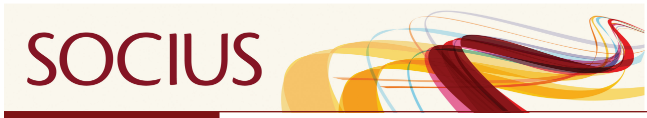
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Love in the Time of COVID-19: The Social Dimensions of Intimate Life under Lockdown

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Abstract

Although popular media across the United States reported that the coronavirus disease 2019 COVID pandemic incited dramatic transformations in personal relationships, identities, and practices, little sociological research examines these developments. What exists elaborates the "how" and "how much" of sex, the frequency of sexual conduct, and changes in the patterning of sexual behavior. In this study of the intimate trajectories of 46 young adults, conducted during the height of U.S. quarantine restrictions in 2020 and early 2021, the authors explore the "whys" of sex. They find that the exogenous force of the pandemic profoundly altered individual relationship trajectories, prompted sexual introspection projects, shifted understandings of sexual risk, and promoted new modes of intimacy. These findings suggest that pandemic life reached deep into subjective self-understandings and ways of relating to others. They also reveal the benefits of foregrounding cultural meanings over behaviors, changes in thoughts over actions, and social processes over individual outcomes.

Keywords

COVID-19, sexuality, relationships, risk, digital sex

It was March 2020, and Molly[1] wasn't looking for love. As the coronavirus pandemic (COVID) shuttered her Connecticut town, Molly focused on caring for the residents of the retirement home where she worked, while preparing to begin a master's program in public health that summer. Molly, a white, straight, cisgender woman who had grown up on the East Coast, was 24 at the time. She was busy and driven. So, when a handsome guy named Sid "slid into her DMs" on Instagram, she was surprised to find herself—within a few weeks—spending almost every night with him. "I feel like because of COVID, we got to know each other on such a deeper level." The relationship progressed quickly. Although it would typically take Molly months to cook dinner for a lover, she cooked for her new boyfriend on one of their very first dates. "Like, you can't go to a restaurant . . . what are you going to do?" They spent long hours together in Molly's home, talking on her sofa and having a lot of sex. They quickly developed a deep emotional intimacy, a friendship, as she described it. Molly felt more open to sexual exploration with Sid than she had with past boyfriends. They were playful; they tried shower sex, kitchen sex, new sexual positions. When Molly was gifted a pair of handmade masks by a friend, they even tried masked sex. And although Molly found the mask suffocating, there was something electric about bringing the pandemic into the bedroom. But it wasn't all lighthearted fun; they each had a critically ill parent, so serious conversations about risk and loss animated their early connection. Molly felt she learned a great deal about Sid in a short time, and about relationships more generally. She said,

[1]All names of participants appearing in this article are pseudonyms.

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"I think I've just come to the fact that I *like* him. And I think, if anything, COVID has just taught me the worth of liking someone, not just loving someone."

Maritza, on the other hand, had been with her husband for nearly a decade when the pandemic began. Though she, like Molly, is a straight cisgender woman, the impact of the pandemic on her life pandemic was markedly different. She was 30 years old when we interviewed her in December 2020, a driven Afro-Latina woman completing a master's in education. She told us that although she had long fantasized about becoming a wife and mother, quarantine quickly shifted both her priorities and her feelings about her relationship. "The pandemic forced [us] to be together in the same fucking apartment . . . all the *fucking* time." Although she characterized her marriage as unhappily "codependent" even before lockdown, their very different work schedules meant that Maritza and her husband spent little actual time together. Suddenly, they were doing everything together in a tiny two-room apartment. Everything, that is, except having sex. The stress of coworking, combined with the shock of constant engagement, began to take its toll. Although Maritza reported her friendships deepening during this time, anchored by frequent Zoom calls, she began detaching from her romantic relationship. Not long before we spoke, she and her husband split up and he moved out. Maritza reported feeling more alive, and more in touch with her sexuality than she had in years. "I play with my boobs . . . I like to look at myself naked in the mirror a lot. . . . Now I'm like horny all the time. . . . In short, I got my sex drive back." Although an initial foray into online dating proved "depressing," Maritza committed to a new vision of her life. She told us that the pandemic made her want to "live life beautifully" and to "be a very free bird."

Molly and Maritza came from different backgrounds and had wildly different romantic histories, but they did have one thing in common: the COVID pandemic prompted major changes to their intimate lives. Each woman underwent a significant transformation, engaged in a process of self-discovery, altered a partnership, and changed her relationship to her sexuality. They weren't alone. By all accounts, the pandemic changed many people's sex lives (Elsesser 2020). Whether "seeking a partner for the end of the world" (Bromwich and Garcia 2020), resorting to "situational sex" with nonromantic friends or roommates (Elsesser 2020), or engaging in more creative solo sex (Drolet 2020), the retreat from a world of sociality into relative isolation prompted fascinating transformations in romantic life.

Core concerns among sociologists in the early days of pandemic research centered both the macro-structural dimensions of this "social crisis"—contagion in megacities, viral spread by mass air travel, health outcomes as mediated by governmental failure and corruption—and their more local effects (Connell 2020). Sociologists explored COVID as a "social disease" (Trout and Kleinman 2020), stratified along predictable social, economic, and racial lines (Maestripieri 2021). Its impacts spanned the domains of public and private life, exposing existing vulnerabilities, while reinforcing and even amplifying current inequalities (Haase 2020).

We, the authors, are a Columbia University sociology professor and six graduate student members of a sociology of sexualities course that met on Zoom during the fall semester of 2020. As we engaged literature on intimate and erotic life while undergoing our own individual relational and erotic reconfigurations, we recognized an urgent and unique opportunity to investigate some of the most micro-interactional parts of pandemic life. We determined that an interview study would be best suited to capture rich, nuanced data about sexual behavior, identity processes, and underlying motivations for intimate decision making. We decided to develop a team project tracing the intimate trajectories of a sample of young adults enrolled in graduate programs in New York City to ascertain how the pandemic and associated school closures affected their relationships, sexual behaviors, and self-understandings.

The first wave of research into the impact of the COVID pandemic on relationships and sexuality revealed differences in the frequency of sexual conduct between those already partnered, and changes in the patterning of sexual behavior among those single or dating (Hensel et al. 2020; Luetke et al. 2020; Karagöz et al. 2021; McKay et al. forthcoming). These studies examine the "how" and "how much" of sex. In this exploratory study, conducted during the height of U.S. quarantine restrictions in 2020 and early 2021, we explored the "whys" of sex: the ways the exogenous force of the pandemic changed individual relationship trajectories, introspection projects, understandings of sexual risk, and ideas about intimacy. We find that although participants focused on or experienced changes in many of the same domains of intimate life, there was significant heterogeneity in what these responses looked like, contingent on factors such as living situation, relationship status, and underlying sexual desires. These findings suggest that pandemic life reached deep into both subjective self-understandings and ways of relating to others. They also reveal the benefits of foregrounding cultural meanings over behaviors, changes in thoughts over actions, and social processes over individual outcomes while investigating post-COVID sexualities.

Pandemic Sociology: From Macro to Micro

Sociologists made quick work of contextualizing pandemic response efforts and meaning-making by individuals. Imbued with a sense of urgency, initial research focused heavily on themes of risk, fear, uncertainty, trust, and globalization (Matthewman and Huppatz 2020; Ward 2020). COVID offered a kind of natural "breaching experiment" (Scambler 2020) where the consequences of systemic inequalities were both revealed and multiplied, most consequentially along lines of race, class, gender, age, and disability (Connell 2020; Goggin and Ellis 2020). In addition to producing substantial

disparities in health outcomes (Magesh et al. 2021; Rozenfeld et al. 2020), social and economic stratification also resulted in vastly different experiences of both structural and local conditions, including government financial relief, digital and in-person labor expectations, parenting and family care, ability to social distance, and access to social support (Bariola and Collins 2021; Sy et al. 2021; van Dorn, Cooney, and Sabin, 2020). Because "contagion is always a social phenomenon" (Lupton 2022), sociologists employed "realist" approaches to causal analysis (Berger and Krumpal 2021), while also attending to the cultural, affective, and relational dimensions of the pandemic (Averett 2020).

Young adults were particularly vulnerable to vocational interruption, uncertainty about future career prospects, and mental stress. Students reported significantly higher levels of anxiety, depression, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder than nonstudent employed persons, particularly at the university level (Kar, Kar, and Kar 2021). Graduate students experienced loss of community support, compromised mentorship dynamics, and additional family stress (Kee 2021). Students balancing graduate training alongside employment were doubly burdened, facing loss of current jobs and uncertainty about future careers (Tsurugano et al. 2021). Educational trajectories shifted quickly and radically, with some students forced to forestall training requiring physical copresence (Thompson 2020), while others were fast tracked to the frontlines of clinical care (Goldberg 2021). Difficulties developing effective transitions to online education (Trout and Alsandor 2020) and a need to develop new modes of training and mentorship that respond to pandemic life (Nash 2021) were common complaints, leading some to abandon school and immediate career plans completely. The transition to adulthood, although heterogenous, appeared catastrophically stalled for many.

COVID and Sexuality: The "How" and "How Much" of Sex

As social life contracted in 2020, both scholars and lay social theorists speculated about its impacts on sexual and intimate life. Heterogenous predictions guided early empirical work on the topic, including the anticipation of a baby boom propelled by increased sex between couples (Bailey, Currie, and Schwandt 2022; Carpenter 2020; Ullah et al. 2020), a decrease in casual sex (Döring 2020), an increase in divorce rates (Dvorak 2020), greater masturbation (Padgett 2020), and higher consumption of pornography and participation in virtual sex (Banerjee and Sathyanarayana Rao 2021; Grubbs et al. 2022; Mestre-Bach, Blycker, and Potenza 2020). Although quarantine measures increased the opportunities for sexual self-exploration for some, it eroded resources essential for sexual health and psychological well-being for vulnerable populations, including women, LGBTQ people, and sex workers (Hall et al. 2020; Platt et al. 2020). This reshuffling of social life, work, play, and relations to others prompted some to suggest the necessity of, and perhaps, opportunity to, "reinvent intimacy" (Lopes et al. 2020).

Research conducted during the pandemic corroborates many of these initial hypotheses, but it also reveals complications, contingencies, and uncertainties about the generalizability of individual findings and the underlying processes at play. Surveys of sexual behavior reported decreases in self-reported desire, sexual frequency, functioning, and the overall quality of romantic partnerships among substantial portions of men and women in the U.S. (Gleason et al. 2021; Hensel et al. 2020; Luetke et al. 2020). Researchers hypothesized an overall increase in stress and depression, loss of privacy, and an overall reduction in quality of life as causal factors (Torres-Cruz, Aznar-Martínez, and Pérez-Testor 2022). Other surveys painted a more inconsistent picture (Bowling et al. 2021). One survey of 1,559 adults revealed that although nearly half of participants reported a decline in sex during the pandemic, one in five respondents reported expanding their sexual repertoires; they were also three times more likely to report improvements in their sex lives (Lehmiller et al. 2021).

On a population level, COVID appeared to usher in a time of "less sex, but more sexual diversity" (Lehmiller et al. 2021:295). Americans reported engaging in novel forms of sexual exploration during lockdown, possibly as a means of coping with stress or as a compensatory strategy to combat social isolation (Gillespie et al. 2021). During lockdown, like most other parts of social life, sex moved online. The Internet played a central role in maintaining intimate and erotic ties to others, by facilitating communication with potential partners and sexual communities (Eleuteri and Terzitta 2021) and access to pornography (Cerdán Martínez, Villa-Gracia, and Deza 2021; Zattoni et al. 2021).

The "Why" of Sex

Whether measuring changes in relationship-anchored sex or examining the ways individuals sought new romantic and erotic ties during lockdown, individual sexual behavior involved a series of emotional and intellectual calculations. The heightened emotional frequency of the moment, combined with a near universal need for interpersonal connection provoked many people to seek out new sexual ties, even in the face of bodily risk (Braksmajer and Cserni 2021). Although analyses of coupled sexuality treated it as part of the holistic universe of domestic life, studies of sex and relationship seeking had a near epidemiological approach, foregrounding sexual risk, and using HIV as a paradigm for thinking about sex during COVID (Eaton and Kalichman 2020; Garcia-Iglesias and Ledin 2021). In some ways, the HIV paradigm was, and is, instructive; those seeking sex outside of the home during quarantine developed "an array of ethically reflexive strategies" (Hakim, Young, and Cummings 2022:294) to negotiate the uncertainty, biological risk, and social risk that comes with physical proximity to others,

similar to the early years of the HIV epidemic. Yet HIV is not truly analogous; it is far more highly stigmatized and more directly tied to sexual behavior. Nonetheless, the "multidirectional memory" of HIV (Catlin 2021) points to the centrality of sexuality during "viral times" of risk, disease, and uncertainty (Garcia-Iglesias, Nagington, and Aggleton 2021). In that sense, discourses that frame sexual behavior only in terms of "rational" and "irrational" decision making (Jackson and Scott 1997) eclipse the wide variety of underlying motivations for pursuing individual sexual projects (Hirsch and Khan 2021), such as achieving pleasure, closeness, social capital, self-actualization, or exploration. Newer responses to sexual risk discourse that privilege "the emotion-risk assemblage" (Lupton 2013) center the fluidity of social ideas about bodies, objects, and sexualities. These more cultural approaches to meaning suggest that COVID management is, often, the management of relationships and intimacies.

As the emergence of a discrete "post-COVID" era seems increasingly improbable, and as ecologies of risk and disease continue to shift globally and locally, it is necessary to develop frameworks for situating sexual action within relations of epidemiological conditions, affective motivations, and concrete institutional practices. COVID intimacies appear distinct from prepandemic relational life in several ways: COVID as an exogenous force shifted the temporality of relationships, occasioning sometimes drastic transformations. The intensification of domestic life produced both internal and interpersonal challenges, but also novel opportunities for introspection. COVID occasioned a shift in cultural frames around sexual risk, dispersing it from the individual and into the collective. And finally, the stark reality of quarantine necessitated the absorption of digital technologies into ever more facets of intimate and relational life. These findings illustrate just how deeply the pandemic saturated erotic life, and some of the unique potentials it revealed.

Table 1. Sample Demographics.

Characteristic	*n*	%
Race and ethnicity[a]		
Arab	1	2
Asian or Pacific Islander	8	17
Black or African American	5	11
Hispanic and Latino	4	9
Native American or Alaskan Native	1	2
White or Caucasian	32	70
Gender[a]		
Cisgender man	13	28
Cisgender woman	31	67
Nonbinary, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming	3	7
Sexuality		
Bisexual or pansexual	7	15
Gay or lesbian	9	20
Queer	1	2
Straight	29	63
Age		
21–24 years	18	39
25–27 years	23	50
28–31 years	5	11
Annual household income		
<$20,000	15	33
$20,000–$49,999	8	17
$50,000–$79,999	8	17
$80,000–$99,999	1	2
$100,000–$200,000	3	7
>$200,000	4	9
Unsure	7	15
Graduate degree program[a]		
Master's degree	35	76
PhD or PsyD	6	13
JD	3	7
MD	3	7

[a]Some respondents chose multiple categories.

Methods

This project emerged from a graduate course on the sociology of sexualities, taught via Zoom during the height of the pandemic. Six members of the course with an interest in qualitative research began a collaborative process of study design, with each student conducting and transcribing interviews, coding data, and contributing to the analysis of the findings. In total, team members conducted interviews with 46 graduate students aged 21 to 31 years enrolled in degree programs in the greater New York City area (see Supplemental Materials for full list of interviewees). Young adult graduate students were selected as the sample population for multiple reasons. Because graduate students were engaged in school, and many, in jobs as well, they navigated major professional disruptions. Second, as young adults, graduate students were more likely to still be actively dating, having sex, or negotiating intimate partnership arrangements. Last, the research team was composed of graduate students, which expedited recruitment via familiar with academic networks and helped establish rapport with respondents through shared student status.

Some interviewees remained in the city during lockdown, whereas others relocated to be closer to family or friends. Respondents included 30 women, 13 men, and 3 people who identified as nonbinary, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming. Sixty-one percent identified themselves as exclusively white, 11 percent as Black or Black/multiracial, 17 percent as Asian Pacific Islander or Asian Pacific Islander/multiracial, 9 percent as Hispanic or Hispanic/multiracial, and 2 percent as Arab. One-third of the respondents (33 percent) reported an annual household income less than $20,000; another third (34 percent) of the sample reported between $20,000 and $80,000; and 18 percent reported making more than this amount, while 15 percent were unsure (see Table 1). Recruitment response

and interview rates were lowest among men and highest among women, which contributed to the larger number of women in the final sample. The final sample also skewed slightly more toward white respondents. Although the research team recruited from a diverse array of New York City institutions and departments, we were ultimately constrained by having zero funding and conducting research during the height of COVID, and we prioritized analytic depth over generalizability.

We recruited participants through the social networks of the graduate student researchers, social science departmental listservs at local colleges and universities, and snowball sampling of initial respondents. Interviews were conducted virtually and audio recorded using Zoom video conferencing software. Interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and covered the respondents' backgrounds, living situations, and social ties prior to COVID; their relationship histories; sexual desires, practices, and interests; and changes to each of these domains in the first 9 to 12 months of the pandemic.

Each interview was transcribed by the graduate student researcher who conducted it and then coded in ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software by two separate researchers to ensure reliability. Although the research team went into the interviews with certain set ideas of what we would be coding for (e.g., concrete changes in sexual desires and behaviors, rationales for behavioral changes, uses of technology to supplement bodily sex), other codes emerged from an inductive approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998) to the actual data garnered. For example, we quickly recognized that COVID ushered in major relationship transformations for a significant number of respondents, and the subsequent analysis of those narratives led to the creations of the "exogenous force" section that follows.

The compressed nature of the data construction and collection period (an academic semester) along with the inclusion criteria for participation limit the generalizability of our findings greatly. For example, approximately 14 percent of the U.S. population older than 25 years possess a graduate or professional degree (Schaeffer 2022). Additionally, very few of our respondents were employed as "essential workers" and thus did not face the same labor expectations or exposure risks as many others did during lockdown. And though there was some diversity in work experience and relationship style (compare, for example, a single student who just graduated college with a married 30-year-old with work experience), our decision to interview diasporically located graduate students with ties to New York City schools yielded a sample characterized by high educational attainment and a life configured around school. For these reasons, our conclusions should be treated as an invitation to widen this kind of in-depth, culturally informed analysis of sexuality to encompass other populations, rather than a set of overarching conclusions about all pandemic intimacies in the United States writ large.

Results

Our interviews revealed four primary shifts in intimate life during the early months of the pandemic. First, COVID acted as an exogenous force on relationship trajectories, hastening the solidifying and dissolving of partnerships. Second, the contraction of the social world into an intensified domestic sphere interrupted daily routines, provoking logistical and emotional challenges for some, and prompting deep introspection about sexual projects for many. Third, the viral nature of COVID occasioned a shift in the way young people understood sexual risk, from a focus on individual-level exposure (self or partner), to a more dispersed construction of risk that considered one's whole social network. Finally, the particular constellation of contracted social opportunities, intense introspection, and omnipresent sexual risk animated new uses of digital technologies to facilitate emotional and erotic life.

COVID as Exogenous Force

The impact of COVID, most particularly quarantine, altered the temporality of relationships in striking ways. Some responded by concretizing more casual relationships, whereas others dissolved relationships they thought would endure. Everyone paused and took stock in some way. More than half of respondents (29 of 45) were in relationships at the beginning of the pandemic. The demands of lockdown accelerated relationship trajectories, provoking some respondents to cohabit and others to end cohabitations. Those in relationship arrangements that remained structurally similar reported greater overall satisfaction, appreciation of partners, and confidence in the durability of the relationship. Respondents whose relationships successfully weathered the pandemic tended to focus on thoughtful domestic efforts made by partners to increase their comfort. They understood certain disadvantages of cohabitation, such as changes in the frequency or temperature of sexual activity, to be situational rather than permanent and balanced by positive changes such as increased intimacy. Those whose relationships fractured reported an intolerance for some of those same small domestic rhythms.

Eight respondents reported that the pandemic accelerated a decision to cohabit with a partner. Most reported that domesticity increased the intimacy of the relationship, but the transitions weren't seamless, and many reported a lull in their sex lives. Lilah, a 26-year-old, straight, white woman, and her fiancée, Rich, had not planned to live together before they got married. In March 2020, however, Rich relocated to his parents' house and Lilah elected to join him there. "It was really sudden, and we wouldn't have done it without the pandemic." Lilah reported fighting with Rich more than before and struggling to adjust to some of his specific habits: "I started getting like kind of neurotic about some of his tendencies. And I was like, 'I don't like the way you chew. I don't like the way you swallow. I don't like the way you blink.'" Lilah quickly

realized that she needed some coping mechanisms for their newfound proximity and loss of privacy. She vowed to stop paying attention to every annoying thing Rich did. Instead, they created small, shared rituals. They devised a calendar; each morning they planned a joint activity, meditating or exercising, and each evening they carved out time to connect. But they also spent a good deal of time apart. Their sex life suffered. The repetitive rhythm of their days and proximity to family were not aphrodisiacs.

> It's hard to kind of keep things exciting when things are so monotonous and the same thing every day. So [our sex life] is a little bit worse, but I'm not too worried about that because I think that's very contextual and based on everything that's happening around us rather than based on like our relationship.

Lilah acknowledged the toll the pandemic took on their relationship but framed it as situational and likely not permanent. So did Lucy, a 26-year-old, straight, white woman, who began cohabitating with her boyfriend David. She reported that although their intimacy deepened, the pandemic had a chilling effect on their erotic life. Although their sex was vibrant and gratifying when they saw one another only on weekends, Lucy found it hard to balance work and romantic life, where both occurred in the same space. "David's place used to be where I hang out, and it was easier to turn off that 'responsibility' meter." She noted, "But now, this is where I have to get my stuff done. You can't, it's not as separated." Lucy's sense that these changes were structural and would abate with the pandemic kept her optimistic about the relationship.

Respondents who felt that quarantine was a positive time for their relationships attended closely to the details of shared domestic life. They noticed small things their partners did to increase their comfort or derived enjoyment from doing small things they thought their partners might appreciate. When Emma, a 26-year-old, straight, Asian American woman moved into her boyfriend Scott's apartment, he endeavored to make the space more visually appealing by buying furniture and plants and decorating the walls. Mei set up the lighting in her apartment the way she knew her boyfriend enjoyed it. Lilah and Rich did yoga together. Jingyi changed her sleep schedule and diet to accommodate her partner's habits and preferences.

Sometimes, very little actually changed about a particular relationship, but COVID provided a chance to appreciate what was already there. Eric, a 30-year-old, straight, white, cisgender man reported feeling grateful for his fiancée's company while weathering the two-time postponement of their wedding ceremony and a final year of law school online. He thought the intensity of pandemic life highlighted the value of their sexual and emotional companionship.

> The sense of intimacy and comfort that I think sex can provide, and just more broadly, like a relationship can provide has been really important. So there's a lot more just confiding about the scariness and just anxiety of the times with your partner and having them like physically close. . . . In a time where people feel so isolated, honestly, [I was] just feeling grateful to have somebody to weather this with.

Teagan, a 27-year-old straight, white woman, felt more secure about the durability of her relationship with Jason than she had prior to quarantine. She said that marrying Jason crossed her mind before, but she'd been unsure how to decide. Now, she said, "I feel like we just survived a really tough situation together, so I've never felt more secure that we can do anything."

COVID wasn't an easy time for anyone, but it was particularly bad for some respondents, exacerbating existing fractures in their relationships. In March 2020, James, a 25-year-old, white, cisgender, gay man found himself trapped in his then boyfriend's Washington, D.C., apartment, prolonging what was supposed to be a spring break visit. Although the relationship was rocky before that trip, things got very bad very fast. "Three weeks of living with him and I was like, 'I hate you,'" James declared. They ended the relationship shortly thereafter. Claudia, a 25-year-old, pansexual, white woman and her boyfriend Franklin moved in together months before the pandemic began. Although they shared an interest in live music and spent time going to concerts and music festivals together, COVID changed everything.

> A lot of our life was like going out and going to shows together. We had a lot of friends who'd throw parties . . . we'd always be at someone's birthday, always at a concert, always at a bar. [Franklin] doesn't even drink, and we were always out just doing things. . . . We're both very like social people.

It wasn't merely the contraction of their life to their shared space that caused struggle. Franklin was also much more anxious about contracting COVID than Claudia. When Claudia made decisions to socialize, like attending a small New Year's Eve gathering in 2020, they decided she would sleep in a separate bedroom. Within months, they went from having sex as often as five times per week to having it rarely and sleeping apart.

COVID changed everyone's domestic rhythms. For some, it changed things dramatically, inspiring new living arrangements or ending old ones. For others, it merely reorganized the rhythm of daily life. Although everyone acknowledged the complexities of sharing both living and working space, couples that attended carefully to domesticity and the comfort of the other partner reported deriving benefits from even the challenging aspects of pandemic life.

Sexual Introspection

The disruption in daily routines, contraction of opportunities for sociality, and the intensification of domestic life led respondents to examine their desires, sexual orientations, and relationships to sexual behavior in general. Those without

regular sex partners reported either considering new erotic interests or possibilities (even if they didn't plan to act on them during the pandemic), or reevaluating the ways they conducted their sex lives prior to lockdown. Although many cohabitating couples reported lower levels of sexual engagement during quarantine, some reported the opposite: not just more sex, but more diverse types of sex, occasioned by more discretionary time with fewer external distractions.

Esther, a 23-year-old white, cisgender, woman quarantining at home with her parents, experienced a sexual awakening of sorts, leading to a major shift in her sexual identity. The unavailability of sexual partners and the libido-deadening quality of living in her childhood bedroom concerned her, and she began exploring sexual topics online, thinking about what turned her on, and what she found pleasurable. She watched pornography, specifically porn centering women's pleasure. She became more curious about women in general, noting that she planned to have sex with a woman once dating felt safer. She wondered if she might be bisexual, and began to experiment with identifying as "bicurious." She credited COVID for producing a paradoxical opportunity for self-exploration. Exploring her desires was "kind of like giving an interest to an otherwise *uninteresting*, very boring, very 'nothing' kind of time."

For other respondents, time for introspection led them not to change their sexual orientations, but to revise their orientations to sex. Ruby, a 24-year-old, mixed-race (Black and white) straight woman, recalled an alcohol-fueled threesome with two strangers early in the pandemic. What seemed light and fun at first became dramatic, when one of the participants got physically ill, making it difficult for Ruby to extract herself from the situation. Over the subsequent months, she spent time thinking about her priorities. By the time of her interview, she considered herself "basically a born-again virgin," committed to avoiding risky behavior.

Couples also used pandemic time to explore new sexual territory together. Anna, a 27-year-old, white, pansexual, genderqueer person, started dating Troy just a month before COVID began. Troy expressed interest in being more submissive during sex, and the new couple began experimenting with power. Sanjida, a 24-year-old, straight, South Asian American woman moved out of her parents' home and into an apartment so that she could spend unlimited and unmonitored time with Chong, her boyfriend of 6 years. Freed from dorm life and family surveillance, they entered a new, more exploratory phase, "We're able to buy sex toys and, you know, dabble in things that we haven't been able to dabble in before. . . . We're trying things that are not the ordinary."

The Dispersion of Sexual Risk

COVID's transmissibility altered discussions of sexual risk in novel and important ways. Respondents balanced a need for proximity to others with concerns about not only their own health, but that of their greater social networks. Individuals chose between abstaining from erotic contact and engaging in a variety of risk mitigation strategies that included information-gathering, group norm generation, moralizing discourse, and surveillance. COVID risk featured much differently in these social processes than in its closest analogous context, sexually transmitted infections. The threat of contracting COVID from sexual activity both transformed and expanded the nature of sexual risk by distributing risk beyond the individual and across the totality of one's *nonsexual* contacts.

Decisions about whether to solicit new sexual contacts were complex, indexing not merely erotic desires, but broader emotional and bodily needs. The simplest answer, for some, was abstention. Some single respondents opted out of navigating sexual exposure altogether. Alex considered dating to be an "unnecessary risk" and decided to abstain entirely. Esther substituted sex toys and porn for partnered sex. Talia and Devin also focused on masturbation to curb the loneliness of isolation. Brian engaged with models on OnlyFans as a proxy for bodily contact. Maritza credited boredom, rather than loneliness, for prompting her to engage in solo sexual explorations. She joked from her Zoom window, "I walk around naked all the time. Or like just in my underwear, like I just won't put on pants. I'm not in pants right now [laugh]."

But most single respondents did assume some COVID risk while engaging sexually with others. As the pandemic wore on, even some of the most stalwartly celibate respondents began to waver. Esther, who had preexisting medical conditions and lived with her aging parents, initially thought in-person pandemic dating was "stupid," imploring single friends to abstain. By the time of her interview in December 2020, however, she said that her increasing loneliness, while not prompting her to date herself, inspired greater empathy for friends who broke down.

Holly, a 22-year-old, straight, white woman described engaging in what she called "strategic risk." She described incorporating what she knew about each person's testing history, exposure levels, and local COVID infection rates, weighing them against her own feelings of desire and comfort. Kevin, a 27-year-old, white, cisgender, gay man accustomed to managing his relation to HIV risk, elaborated,

> I definitely try to make risk mitigation decisions, and that's my mindset and my approach to dating and sex right now . . . and that doesn't mean that, like, I'm closed off to dating and sex. It's just going about it in a way that's a little bit different, and a bit more responsible and conscientious of the implications.

Almost all respondents calibrated their behavior and risk tolerance in an ongoing, evolving process that reflected the shifting landscape of public health guidance and the availability of vaccinations. They developed strategies to gauge potential partners' levels of COVID risk, with varying levels of accuracy—and awkwardness. Some looked stealthily for

clues, and others asked direct questions. Adam, who split his time in the pandemic between New York City and his parents' home in Minnesota, shared, "I don't know. I feel like I've just gotten to a point where it's like, I feel like I can vet people enough through conversation, just like asking questions and stuff, like how safe they're being." Adam was content with "a rough sense" of how seriously other men on Grindr were taking the pandemic; he searched profiles for vaccination status and asked straightforward questions about potential hookups' social exposure. Chris, a 31-year-old, straight, Latino man expressed similar sentiments, shrugging, "Sometimes all you can do is play thigs by ear, try to not put yourself at risk, and hope that the other person is being honest."

Although some respondents analogized asking sexual and nonsexual contacts about COVID exposure, others found discussing exposure in romantic contexts far trickier, as those discussions indexed questions about monogamy. Priya, a 25-year-old, straight, Asian American woman was surprised by the awkwardness of discussing risk with Jin, whom she began dating during the pandemic. "At the beginning," she said, "I didn't really know if I should ask him all these questions about like, 'Oh, how often are you getting tested? Like what else are you doing?'" Priya reported being "stunned" when Jin went in for a hug on the first date. "Like 'What?! What are you doing?'" She knew he was taking public transit, but little more than that. Feeling unsure how to initiate the conversation, Priya instead deferred visiting her parents later that month to avoid putting them at risk.

On their second date, Priya and Jin spoke more earnestly about the hug. Jin offered, "I don't know how to ask you this, and like, it's so awkward, but I wanted to kiss you." By the third date, Priya had built up the courage for her own clunky question.

> "I don't know how to ask this but are you like, seeing other people? I don't care if you like, hang out with your friends or whatever. But like, you kissing other girls . . . like, not very good for either of our health."

Jin laughed and affirmed that he wouldn't date around on the side under normal conditions, but *especially* not in a pandemic. And Priya acknowledged she might not broach the topic of romantic exclusivity so early. But clear communication about both COVID exposure and monogamy relieved them both.

Questions about orientation to COVID were not merely about avoiding exposure. Both single and coupled respondents reported considering shared orientation to risk to be a proxy for shared moral values. For the risk-avoidant, taking COVID seriously signaled selflessness, accountability, or commitment, while being less cautious signaled selfishness, irresponsibility, and untrustworthiness. Orientation to COVID risk might also represent personal politics or scientific literacy. Kevin reported that even after the pandemic, he would only consider dating people who believe in science, doctors, and public health and who don't "buy into absurd conspiracy theories." Respondents in relationships undertook efforts to identify shared norms. Teagan joked, "If one of us is going down, the other one's going down." Some used discussions about risk as opportunities to increase emotional intimacy, describing the ability to trust one another in absentia as a marker of a mature, healthy bond. Partners supported each other around slip-ups and counseled each other on how to make good choices. Molly, who continued to work in a nursing home during COVID, began cohabitating with her new boyfriend, Sid. When Sid wanted to go to a poker night with "the guys," she tried to persuade him to remain home. But she also told Sid she was going to a popular restaurant known for its outdoor dining, later posting an image on Instagram of herself seated indoors. Each made efforts to avoid socializing, and each made deliberate choices they knew would anger the other. Molly relayed these instances with humor and realism: "So it's almost like a double standard on both of us?" she shrugged. But not all couples were as successful in navigating misalignments. Jackie, a 25-year-old, straight, white woman started a relationship with Max at the start of the pandemic. Their first fights centered on travel and social exposure. Jackie, a dedicated dancer who hadn't been to the studio in months, was adamant about returning once they reopened. Max, on the other hand, preferred she wait to go back. Jackie stood her ground, and they fought. She reported feeling uncertain when to push for autonomy and when to acquiesce.

Whether coupled or single, all respondents were embedded in larger social networks. This was where discussions of COVID exposure departed most radically from existing sexual risk frameworks. The COVID risks posed by sexual contact transformed larger social group norms into sexual norms. Some respondents felt that dating and casual sex required either keeping their activity secret from family, friends, or other pod mates, or disclosing intimate details about their sex lives with people they would prefer not to. In group living situations, social networks and families, heightened surveillance of each other's lives, romantic choices, and the relative privilege of sexual and romantic relationships over nonsexual friendships frequently caused conflict.

Anya, a 24-year-old, white, pansexual woman described navigating sexual risk very differently in two different settings. Anya and her brother escaped Manhattan to stay with their uncle and immunocompromised aunt in the suburbs. After a few months on dating apps, Anya hit it off with someone living in New York City and wanted to meet in person. To safeguard her family, she planned to self-quarantine for two weeks after her date. Anya knew she couldn't covertly disappear, so she had to disclose her intention to her pod. "I had to have a conversation with my aunt and uncle about my sex life. *Wild* stuff." Anya first went to her aunt, with whom she had gossiped about her sex life in the past, and then they brought the matter to Anya's uncle, a biologist, for his input:

> So we like literally . . . the three of us sat down and we're talking about my sex life. And at one point my aunt just goes. "We just want you to be having good sex!" And I'm like, "That's really kind, but also, I hate everything about what's happening right now."

When Anya's young cousin walked in a moment later and inquired about their laughter, she was mortified to hear her aunt declare, "Oh, Anya is trying to hook up with somebody." Despite her embarrassment, she considered the conversation to be a "nitty gritty" reality. She joked, "You know things are desperate when you're like, 'Yeah, I'll talk to my aunt and uncle about sex.'"

When Anya returned to the city over the summer, she entered another, even more complex cohabitational dynamic, a university co-op with 10 other people. Anya said her housemates met via Zoom over the summer to establish ground rules: masks in the common areas, no indoor dining, no house parties. In short, "be responsible, but we're not going to police your sexuality. So, like, if you want to hook up with someone, go." Things quickly grew fraught when case numbers in the city began to rise. The group contracted: no indoor unmasked activity with anyone outside the co-op, with minor exceptions.

> I get like, that we had said like, "we're not going to police your sexuality," but then yeah . . . we want people to be having space for emotional connection, but also like, it's just not safe to be doing some of these things right now.

According to Anya, the co-op members were "all very close and [had] no boundaries and [knew] way too much about each other's personal lives," even before COVID. "Everyone knew everything." If someone walked through the door with a partner, everyone would ask how the sex was the following day. But anxieties about infection and the sheer number of people living together required extreme caution and transparency, and even abstention from much-needed intimacy. As one of the spearheads of the restrictions, Anya lamented "Ah, damn it, if only the rules didn't apply to me, but they apply to everyone else!" In one part of Anya's life, she felt able to conavigate sexual intimacy with responsibility toward her larger network. In another setting, that felt impossible. In both contexts, COVID promoted types of disclosure and regulation that were unique.

Although COVID deprived some communities of sex, it also occasioned the formation of new sexual communities. Dahlia, a bisexual, mixed-race (Asian American/white) woman who worked as a waitress in a beach town, described how the local summer restaurant workers became a sexually connected network:

> Everyone was sleeping with everyone that summer, really, because like there was no one else to sleep with. So, it was all the staffs of the restaurants were weirdly interconnected through these crazy sexual networks. And in that way, it didn't matter.

Dahlia reasoned that there was little point in abstaining from sex, when she was just going to work to stand directly beside someone else who made different choices. Having sex with anyone felt like having sex with everyone. But even remaining an observer was risky. Eventually, everyone just threw up their hands, and decided to make the staff community a closed sexual circuit. She reported, "I think we all were sort of like, we might as well just really only sleep with each other all summer and be like a big pod of like, the staff across the island." Dahlia and her peers elected to close their sexual circle, both to mitigate risk and to provide a sphere within which sexual conduct was permissible.

Although some collective norms were managed peaceably, others required a certain degree of surveillance and coercion. Esther's parents surveilled and intruded on her sister's relationship with her boyfriend.

> At first, they weren't allowed to hang out, and then it was like, socially distant they could hang out in the backyard . . . it's just very interesting because that caused a lot of tension in the house [laughing]. And it became so awkward and embarrassing for her because she had to say, y'know, "did you give him a hug? did you give him a kiss?" Stuff like that . . . no privacy there.

Generally, respondents reported that long-term sexual or romantic partners were readily incorporated into each other's pods. However, partners perceived to be high risk were sometimes banned, resulting in conflict. When Kay's boyfriend Sammy moved back in with his parents, the family maintained strict precautions, excluding Kay. Realizing that they wouldn't be able to see each other for the foreseeable future, Kay and Sammy broke up.

Other pods drew distinctions between relationship types, privileging romantic partners above platonic ties. Erica experienced conflict with her roommate after inviting a friend over to visit. Her roommate, who was often in the company of her boyfriend, objected, suggesting that neither of them should be hosting platonic friends in their shared space. She called it a "real double standard," exclaiming with exasperation,

> Does that mean that I should be the one person not allowed to have someone over when you're literally like hooking up with someone? Like if one of you gets COVID, the other person getting COVID, and then we're all getting COVID!

For Erica's roommates having an ongoing sexual partner over was a decision that required no conversation. Seeing her oldest friend after weeks without external socialization, on the other hand, was cause for admonishment.

Telepresent Intimacies

Much like work or school, sexual and intimate life shifted heavily online. Dating apps such as Tinder, Grindr, and Bumble; transactional Web sites such as OnlyFans; and even platforms such as FaceTime and Zoom became pivotal venues

for interpersonal connection between people separated by lockdown. Respondents' comfort levels with digital intimacy varied. Some entered lockdown already comfortable with online dating; others were entering unfamiliar territory in the most unfamiliar of times. Some respondents found pleasure, companionship, or entertainment online; others became disillusioned with what they described as a poor substitute for in-person intimacy. Telepresence, or being online together in real time, eased the isolation of lockdown and augmented it for others. Although everyone agreed that virtual sex and dating were not as satisfying as "the real thing," many thought they were better than nothing. As one respondent exclaimed, "It's the *bare* minimum."

James, a newly single 25-year-old, white, cisgender gay man, began experimenting with dating apps and video chatting with men he met online. He matched with Victor on Hinge, and they began talking on FaceTime for hours at a time, four to five times per week. They met in person two months later and began a relationship. James thought it unlikely that they would have ended up together at any other time, because meeting people at bars, his prepandemic approach to hookups, didn't foster deep connection. He reasoned, "We really only talked because we wanted to talk to each other. . . . It was just super intimate and a really interesting way to meet someone because . . . all I saw were the things that mattered." One night, James and his new lover watched a meteor shower from their respective locations on separate sides of the country. James found online dating romantic; another respondent, Sam found sexually frustrating. Although virtual dating could be meaningful, and Sam said he didn't "*hate* it hate it," he sighed, "I'm just very horny after, like, two months of absolutely nothing but cybersex."

Couples separated by the pandemic used technology to devise creative ways to experience once another. Talia, a 27-year-old, cisgender white, pansexual woman, described a call with her partner one night while she was feeling sick:

> They were like, "hey, so you're resting right now, right?" And I was like, "yeah." And they were like, "well, I'm going to take some extra pillows from my bed and put them in front of me. And you can take the extra pillows from your bed and put them in back of you. And like, let's just kind of imagine." And so, that's intimacy to me! It's not like "oh, I'm fucking you from behind." But it's like, there's this real intimacy.

Talia described this exchange as "real intimacy," a use of digital space to potentiate a form of emotional and even physical connection that she positioned as akin to what they might have felt had they been able to hold one another, instead of pillows.

Brian, a 24-year-old cisgender Black and Latino straight man, abstained from any in-person sex or dating during the height of the pandemic. Instead, he reported, he was "living on the OnlyFans, man." Brian's openness about this practice provoked derision from his uncle and brother, but Brian thought OnlyFans was the most ethical orientation to sex for someone unwilling to risk COVID exposure. It was better, he said, than "stringing another person on" by engaging in erotic chat with women he didn't intend to meet. It was also more ethical than consuming free porn on sites such as Pornhub, where content was often stolen and actors received no compensation for their appearances. Brian saw OnlyFans as a mutually beneficial transaction; he got his erotic needs met, and performers got paid for providing that service. It even offered a path to a form of sexualized sociality, as he began exchanging links to OnlyFans pages with a female friend who was also abstaining from in-person sex. OnlyFans became an avenue through which Brian could relate to others sexually, satisfy his own needs, and keep himself safe.

Telepresent intimacies, although common, are still relatively new. Global lockdown contracted opportunities for in-person connection, making their use feel more urgent in many domains of daily life. Telepresence and other online interactions certainly offered respondents a pragmatic avenue for meeting people without exposing themselves to COVID risk. For some, it also introduced novel routes for erotic and emotional connections that would have been otherwise impossible in the context of pandemic, or that they might not have tried under even prepandemic contexts.

Discussion: COVID Intimacies

Two primary formulations dominate the literature on sex under lockdown. The first paints a depressing portrait of the erosion of erotic life, via decreases in sexual frequency, desire, functioning, and relationship quality. The second acknowledges an overall decline in sex but suggests that for those still having it, COVID might generate an increase in the diversity of sexual behaviors. This focus on the "how" and "how much" of sex complements medicalized frameworks that assess sexual practices quantitatively as a means to combat illness. Indeed, the few studies that analyze the motivations for sexual action foreground bodily risk, even directly analogizing COVID-era sexuality to the early days of the HIV pandemic. Our research suggests that there is much to be learned by shifting our analytic gaze to the "whys" of sex: the ways romantic, erotic, and sexual action are both produced by social forces and guided by a complex emotion-risk assemblage that merges individual level intrapsychic experience with relations to significant others and social institutions. Our findings, which reflect only a narrow slice of early COVID-era life in America, are an invitation to consider four potential impacts of large-scale quarantine on intimate life.

First, we suggest that this massive viral event and the subsequent contraction of the public sphere occasioned an intensification of domestic life that changed the temporality of relationships, and in some cases, their ultimate trajectories. Lockdown forced individuals to explicitly choose both cohabitants and primary intimates, to confront the repercussions of those decisions with others, and to then share the

contracted social world with those they selected. This accelerated commitment in some cases, dissolution in others, and introspection in many. Whatever their relationship status, most respondents reported thinking more deeply than before about their personal, relational, and sexual choices. Many reported trying out new sexual ideas, identities, and practices, or thinking carefully about their sexual projects in general.

COVID's transmissibility also transformed sexual risk from a dyadic to a collective construction. Intimate networks, or "pods" navigated the contingencies of infection rates and differences in risk tolerance, legislating social and sexual contact. Perhaps most interesting and surprising to the researchers, respondents reported a new way of contemplating sexual risk. They described a fluid, negotiated, and ongoing process of balancing their needs for physical companionship with risk, not merely to their own bodily health, but to the health of everyone in their social network. This more diffuse sexual risk, although appearing analogous to previous viral events (HIV/AIDS primarily), encompassed webs of social relations not often associated with sexual risk taking, like the health of aging parents, requiring new kids of intergenerational conversations about sexual life.

Because COVID traveled indiscriminately through both sexual and nonsexual contacts, many people found themselves negotiating their personal sexual choices with friends and family in ways unthinkable before the pandemic. Some respondents railed against having their erotic lives become the topic of conversation, surveillance, and regulation. Others used questions about risk aversion to assess both moral and emotional compatibility. These conversations proved essential to anyone navigating a shared sexual or domestic life, and they sometimes transformed relationships. They could also be very difficult, prompting some to abstain from romantic and sexual life altogether. For several respondents, maintaining sexual and romantic lives depended, like everything else, on the creative use of digital technologies, which yielded experiences that ranged from the woefully unsatisfying to the deeply intimate and sustaining.

Although some experiences of sexuality remain unique to lockdown, respondents underwent changes that are likely to persist into the future. The pandemic acted as a crucial turning point wherein old relationships were broken, and new relationships were forged. Digital technologies and telepresent intimacies grew in popularity, and the self-discoveries many people unearthed through sexual introspection cannot be undone.

Thinking less about sex as a discrete and measurable event and thinking instead of "COVID intimacies" as part of larger life projects produces unique, generative opportunities to examine the reasons underlying some of the phenomena reported in other studies. Perhaps our intellectual perspective was itself animated by our individual experiences of early-pandemic isolation. Our brief, six-week Zoom class prompted a months-long engagement, dozens of digital conversations, new remote collaborations, and much introspection. It was clear to us from the start that lockdown heightened the import of intimate life in new ways. Moving forward into "the long pandemic," we encourage researchers to attend to a broader range of populations than our sample targets, and to also consider the centrality of sexuality in making lives worth living in the face of risk, uncertainty, and disease.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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