. One participant reported, “Decreased [masturbation during the pandemic]. [I am a] healthcare worker; too depressed/tired and went from very low libido to none.” For this participant, the increase of stress from the pandemic, paired with even more pressure and risk of being a healthcare worker, has an understandable negative impact on sexual frequency. There were also reports of seemingly little value placed on masturbation, so despite a previous influx in masturbation, the frequency then again plateaued: “Before the pandemic, I have never masturbated. Since the pandemic, I have masturbated a few times, but have now stopped due to religious reasons.” Another respondent reported: “Probably decreased a little bit overall. Increased at the start. Fewer sexual encounters (not leading to full sex) since I'm not going out, so less spontaneous masturbation stemming from this.”

Furthermore, a majority of respondents that watch porn reported that their frequency of consumption of pornography has remained the same since the beginning of the pandemic (29.2%). Otherwise, 16.7% saw an increase in pornography usage, while 10.4% saw a decrease. Among those who experienced an increase in pornography consumption alongside an increase in masturbation, it may largely be due to having more time to do so out of boredom and feelings of stress and isolation.

Partnered Intimacy

Cindy began the pandemic without any kind of partnered intimacy. She actually experienced increased partnered sexual intimacy during the pandemic, though not a huge increase of romantic intimacy. When restrictions let up a bit, she began going out occasionally and hooking-up with men. Though, she never spent much time considering them as potential romantic partners. She actually expressed coming out of her shell a bit since the pandemic. She attributes her newfound confidence to men paying her more attention when going out. She explains her pandemic reality:

With the pandemic, because I was working so much, I think I got increasingly lonelier and more self-aware of that. So, with a pandemic, now I think I've been talking to people more and being less afraid to talk to people. Because before that...I wouldn't really talk to anybody—too scared to do so. But now I'm just kinda like, “well, y'know, what's the worst that can happen?” Yeah, we're going through a global pandemic. So?

All respondents indicated some desire to have physical touch—though not always sexually. Although, sex is definitely a perk of it as indicated by Scarlett: “Well, first off, I really just need my bed rocked. Um...I would like to have a partner. I would like to have a relationship.”

Dating Apps and Technology Use to Manage Intimacy

The survey asked various questions about dating app usage and the difference in dating app experiences prior to the pandemic compared to within the pandemic. Only 27.27% of respondents who did not have a consistent partner during the pandemic reported using dating apps prior to the pandemic. Conflicting with what I initially predicted, this number decreased to

20.75% when asked whether they utilized any dating apps during the pandemic. These low numbers of respondents using dating apps before and during the pandemic is likely due to the influx of asexual/aromantic folks who participated in the survey. I initially expected dating app usage to increase during the pandemic out of boredom and loneliness, but it decreased for these respondents, likely due to the increased anxiety and risk of possibly meeting up with someone from a dating/hook-up app during a pandemic in which isolation is mandated/expected. Though this finding aligns with Sanchez et al. (2020) study that found a decrease in dating/hook-up app usage, but an increase in online sexual activity. Furthermore, about 80% of respondents reported not going on dates or having sex with someone during the pandemic. For the roughly 20% of people that reported going on dates or having partnered sex during the pandemic, some explained that they were having sex with a friend, a partner they were briefly seeing, and one mentioned having regular Zoom dates.

All respondents of this section either did not rely on technology to manage sexual intimacy *with others* (86.3%) or utilized those tools only occasionally (13.7%). Technology in this case includes FaceTime, chatrooms, and other uses of computer-mediated communication. Of the people that reported using technology for partnered sexual intimacy, a majority mentioned some form of sexting or sending nude photos with anonymous people on the internet or people they knew. A couple of participants explained that they either did not get much pleasure from it or utilized specific forms of role playing or fantasy that does not always prioritize what is considered typical sexual interactions, as one respondent explains: “I did some texting and roleplaying with some of my friends. It was okay. I mostly engaged in it only 'cuz they like it—I like seeing people I care about happy.” Another participant explained a similar dilemma of engaging in the sexual activity using technology, but having little desire for physical intercourse:

For me, my sex life is entirely fetish fantasy, which involves the masculine projection of certain clothes, and the fantasy projections of manly power associated with them but has nothing to do with sex or bodily fluids. Yes, I continued to have email exchanges and use one-on-one chat as I have done for 20+ years. I dislike video and do not have a video camera.

Interview respondents expressed the desire to meet someone serious at some point, though the process of meeting people has become increasingly difficult. However, Bumble (a dating app where women have to reach out to men first in heterosexual dynamics) has been relied on, they all indicated that (usually) the most success they get when trying to meet others to engage in intimacy with, is by going out and meeting people in person. Scarlett expressed these sentiments best when she said:

So, it was super hard to find someone and I have always found someone while partying or while drinking. So, like not going out and partying a whole bunch—it really puts up fucking damper on meeting people.

While bars were closed and restrictions were stricter, this was not really an option. However, once things lifted a bit, bars were open and meeting people in-person at bars was now an option again—but with an added risk of COVID-19. Cindy explains:

I did use dating apps, but never with like an actual purpose of truly finding anybody. It was more just like an entertainment thing, even during quarantine—there was a moment where I had to quarantine with my roommates, and we had little Tinder-Zoom moments where we just look through Tinder. But it was never serious. Yeah. Never actually out there looking per se, and no hopes of anything.

All interview respondents indicated using dating apps primarily out of boredom and a little boost of confidence. Though they kept the options open of potentially meeting someone serious, they had little hopes in that happening. The pandemic fostered increase in boredom and isolation, so their dating app usage helped mitigate that. This led to a possible increased in dating app usage—though that is implied. Interestingly, dating app usage was only a prevalent theme among the interview participants, rather than the survey participants

Interviewees all primarily valued the feeling of being attractive to someone. This is something that was probably missing for single people during the pandemic. If single people are not using dating apps or online means of talking to people during the isolation of the pandemic, they may crave being perceived by others. As Sarlett said:

I feel like for me personally, and it always has been since I was like 16, it was more about attention. Someone does find me attractive; someone does want to hit that. Right? –

Having a Consistent Partner without Cohabitation

Participants in this category all reported having some sort of consistent romantic or sexual partner during the pandemic whom they did not live with. These relationships varied quite a bit between commitment of relationship (or lack thereof) and length of that relationship. Nearly all the respondents reported being in some sort of committed romantic relationship for over a year. However, 26.09% of participants mentioned starting their romantic or sexual relationship during the pandemic, making it difficult to report any pandemic-related change in the relationship. Over 90% of participants reported online/technological means of communication was the most relied on within their romantic or sexual relationships during the pandemic. This indicates that much of these relationships are mediated online or may be long-distance during the pandemic. This is somewhat consistent with what Castro-Calvo et al. (2018) found in their study.

They found that 82.4% of people used online means of sexual activity existed within the context of a committed relationship. The difference between their findings and mine, is that my participants did not strictly allude to the idea that online communication between partners were for the purpose of sexual activity. The pandemic caused some sort of physical disconnect between partners, correlating to a greater reliance on technology to stay connected. It is also worth noting that among this group of participants, many reported “N/A” for various questions. I will be reporting the statistics that lie outside of that response. In other words, I will be focusing predominantly on participants of which the questions were applicable to, not those who answered “N/A.”

Romantic Desire and Intimacy

Besides those who answered “N/A,” 28.6% of participants who were in a committed, non-cohabitating relationship reported a decrease in romantic intimacy during the pandemic. As one person sums up, “Have not seen him nearly as often so [I] have been missing him, lonely, sad, frustrated.” Another respondent explains, “It [relationship satisfaction] went down gradually as dates became harder at diversifying.” A couple people indicated the opposite, “Entered this relationship because I was around doing online courses instead of [doing courses] in another city like I normally would...Relationship satisfaction has greatly increased!” One person saw some fluctuation as they explain, “I wasn’t able to cuddle with anyone for a year, but now I live closer to one partner so I can again.”

Sexual Desire and Intimacy

60.87% of respondents in a committed but non-cohabitating relationship during the pandemic indicated being sexually active (either in-person or online) with their partner prior to

the pandemic, while 13% reported not being sexually active with them. 26% of participants in this overall category account for people that were not in their current relationship (during the pandemic) prior to the pandemic. There was an increase from 60.87% of respondents being sexually active with their most consistent partner *before* the pandemic, to 73.91% *during* the pandemic. It unknown whether this represents a legitimate increase in sexual activity due to the pandemic, or if this is just not including some of the 26.09% of people that were not in a relationship prior to the pandemic.

Participants in a committed but non-cohabitating relationship also reported their typical means of satisfying themselves sexually prior to the pandemic. Roughly 43% of respondents relied predominantly on solo masturbation, while more specifically, 21.7% relied on that solo masturbation paired with casual hookups (likely due to not being in a committed monogamous relationship before the pandemic). 12.4% reported only utilizing partnered sex prior to the pandemic.

When asked about any changes to frequency of sexual activity impacted by the pandemic, a third of participants reported a decrease in frequency, while only 8.4% indicated an increase or unchanged frequency. The remaining answered “N/A,” some of which felt conflicted answering this question by stating, “My current girlfriend and I didn’t meet until after the pandemic started.” Furthermore, 13.1% of people reported an increase in sexual satisfaction, 17.4% indicated no change, and 21.7% mentioned a decrease in sexual satisfaction during the pandemic, as explained by one person, “[Sexual satisfaction was] challenged a bit by frequency, ability to see each other, [and] effects of chronic stress.” As will later be addressed, it was not uncommon for all respondents of this survey to indicate an increase in stress and its impact on sexual satisfaction and intimacy.

Additionally, likely due to the wide array of people in this category living alone, 34.8% of people experienced no change in frequency of masturbation since the start of the pandemic. Besides participants that reported this question not being applicable to them or having never masturbated (30.4%), 25.1% of people indicated an increase in masturbation frequency. 54.17% of respondents in this section reported no change in opportunity to masturbate since the pandemic, while 25% felt there was more opportunity, and 20.83% experienced less opportunity to do so. Among the majority of people that responded no change in opportunity, it is probable that a large amount of those responses were from respondents that answered “N/A” to the previous question or do not engage in masturbation. Furthermore, of those who had the same level of opportunity, many reported living alone prior to the pandemic and during. Some of the responses from the people that reported an increase include: “Less socializing time,” “Trapped at home, less going on in life,” and “I live alone and could crank it at my leisure. Instead, I play American reed organ instead of pumping my own organ.” As the last quote humorously indicates, just because there is more opportunity, does not mean that opportunity inherently causes increase in actual frequency.

Technology and Sexual Satisfaction

When asked about how the use of technologically-mediated means of sexual satisfaction has changed since the pandemic, of the people that felt this was applicable to them, 21.7% felt that their use of porn increased, while 26.1% saw no difference in their frequency of porn consumption. Among those who saw an increase in porn consumption, one respondent replied, “[My] boyfriend and I exchange a lot more sex and porn related Reddit links now.” Another person wrote, “[I rely on] porn[;] [it] temporarily satisfies, but ultimately makes me feel worse.” Though this person did not necessarily indicate an increase of porn, they did highlight a sense of

reliance and shame around porn consumption, possibly exacerbated by the pandemic. The use of technology between partners was not entirely prevalent, but for those who mentioned using online sexual activities between themselves and their partner, they mention it being as a way to satisfy sexual needs, in which they will exchange sexual content with each other. This corresponds with Waskul's (2014) finding that people would pragmatically use technology to achieve sexual needs within existing relationships. More specifically, when asked only about porn consumption (not including any other online means of sexual satisfaction), 25% of people reported an increase, 20% reported a decrease, and 40% felt it remained the same. Of those who indicated a decrease, a couple of respondents explain, "Decreased. Though I have my own room and could use headphones, I find myself nervous to use porn because there are more people around than usual," and "Decrease, only watched [porn] together with [a] partner (unless pictures/videos taken by [my] partner counts as porn, in which case increased)."

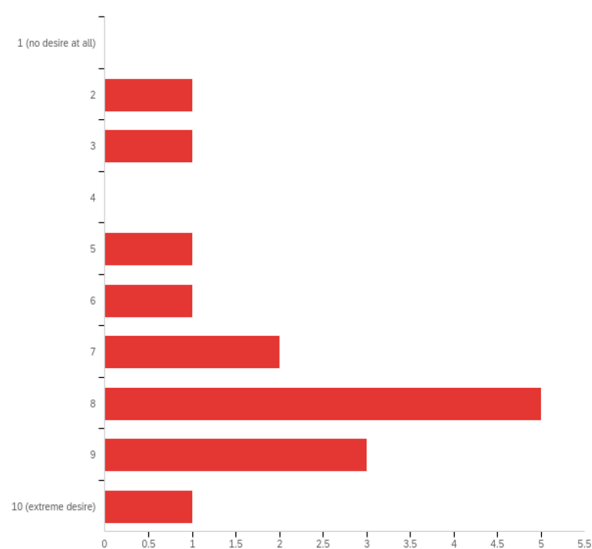
Sexual Desire for Their Consistent Partner

To gauge how satisfaction and desire for one's consistent partner may have been impacted by the pandemic, I asked participants to report the level of sexual desire for their partners that they felt prior to the pandemic and during the pandemic. However, a limitation of this is my neglect to account for people that were not with their current partner prior to the pandemic. Because of this, the data may be skewed if participants that fall into this circumstance (of not being with their current partner before the pandemic) chose to still answer this question, along with the chance of not comparing the data among the exact same group of people (i.e. even for people that did not answer the level of desire for their partner *before* the pandemic because they didn't have a partner, they are still answering the desire of their partner *during* the pandemic, so the two are not being properly compared). Regardless of these limitations, the data

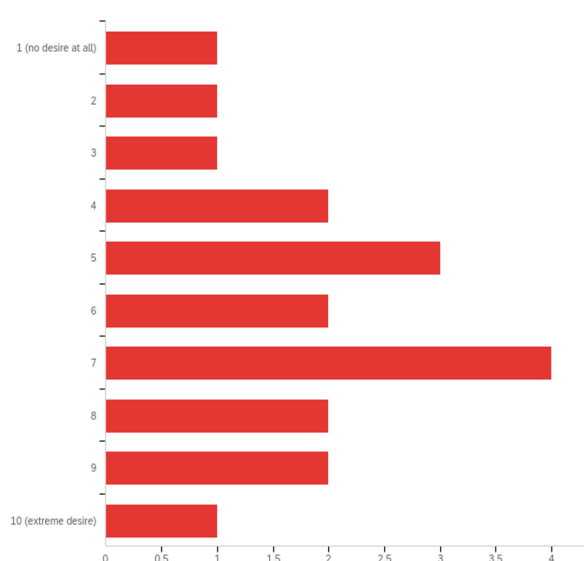
still shows substantial findings of the general transformation of desire for their partners impacted by the pandemic.

From no desire at all (1) to extreme desire (10), 33.33% of respondents report an 8 of a level of sexual desire for their partner prior to the pandemic. Most of the responses reported between a 7 and 9 of sexual desire for their partner before the pandemic. This is contrasted with

Q28 - Before the pandemic, what was your typical level of sexual desire for your most consistent romantic/sexual partner on a scale from 1-10 (1 being no desire at all and 10 being an extreme desire)?



Q29 - During the pandemic, what was your typical level of sexual desire for your most consistent romantic/sexual partner on a scale from 1-10 (1 being no desire at all and 10 being an extreme desire)?



a more sporadic array of ratings for reports of sexual desire for their partner during the pandemic. The most common response was a 7 with 5 being a close second. Responses for level of desire during the pandemic were concentrated a bit lower on the scale compared to their reports of desire before the pandemic. We can attribute this to possibly feeling more distant from their partners due to stay-at-home orders and the risk of being in-person with their partners. However, these reports are not nearly as substantial as the results of these questions for people who have cohabitated with their partners during the pandemic (addressed in the next section).

When asked about whether people in committed relationships who were not cohabitating during the pandemic experienced any desire or thought of cheating on their partner (if they are in a committed monogamous relationship), only 10% reported “yes” and another 10% reported that they were already cheating. 45% of people reported this question not being applicable to them, likely because they were not in a committed monogamous relationship or because they felt uncomfortable with the question. Again, we must keep in mind that the requirement for this set of questions was for participants to have some sort of consistent romantic or sexual partner, committed or otherwise, of whom they do not live with. 35% reported not experiencing an urge to cheat, as put by one respondent, “No, I am satisfied online as I am in-person, and the relationship is about more than sex.” 20% had answers that were inconclusive, such as, “Somewhat so, because we were not having penetrative sex and because of the lack of effort as far as meeting with one another frequently during the pandemic.” A similar response was, “Somewhat. [My] partner had health issues she was refusing to take care of which reduced her libido and how attracted I was to her.”

60% of people in non-cohabitating, committed relationships indicated taking some form of COVID-related precautions before anticipating meeting a potential or committed partner, while 20% indicated not taking cautionary measures. Majority of the people who answered that they did take health precautions reported doing a combination of wearing masks, social distancing beforehand, getting vaccinated, quarantining, and greater attention to hygiene. This was true for all groups of people in my sample. All categories expressed that to some extent, they limited contact with others and limited meeting up with potential or existing partners. Among all groups, answers to questions about COVID-19 precautions did not offer very rich data outside of what was expected and recommended to practice for all of us.

Finally, when giving the participants the opportunity to share anything that has impacted their romantic or sexual intimacy during the pandemic that had not yet been addressed, they actually had a lot to explain that I did not consider. 13.3% explained that weight gain was a factor during the pandemic that got in the way of sexual satisfaction. As one participant replied, “Our parents were home more; we both were experiencing more body insecurity because of weight gain.” Another reiterates, “Partner’s significant weight gain and reduced libido [got in the way of sexual satisfaction.]” An overwhelming percent of people (over 60%) used this question to elaborate on difficulty meeting their partners in person due to travel restrictions, quarantining, long distance, having limited privacy due to family/others being home, and lockdown getting in the way of potential dates. As one participant describes, “Not being able to go to each other’s houses much due to family/roommates being precautionary about the virus.” One person showed that concern over COVID precautions taken by a potential partner deterred her from meeting anyone new: “I am far less willing to meet someone new, feel comfortable being that physically close to them, or trust that they are taking the precautions against Covid that they say they are.” Stress combined with a decrease in confidence also hindered satisfaction as explained here: “Government mandated lockdowns (unable to leave home); impacts of chronic and acute stress— not feeling confident in myself or not feeling as interested.” Worth addressing, one person explained how seeing their partner less frequently ultimately led to the end of their relationship:

Because the norm became that we saw each other much less frequently, it became easy for the bar to lower and lower further. Ultimately, we broke up. I needed more effort from him to come see me at my place, but he did not. Conversely, I became quite busy with work (no doubt in part because of the work-from-home situation leading me to taking fewer breaks and working unpaid overtime). I

stopped prioritizing him and propping up the relationship through my attentiveness, so it collapsed. We remain friends.

As will be uncovered in the next section, there seems to be two common themes among the negative impacts that COVID-19 had on relationships—couples were either seeing each other too much or not nearly enough. In the sentiment above, the participant details how their relationship experienced the latter. It required increased prioritization and effort to keep it afloat, which is likely not uncommon for non-cohabitating couples. At the dawn on the pandemic, we were very unaware of the severity of the virus, so visiting one's partner posed quite the risk and heightened anxiety.

Having a Consistent Cohabiting Partner at Some Point During the Pandemic

The people in this study who had a consistent cohabiting partner during the pandemic were predominantly married or in a long-term monogamous relationship (73%), although some were not monogamous at roughly 7.8%, while 10% indicated having extramarital/affair relations outside of their committed relationships' agreements. Majority of couples' main mode of communication was in-person communication, sometimes paired with texting and calling. 43.71% reported living with other people outside of a romantic/sexual partner, whether that be children, parents, roommates, friends, etc. This category had the highest number of participants with rather colorful responses that offer more in-depth insight to how the pandemic has impacted their romantic and sexual intimacy with their (predominantly) long-term relationships.

Sexual Intimacy Prior to the Pandemic

45% of people in this study who had a consistent cohabiting partner during the pandemic relied predominantly on in-person partnered sexual activity prior to the pandemic, while 30% mentioned a combination of masturbation and in-person activity. Occasionally, participants

would attribute sexual activity to being solely a “natural” and “hormonal” pragmatic act that one does instinctually. As one respondent explained, “My partner would typically approach me. I didn’t care either way. Once in a while [I] would masturbate when I did feel the need to release, but it was more hormonal and mechanical in nature than anything.” Only 10% relied only on masturbation, as one person explains, “[I] was in a completely sexless marriage prior to the pandemic. Masturbation of [my]self in private was [my] main mode of sexual release.” Not only will we see that the pandemic had a negative impact on long-term partners’ sex lives with one another, but there are also respondents that had a relatively non-existent partnered sex life to begin with. 11.6% mentioned reliance on online sexual activity, whether that was their only source of sexual satisfaction or if that was paired with other modes. Throughout this survey, there were a few people who repeatedly discussed extramarital affairs they were having (many online), though it is inconclusive whether those affairs began during the pandemic.

Effects of the Pandemic on Romantic Intimacy

When asked about how romantic intimacy has changed during the pandemic, the most popular response was that it hadn’t been affected much or has stayed relatively the same at 44.4%. Although, 30.2% of people alluded to some sort of decrease in romantic satisfaction with their partners. As several participants wrote:

I became increasingly frustrated with my spouse and sought out additional partners to fulfill my sexual desires.

The pandemic was the death knell for my relationship satisfaction between my husband and I. The affair started before the pandemic really hit, but my interest in

the affair partner skyrocketed and interest in my spouse plummeted during the pandemic.

The relationship ended. Satisfaction decreased dramatically.

Relationship satisfaction was low entering the pandemic. Once the pandemic was letting up somewhat, my satisfaction became very low.

The data here indicates that people who were already in suffering relationships prior to the pandemic experienced more strain as the pandemic emerged, often resulting in finding satisfaction with others outside of the relationship. On the positive end of things, 11.1% reported an increase in satisfaction with responses. One respondent reported, “The pandemic brought us closer together as far as our romantic relationship is concerned” and another simply replied, “It has improved!” Of the 44.4% that saw no change in romantic satisfaction, there were responses that indicated high satisfaction that was not impacted during the pandemic. One respondent confidently replied, “It has stayed rock solid the entire pandemic,” and another wrote “[It] hasn’t changed, been very satisfied before and during.”

Changes to Sexual Activity and Satisfaction During the Pandemic

38.7% of people who had a consistent cohabitating partner during the pandemic reported that frequency of sexual activity with their partner decreased. Some notable responses among this group were, “Sex went from 4-5 times a week to 2-3 times a week. I’m not completely satisfied,” and “Maybe a little decrease because we see each other every day instead of just on weekends. Less pressure to get all the intimacy out during our brief time together,” and “[Lessened] a lot due to kids being home 24/7.” 25.8% of people explained that their sexual frequency with their partner has been unchanged, though one person explained that they began relationships with

other partners in addition to their most consistent/committed partner. They wrote, “Sexual activity with my spouse is unchanged, I went from no romantic partners outside of marriage to two additional partners with frequency [of sexual activity with them] going from none to three times a week.” 14.5% of participants reported an increase in sexual frequency with their partners, one specifically reported having sex one to two more times per week. The remainder of respondents (21%) wrote things that I could not strictly categorize with an increase, decrease, or no change. Many of these people reported that it fluctuated. Many of the respondents that I coded as “other” were people who reported on their activity with their partner along with their activity in their affairs/outside partners. These responses include the following statements such as:

Husband = increased; secondary = much less frequent than originally planned

Less than five times in the last two years, and the last time was at least a year ago.

All initiated by my partner.

Spouse-decreased. Partners-increased

It went from minimal to nonexistent. I started seeking outside partners and have, as a result, increased the frequency from zero to infrequent.

Currently going on 2.5 years of no sex – so the pandemic didn’t change that.

It has stayed the same with my spouse, but a little less frequent with affair partners.

Beyond sexual frequency, participants who had a consistent cohabitating partner during the pandemic also reported how their sexual satisfaction with their partners has changed during the pandemic. The most common response (38.7%) was that satisfaction decreased. Interestingly,

one person noted the increased awareness of illness and contamination playing a role:

“Decreased I guess, because frequency has decreased—this is my fault because I keep rejecting all her advances because I think I’ve developed some contamination OCD and I think I’m dirty all the time.” 32.3% of people wrote that satisfaction has remained the same, while only 5.1% reported an increase in satisfaction. Outside of these responses, there were some responses that I coded as “other,” with responses such as “Opportunities to enjoy masturbation were less with [my] wife and kids around all the time. Since that is the only sexual activity I have, it has a negative impact.” The rest of the outlier responses mentioned themes of satisfaction fluctuation (not necessarily just increase or decreasing, along with responding “N/A.”)

When asked specifically about the impacts that the pandemic may have had on frequency of masturbation, 36.2% reported no impact, 34.5% reported an increase, and 13.8% saw a decreased. Most people did not indicate a reason for their answer, but a few people stated that family being home most of the time reduced the privacy to masturbate. Furthermore, 21.8% reported an increase in pornography consumption, 9.1% saw a decrease, and 29.7% experienced no change. In regard to how the pandemic has impacted opportunity to masturbate, rather than frequency as mentioned above, 42.62% had the same opportunity, 24.59% had more opportunity, and 32.79% reported having less opportunity. Some responses indicating having increased opportunity include many people that found working from to allow them more time to masturbate:

More time at home (working from home means no commute; more time to myself before/after work, leisurely showers, etc.).

I work from home alone, my partner doesn’t.

We both have been working from home since March, 2020 and not traveling so there is more opportunity to masturbate.

For people that mentioned having less opportunity, practically all respondents reported experiencing diminished privacy due to family/spouse being home most of the time as is addressed in these responses:

Child has been in virtual school.

For some types of masturbation, I have a preference to do them while home alone and I haven't had that opportunity very often during the pandemic.

Everyone is home. All. The. Time. Ugh. Privacy is almost nonexistent.

95.16% of people reported being sexually active prior to the pandemic, which decreased to 86.21% during the pandemic. When asked about how they would typically engage in sexual activity with their most consistent partner prior to the pandemic, 59.3% wrote that they primarily relied on in-person partnered sex, while 29.6% reported a combination of in-person sex with sex toys and mutual masturbation. Some of these people also reported use of phone sex, porn, sexting, and discussing fantasies/porn. When asked the same question but during the pandemic, responses stayed relatively the same. Worth noting, there was a slight increase of roughly 2% that began relying predominantly on in-person sexual interaction with their partner during the pandemic. Once person indicated how they specifically rely on online sexual interaction: "Sexting to get one another riled up, video chat masturbation sessions with and without toys, comparing notes on pornography, dom/sub play with others via video chat, etc., etc." Though not generalizable or statistically relevant, this finding does allude to the conclusions that

Castro-Calvo et al. (2018) found in which sexual interactions online are a means of mood management and to “enhance online and offline sexuality” (Castro-Calvo et al. 2018: 504-505).

Use of Technology for Sexual Satisfaction

I asked about any changes to participants’ use of technology for sexual satisfaction both partnered and alone (FaceTime, sexting, chatrooms, porn, etc.). Nearly 40% of people responded that this question did not apply to them. 26.2% of people reported increased usage of technology for sexual purposes, especially to watch porn or engage with partners online. One person responded, “It’s definitely increased. Finding an alternative to using in-person partners was definitely facilitated with tech[nology], which allowed for safer expression during the pandemic.” Some quotes that sum up the common themes of people that saw an increase include: “Porn and sexual use of text and video chats with my committed partner”, “Can spend a bit more time ‘selecting’ porn since I’m not often in a rush”, and “More chatting with secondary [partner], cannot see him and no surveillance by employer.” In more detail, one respondent wrote:

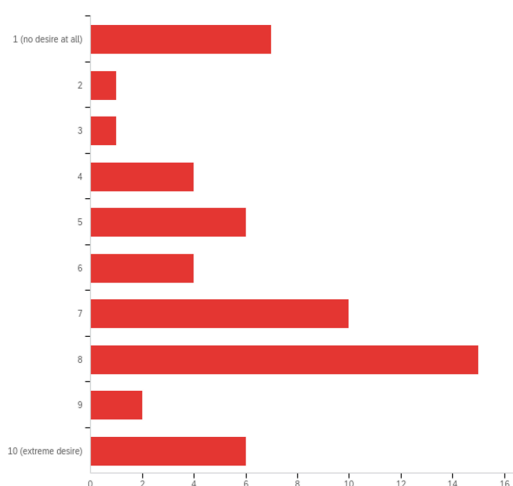
I experimented with an AI chatbot for several weeks. It was general use, but [I] was able to role play romantic encounters and sex. Porn use did not change – minimal. I did end up in what one could call an emotional affair – the first time ever for me in a 20+ year sexless marriage. I feel that it is due to the isolation of COVID.

Changes to Sexual Desire for Their Partners

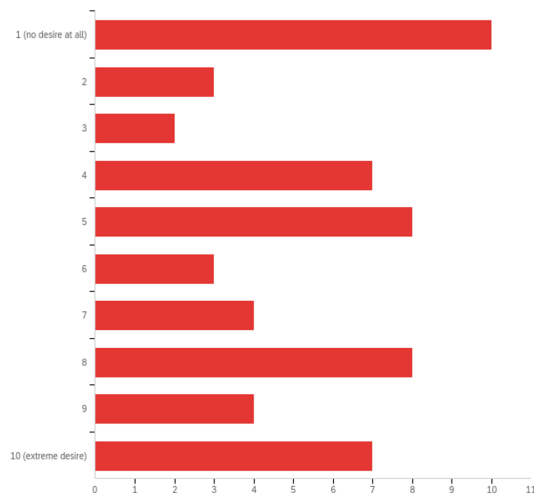
From a scale of 1-10 (1=no desire at all; 10=extreme desire), when asked about their typical level of desire for their most consistent cohabitating partner *before the pandemic*, a rating of 8 was the most popular answer, with 7 following closely behind. Notably, 12.5% rated a 1,

roughly 10% rated a 5, and a little over 10% rated a 10. When asked to rate their level of sexual desire for their partner during the pandemic on the same scale, the trend transitioned downward toward lower ratings. The most common response was a 1 at 17.86%. 5 and 8 at just under 15% each. Next most common at 12.50% each were ratings of 4 and 10. We can see from this data that for this group of participants, the pandemic seemed to have had a general impact on people's sexual desire for their partners as the trend of desire decreased during the pandemic.

Q28 - Before the pandemic, what was your typical level of sexual desire for your most consistent romantic/sexual partner on a scale from 1-10 (1 being no desire at all and 10 being an extreme desire)?



Q29 - During the pandemic, what was your typical level of sexual desire for your most consistent romantic/sexual partner on a scale from 1-10 (1 being no desire at all and 10 being an extreme desire)?



Like participants in this study who were in a committed non-cohabitating relationship during the pandemic, I asked those who were cohabitating if they had an urge/desire to cheat on their committed partner (if in a monogamous relationship) during the pandemic. 27.5% reported “yes,” while 59% reported “no.” Of those who reported “yes,” there were both people who have already been cheating and those who have not cheated but have considered it. Of the former, some responses include, “Long time affair prior to Covid” and “I was already having affairs long before the pandemic, so... (guilty

whistle).” For those who cheated during the pandemic and not prior, some participants wrote:

We’re open, but I cheated during the pandemic

Yes. We became ethically non-monogamous, but it turned into cheating via breaking our agreements.

Yes. I have never cheated or seriously considered cheating in my 20+ year marriage. A few months ago, I inadvertently fell into an online emotional affair with a person on Reddit.

Have cheated, however unlikely the pandemic influenced this since I was already unfulfilled in the relationship.

There were also plenty of people in cohabitating committed relationships during the pandemic that considered cheating or had the desire to cheat during the pandemic but did not follow through. As one respondent claimed, “I considered it, but it’s not something I’d be able to go through with” and another reiterated, “Yep. I know I can get better sex with someone else—be treated better and actually orgasm. Right now, all I see when I look at my SO [significant other] is hate and rage.” Several other participants expressed similar sentiments:

Yes. I think this [the desire to cheat] may be because I am “starved” for interaction with other people given that I have been so isolated.

Yes, I have had the urge to install Grindr and get slutty with anyone on offer, but I haven’t indulged, both due to the pandemic-related reasons, social anxiety reasons, and the amount of guilt such a scumbag move would bring forth in me.

Yes, I felt trapped in my house and in the relationship.

There were a couple respondents who specified that the desire or contemplation to cheat was exacerbated during the pandemic because it seemed to highlight already-existing issues within their relationship. The relative dissatisfaction in relationship and sexual satisfaction being exacerbated by the pandemic (which likely heightened stress) is consistent with Bodenmann et al. (2007) study that suggested that higher stress levels among couples who were relatively dissatisfied in their relationship showed a correlation with less reported sexual activity. The increased desire to cheat was also persistent in Coop Gordon and Mitchell's (2020) study that concluded that the pandemic has caused an increase in daily stress and has caused many couples to constantly be with one another, thus influencing them to grow tired of one another. Two respondents wrote, "Yes. But the desire [to cheat] predated the pandemic and was exacerbated by specific issues in the relationship that predated the pandemic by a few months," and "Yes, being with her all the time has illuminated how inactive our sex life is."

Of the 59% of people in a cohabitating committed relationship during the pandemic that reported not experiencing a desire to cheat, some explanations include:

No desire to cheat. We were both grad students before the pandemic, so it didn't really change our lives much at all in context to our relationship.

No, but she cheated on me, and the relationship ended.

No – while I did feel hurt by the lack of sexual desire/attraction from my partner, I kept my frustrations to myself as his anxiety was fairly severe during the pandemic.

Among respondents who were in a committed cohabitating relationship, majority did not experience the desire to cheat on their partner. Per explanations given by participants, it seems as though much of them experienced strain within their relationship, in which that influenced some to want to cheat and some to not want to cheat. Though this cannot be generalized, a common theme suggests that spending an increased amount of time together at home caused many couples to experience more conflict and often less satisfaction in their romantic and sexual intimacy.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

My goal of this thesis was to understand the impacts that the pandemic had on single people's romantic and sexual satisfaction, non-cohabitating relationships, and cohabitating relationships. I also aimed to understand how people intentionally managed and adapted their intimacy and satisfaction during the pandemic. Though there were some limitations with data collection and the overall validity of the data as mentioned above, I still found some insightful findings through both the survey and interview processes. Though not generalizable, it still gives us some idea of how people have both been impacted by the pandemic, and how they managed that impact.

In this thesis, one of my initial goals was to build conclusions around people's reliance on online means for maintaining, developing, or managing sexual and romantic intimacy. However, this was not a very prevalent theme among the data—both because I did not ask much about it, but also because survey and interview participants did not report much of a reliance. I found that, largely, participants of all three categories were did not report much of a change when it comes to relying on online means to satisfy sexual or romantic intimacy of any kind. There was a slight increase of use of pornography paired with the increase of masturbation, but dating apps and the use of other technologies to meet people online were sparse.

I also sought out to look at age differences along with the impact that heightened pandemic-related stress had on intimacy and satisfaction. I found that living situation paired with relationship status was a more effective way to divide up data and draw conclusions accordingly, regardless of age, of which I will summarize the key findings below.

As we can see from the findings, of the people in my sample people in committed, cohabitating relationships were hit the hardest by the pandemic—contrary to what I initially expected. Overall, I found that single people were not as widely impacted by the pandemic, though they faced increased loneliness and desire for intimacy not as easily or safely obtained through the pandemic. Furthermore, they were slightly impacted by decreased privacy to engage in predominantly solo intimacy, but overall, did not see much of a change between pre-pandemic and during the pandemic. As for people un committed, non-cohabitating relationships, the greatest barrier they faced was increased difficulty meeting in-person with their partners and heightened concern of the risks of meeting with them. Finally, for people in committed, cohabitating relationships, they saw the greatest impact. They experienced heightened conflict with their partners and saw a decrease in both sexual frequency and satisfaction with their partner due to increased isolated time with their partners. It is important to note that a potential reason why I found that people in this category of being in committed, cohabitating relationships were the most impacted could be because this was the largest group of people in my sample at ninety participants. On the other hand, single people had a n=64, with 66% of them identifying as asexual or aromantic.

Single people in this study, both encompassing survey participants and all three of the interview participants saw a relative increase in masturbation with more time at home. 17% of survey respondents and two of the interviewees reported an increase in masturbation. Though 17% may not seem significant, we need to remember that 66% of people reported being asexual and aromantic, and largely did not report utilizing masturbation or saw no change in rates of masturbation. Among single survey participants 37% experienced a at least somewhat of a decrease in romantic satisfaction due to barriers to meeting people in person paired with

concerns around health and safety due to the virus. As mentioned in the limitations and at the start of this chapter, technology was not heavily relied on, and was especially not increasingly relied on during the pandemic among this group. Only 14% reported relying on technology and online means to satisfy their sexual intimacy. Again, this low number may be due to the disproportionate amount of asexual people along with respondents not reporting any increased reliance on technology for sexual means during the pandemic. Slightly more than 16% of single people experienced lessened partnered sexual activity. Privacy to engage in sexual activity not largely impacted as 30% reported. 70% of participants in the single category reported no change in sexual satisfaction due to the pandemic. The already low number of roughly 28% of single people using dating apps prior to the pandemic decreased to roughly 21% during the pandemic. This provides that my prediction that dating app usage out of boredom or loneliness would increase during the pandemic to be incorrect among my sample.

Among people in non-cohabitating, committed relationships, there was more of an impact on satisfaction and frequency of sexual activity, predominantly partnered sexual activity. Though, this group of people were the smallest of my entire sample at 37 participants. Being that many people in this group chose to answer "N/A" for many of the questions on the survey, many of the significant percentages reported may not seem statistically significant, but they were, as they were the common themes found outside of answers that were not entirely useful. Overall, 33% of people reported a decrease in sexual frequency while 21% reported an overall decrease in sexual satisfaction. This group of people were in committed relationships, but did not have as readily access to their partners in person due to stay at home orders and concern over COVID-19. 25% reported an increase in masturbation with more time at home at increased boredom. Some of these participants felt that there was less opportunity to masturbate at 21%, but 54%

reported no change in opportunity, being that their living situation remained the same and they were not living with their partner. 25% reported an increase in opportunity to masturbate with sentiments around having more spare time alone at home. The most notable finding among participants in non-cohabitating, committed relationships is that 29% of them reported a decrease in romantic satisfaction with feeling more isolated by their partner, but many utilized online means to keep in touch with their partner. Lastly, many of these people were not in the relationship that they are in during the pandemic, prior to the pandemic. Because of this, it was difficult to adequately measure how desire for their partner has been changed by the pandemic. However, among the bulk of this category of participants, we can see from the findings that desire for their partner has negatively been affected by the pandemic with less desire to cheat. Though this desire to cheat was not as impacted by that pandemic compared to the desire to cheat among the final group of people – those in committed, cohabitating relationships.

Finally, among people in committed, cohabitating relationships, we saw that they expressed the greatest distress and impact of the pandemic on their intimacy and satisfaction. The most common sentiment from this group on the impacts they faced on sexual frequency, was an overall decrease. This contrasts from what we may have initially predicted at the start of the pandemic. It was often thought that people in cohabitating relationships would face a “baby boom” and have much more sex. Though this may have been the case at the dawn of the pandemic, people in this research expressed it leveling out, decreasing, or not changing much. For those who experienced minimal change, many explained that they were in a “dead bedroom,” or relatively sexless relationship to begin with. Many of the people that reported a decrease in sexual frequency with their partner also disclosed that they saw an increase in frequency with affair partners, or that they sought them out. Nearly 40% of people in this group

reported an explicit decrease in sexual frequency and 71% of people in this group reported either an increase in masturbation or no change since the start of the pandemic with 33% experiencing a decrease in opportunity to masturbate. Most notably, is the stark contrast in people in cohabitating relationships' desire for their partner before the pandemic compared to during, of which a level of 1 (no desire at all) was the most common rating for desire during the pandemic. When looking at the charts in the findings chapter, we can see how the level of desire during the pandemic were more sporadic and concentrated more towards the lower-to-middle ends of the spectrum. Finally, people in this group had a greater desire to cheat compared to the previous section of people, those in non-cohabitating, committed relationships. 28% had the desire, encompassing of those who had already been cheating on their partner before the pandemic, those who started cheating during the pandemic, and those who did not follow through with cheating.

Though my findings are not generalizable, it was still very useful in developing a better understanding of how people of various relationship statuses and living situations were quite differently impacted by the pandemic, yet experienced similar struggles. Regrettably, I did not make any significant findings around use of technology and the ways that it was used to mitigate issues of isolation or to enhance sexual/romantic intimacy. Being that people who use technology or online means to maintain intimacy, likely did so prior to the pandemic, it was not a very prevalent theme mentioned by participants—it was likely that these practices were not largely impacted by the pandemic for my sample. Regardless of the severity of a pandemic-related impact on intimacy, it is evident that it altered satisfaction around intimacy for many of us in some way or another.

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APPENDIX A: QUALTRICS SURVEY QUESTIONS

Demographic and basic questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
4. What is your sexual identity?
5. What is your current romantic relationship status?
6. If you have had a romantic or sexual partner(s) during the COVID-19 pandemic, have you lived with them at any point during the pandemic?
 - a. This does not apply to me - I did not have a romantic or sexual partner during the pandemic.
 - b. No, I never lived with a romantic or sexual partner(s) during the pandemic.
 - During the pandemic, how often on average did/do you see a romantic or sexual partner in-person per week?

 - c. Yes, I lived with a romantic or sexual partner(s) at some point during the pandemic. Please explain how long, when, and any other details you would like to include: _____
7. Who have you lived with during the COVID-19 pandemic? Select all that apply.
 - a. Nobody – I lived alone.
 - b. Romantic/sexual partner
 - c. Friend(s)

- d. Roommate(s)
- e. Parent(s)
- f. Children
- g. Family
- h. Not listed _____

Questions about romance and sexual intimacy if the participant IS/WAS in a romantic relationship during the pandemic:

8. How long have you been in the romantic relationship(s) you were in during the pandemic/still are in?
9. During the pandemic, what was the main mode of communication between you and your partner?
10. Prior to the pandemic, how did you typically satisfy your sexual desires (having in-person sexual activity with a partner, online sexual activity with others, masturbation, etc.)?
11. How has your **relationship satisfaction** with your partner changed during the pandemic?
12. How has your **frequency of sexual activity** with your partner changed during the pandemic?
13. How has your **sexual satisfaction** with your partner changed during the pandemic?
14. How has your **frequency of masturbation** changed during the pandemic?
15. Do you feel you have more, less, or the same level of opportunity to masturbate since the pandemic? Please explain why you chose your answer.
16. How has your **use of online or technological mediated** means to achieve sexual satisfaction (FaceTime, sexting, chatrooms, porn, etc.) changed during the pandemic?

17. Have you been sexually active with your partner **before the COVID-19 pandemic**? If so, roughly how many times a week did you typically engage in sexual activity with your partner before the pandemic?

- How did you typically engage in sexual activity with your partner before the pandemic (sexting, online sexual activity, in-person, with sex toys, watching pornography, etc.)? List all that apply. Please explain.

18. Have you been sexually active with your partner **during the COVID-19 pandemic**? If so, roughly how many times a week did you typically engage in sexual activity with your partner during the pandemic?

- How did you typically engage in sexual activity with your partner during the pandemic (sexting, online sexual activity, in-person, with sex toys, watching pornography, etc.)? List all that apply. Please explain.

19. Before the pandemic, what was your typical level of sexual desire for your partner on a scale from 1-10 (1 being no desire at all and 10 being an extreme desire)?

20. During the pandemic, what was your typical level of sexual desire for your partner on a scale from 1-10 (1 being no desire at all and 10 being an extreme desire)?

21. Have had the urge to cheat on your partner during the pandemic? Explain.

Questions about romance and sexual intimacy if the participant IS NOT in a romantic relationship:

22. Do you desire to engage in romantic intimacy with another person(s)? Explain.

23. Do you desire to engage in sexual intimacy with another person(s)? Explain.

24. How has your **opportunity to engage in sexual activity** (whether alone or with others) changed during the pandemic?
25. How has your **privacy to engage in sexual activity** (masturbation, watching porn, online sexual activity with others, in-person sexual activity with others, etc.) changed during the pandemic?
26. **Before** the start of the pandemic, have you used any dating/hook-up apps?
27. **Since** the start of the pandemic, have you used any dating/hook-up apps?
28. If so, have you met up with any of these people (in-person, online, etc.)?
- Please explain how, and by what means you have you met up with them.
29. During the pandemic did you engage in online or technological sexual activity with another person (FaceTime, sexting, chatrooms, etc.)? Explain.
30. Prior to the pandemic, how did you usually satisfy your sexual desires (having in-person sexual activity with a partner, online sexual activity with others, masturbation, etc.)?
31. Has the pandemic impacted your **romantic satisfaction**? If so, how?
32. Has the pandemic impacted your **sexual satisfaction**? If so, how?
33. Since the pandemic, has your frequency of masturbation increased, decreased, or stayed about the same?
34. Do you feel you have more, less, or the same level of opportunity to masturbate since the pandemic? Please explain why you chose your answer.

Questions about use of technology/online means for romantic sexual satisfaction for people in or out of a relationship:

35. Since the pandemic, has your pornography consumption increased, decreased, or stayed the same? Please explain why you chose your answer.

Questions that are not categorized:

36. During the pandemic, have you taken health precautions prior to anticipated in-person romantic or sexual engagement with a partner? Please explain your answer.

37. Please describe any aspects of the pandemic that may have made **sexual intimacy** challenging that have not been addressed in this survey.

38. Please describe any aspects of the pandemic that may have made **romantic intimacy** challenging that have not been addressed in this survey.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself?
2. What is your gender and sexual identity?
3. Please describe your relationship status during the pandemic.
 - a. (If they had a romantic partner) Are you still in a relationship with that person?
 - b. (If they had/have a romantic partner) Describe your satisfaction of your relationship during the pandemic. Do you believe that the pandemic has impacted your relationship satisfaction with your partner? Please explain your answer.
 - c. (If they had/have a romantic partner) Please describe how you felt about your relationship during the pandemic.
 - d. (If they had/have a romantic partner) What was the greatest challenge you faced with your relationship during the pandemic?
4. Please describe your typical means of satisfying your sexual desires/intimacy (can be alone or with others) **prior to the pandemic.**
 - a. Is this your most preferred way of satisfying your sexual needs/desires? If not, what is?
5. Please describe your typical means of satisfying your sexual desires/intimacy **during the pandemic.**
6. How do you think your frequency/methods of satisfying yourself during the pandemic are different than what is typical for you outside of a pandemic?
7. Do you ever use online or technological means (internet, porn, chatrooms, sexting, sex toys, etc.) to satisfy yourself?
8. On average, how many times a week did you masturbate during the pandemic?

- a. Would you say this is more frequent, less frequent, or about the same frequency to how much you typically masturbated outside of the pandemic?
 - b. Do you feel like there has been any change in privacy to engage in masturbation during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic? Please explain.
9. Has the manner in which you masturbate changed during the pandemic? If yes, how?
10. Have the ways in which you manage sexual intimacy changed since the pandemic?
Please explain.
11. Have you ever taken health precautions prior to an anticipated in-person sexual or intimate engagement with a partner (getting COVID-19 tested, quarantining, etc.)? Please describe what strategies you used.

APPENDIX C: REDDIT SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Hi there! My name is Brooke and I am a second-year graduate student of Sociology at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I obtained my Bachelor's of Science in Sociology as well, and my interests are predominantly in human sexuality. *As a part of my Master's program, I am doing a qualitative study on how COVID-19 has impacted people's romantic and/or sexual intimacy. I am posting on this forum because I am trying to get an array of folks to participate and share their experiences and/or stories in this survey.*

The purpose of this study is to gain rich, in-depth data on how people's romantic and/or sexual intimacy has been impacted by the pandemic. This is a qualitative, predominantly open-ended survey.

As mentioned, I am conducting this study on how people are managing sexual and romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has been approved by the IRB at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Individuals over the age of 18 are invited to participate in my study. The study will consist of a roughly 20-minute-long online survey that will ask you close-ended and open-ended questions about your experiences with sexual and/or romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey is anonymous, but at the end you will be prompted with the opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview if you choose.

This survey contains questions that may make you feel uncomfortable, such as questions about your romantic life and sex life, including partnered, solo, and online sexual activity. Of course, if some questions do not apply to you (which is likely to happen with any survey), simply respond "N/A." You may skip questions you do not want to answer and may quit the survey at any time with no consequences.**

Click the link below to participate in this survey.

IRBNet#: 1764334

Click this link to take the survey: https://mnsu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_29b18sgl3qEnvAa

APPENDIX D: MESSAGE TO REDDIT MODERATORS

Hi there!

My name is Brooke, and I am a graduate student in Minnesota studying Sociology. I was wondering if you all would be comfortable with me posting my survey on how COVID-19 has impacted folks' romantic/sexual intimacy. This survey is completely anonymous.

I will include the post with the link to the survey below so you can check it out. I am aiming to post on various Reddit forms to get a decent array of folks taking the survey.

I really look forward to hearing back from you!

“Graduate Thesis Survey on the Impacts of COVID-19 on Romantic and Sexual Intimacy – 18+ only!

Hi there! My name is Brooke and I am a second-year graduate student of Sociology at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I obtained my Bachelor's of Science in Sociology as well, and my interests are predominantly in human sexuality. *As a part of my Master's program, I am doing a qualitative study on how COVID-19 has impacted people's romantic and/or sexual intimacy. I am posting on this forum because I am trying to get an array of folks to participate and share their experiences and/or stories in this survey.*

The purpose of this study is to gain rich, in-depth data on how people's romantic and/or sexual intimacy has been impacted by the pandemic. This is a qualitative, predominantly open-ended survey.

As mentioned, I am conducting this study on how people are managing sexual and romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has been approved by the IRB at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Individuals over the age of 18 are invited to participate in my study. The study will consist of a roughly 20-minute-long online survey that will ask you

close-ended and open-ended questions about your experiences with sexual and/or romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey is anonymous, but at the end you will be prompted with the opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview if you choose.

This survey contains questions that may make you feel uncomfortable, such as questions about your romantic life and sex life, including partnered, solo, and online sexual activity. Of course, if some questions do not apply to you (which is likely to happen with any survey), simply respond "N/A." You may skip questions you do not want to answer and may quit the survey at any time with no consequences.**

Click the link below to participate in this survey.

IRBNet#: 1764334

Click this link to take the survey: https://mnsu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_29b18sgl3qEnvAa

APPENDIX E: STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT AND AGE

VERIFICATION FOR ONLINE SURVEY

Research Consent Form Sexual Intimacy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Thank you for taking this time to participate in this research. This research is being conducted by Brooke Weinmann, a graduate student under the guidance of Dr. Dennis Waskul at the Department of Sociology and Corrections at Minnesota State University, Mankato. The primary focus of this survey is to understand how people are managing sexual and romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey contains questions that may make you feel uncomfortable, such as questions about your sex life, including partnered, solo, and online sexual activity. You may skip questions you do not want to answer and may quit the survey at any time with no consequences. To quit the survey, simply exit out of the webpage.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to better understand how people have managed sexual and romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Procedures: This study involves online, anonymous surveys with people who have expressed interest in explaining their experiences and strategies of managing sexual and romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. In most cases, the survey will take about 30-60 minutes.

Risks/Benefits: Since your participation in this research is purely voluntary, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to. The risks and benefits are similar to those encountered in day-to-day life. To safeguard your identity and privacy:

*Records of this study will be kept anonymous (your name and identity are in no way tied to your answers/survey) and secured in my password-encrypted computer.

Subject Rights:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study if you don't want to be.
- You have the right to change your mind and quit the survey at any time without giving any reason.
- You have the right to a copy of this consent form to keep.
- You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this consent form.
- This survey is anonymous.

I have read this page.



Questions About This Study or Your Rights as a Research Subject: If you have any questions about this research study, contact Dr. Dennis Waskul at (507)389-5673 or dennis.waskul@mnsu.edu. If you have questions about participants' rights and for research-related injuries, please contact the administrator of the Institutional Review Board, at (507)389-1242. If you have questions or concerns that you would like to direct to the graduate student conducting this research, contact Brooke Weinmann at (507-440-1231) or at brooke.weinmann@mnsu.edu.

If you would like more information about the specific privacy and anonymity risks posed by online surveys, please contact the Minnesota State University, Mankato IT Solutions Center (507-389-6654) and ask to speak to the Information Security Manager.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits.

If you check the box below, it means that you are at least 18 years of age and have read (or have had read to you) the information given in this consent form, and you would like to be a volunteer in this study.

IRBNet ID: 1764334

**I am 18 years of age or older, I have read the information above,
and I would like to participate in this survey.**

APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW

Research Consent Form Sexual Intimacy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

You are being asked to volunteer in a research study on sexual and romantic intimacy in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. You are asked to take part in this study because you have already expressed interest in participating. This research is being conducted by Brooke Weinmann, a graduate student under the guidance of Dr. Dennis Waskul at the Department of Sociology and Corrections at Minnesota State University, Mankato. You may skip questions you do not want to answer and may quit the interview at any time with no consequences. To quit the interview, tell me that you want to quit the interview, and we will quit. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have prior to agreeing to take part in the study.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to better understand how people have managed sexual and romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Procedures: This study involves interviews with people who have expressed interest in further elaborating on their experiences and strategies of managing sexual and romantic intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you choose to participate, I will set up a time with you to meet over Zoom to ask questions and document your responses and stories. With your permission I will digitally record this interview. In most cases, the interview will take about 30-60 minutes.

Risks/Benefits: Since your participation in this research is purely voluntary, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to. The risks and benefits are similar to those encountered in day-to-day life. To safeguard your identity and privacy:

- *Records of this study will be kept private and secured in my password-encrypted computer. Only the researcher and the principal investigator will have access to the records.
- *If I digitally record your story, I will destroy the tape after it has been transcribed (which I anticipate will be within a week of its taping).
- *Your name and all other identifiable information will be omitted from all research records.
- *Disclosure of sexual experiences may risk potential ridicule, unwanted attention, stigma, loss of credibility, etc. The above mentioned safeguards to assure confidentiality, protecting any and all identifiable information about you and your experiences, to assure that these risks are minimal.

Subject Rights:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study if you don't want to be.
- You have the right to change your mind and leave the study at any time without giving any reason.
- Any new information that may make you change your mind about being in this study will be given to you.
- You have a right to a copy of this consent form to keep.
- You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this consent form.

Initial that you have read this page: _____

Questions About This Study or Your Rights as a Research Subject: If you have any questions about this research study, contact Dr. Dennis Waskul at (507)389-5673 or dennis.waskul@mnsu.edu. If you have questions about participants' rights and for research-related injuries, please contact the administrator of the Institutional Review Board, at (507)389-1242. If you have questions or concerns that you would like to direct to the graduate student conducting this research, contact Brooke Weinmann at (507-440-1231) or at brooke.weinmann@mnsu.edu.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits.

If you sign below, it means that you are at least 18 years of age and have read (or have had read to you) the information given in this consent form, and you would like to be a volunteer in this study.

IRBNet ID: 1764334

Subject Name (printed)

Subject Signature

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date