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## Exploring How COVID-19 Impacts Relationship Dynamics Among Cohabiting Heterosexual and Female Same-Sex Couples

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science degree in Health and Rehabilitation Sciences

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study investigates the experiences of cohabitating heterosexual (n=10) and female same-sex couples (n=8) during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores how these couples utilized dyadic coping and relational resilience to manage pandemic-related stressors and how their gender identities influenced their responses. Employing a phenomenological approach informed by feminist, queer, and dyadic coping theories, the study reveals that couples strengthened their bonds during the pandemic through intentional communication and novel activities. The findings of the study also highlight that societal perceptions of gender roles continue to exert pressure on individuals, but female same-sex couples demonstrated greater adaptability by challenging these norms and fostering relational resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings offer valuable insights for couples and marital therapy practices across diverse populations and have implications for public health guidelines. Additionally, this research addresses knowledge gaps regarding the impact of COVID-19 quarantines on cohabitating couples' experiences.

Keywords: COVID-19, quarantine, sexual minority, gender identity, heterosexual, female same-sex, romantic relationship, cohabitation, dyadic coping, relational resilience

## **Summary for Lay Audience**

Every aspect of life has been altered by COVID-19 and government-mandated stay-at-home orders, including the dynamics of romantic cohabiting couples' relationships. This study examined the use of coping strategies that were employed by couples as a unit, how their resilience as a couple was impacted, and how their gender and sexual identities played a role in these experiences. Data for this study was collected through 30-60 minute interviews with ten heterosexual couples and eight female same-sex couples. The study findings offered a variety of cohabiting experiences, strategies for coping with stress as a team, reflections on gratitude surrounding the lockdown, an exploration of gender roles, and a focus on the positive and negative experiences of female same-sex couples. The majority of currently conducted research focuses solely on heterosexual relationships, whereas female same-sex couples' experiences have gotten comparatively less attention. Given the rise in same-sex partnerships both in Canada and abroad, it is imperative to acknowledge this gap in order to ensure that sexuality research is both inclusive and representative. This research gap is addressed by our study, which focuses on heterosexual and female same-sex partnerships, to better understand how gender and relationship dynamics impact the coping strategies adopted by these couple groups to cope with stressors brought on by COVID-19. The findings are expected to offer fresh insights into how COVID-19 affects two different types of romantic relationships. These findings may enhance the development of couples and marriage counselling practises among heterosexual and same-sex populations. Future sexual policies and practises in relation to medical emergencies may also be informed by the study's findings.

## **Acknowledgements**

Early on in my master's career, I consciously made the decision to reframe my thinking and look at this experience as something I "got to do" rather than "had to do". Undertaking a post-graduate degree and facilitating an independent thesis project was no easy feat but it is by far one of the most rewarding and growth-inducing events of my life. I hold eternal gratitude for the following people listed, as this achievement would have been impossible without their guidance, encouragement, and support.

I entered my program with what I thought was a healthy dose of imposter syndrome. I, like many of my peers, often grappled with the value of my study and my ability to accomplish a project of this magnitude. To my supervisor Dr. Treena Orchard, thank you for allowing me the space to grow and hone in on my skills. Thank you for encouraging me to believe in the strength of my idea and my ability to make my vision come to life. I place great value on the conversations we had and the depth to which we got to know one another. Many thanks to my committee members Dr. Shauna Burke and Dr. Marnie Wedlake for your kind and constructive words of encouragement, the faith you had in my project, and the time you offered to connect and support. Halfway through my first year I suffered a moderately severe injury that resulted in surgery and months of physiotherapy. I want to express gratitude for all your unwavering support and understanding during that difficult time. Your empathy and compassion was incredibly reassuring and allowed me to prioritize my health without feelings of guilt and shame.

Outside of the academic circle, I want to thank my family for their unconditional support. Mom, Dad, and Grandma, thank you for letting me discover myself throughout this journey, giving me space to come into my own, and ensuring that I never felt alone in moments of hardship. Thank you for reminding me to prioritize my wellness and avoid burn out. To my younger brother, thank you for serving as the best source of entertainment during my breaks from school and for reminding me that life does not have to be so serious. You are all so special to me and I hope I have made you proud.

Thank you to my friends back home and the wonderful folks I met in London. Thank you for being patient with me when I took far too long to reply, had to vent, or needed to talk through my ideas during data analysis time. You challenged my thinking in so many ways and I feel lucky to have shared this journey with you all.

Finally, a huge thank you to the brilliant and wonderful couples in my study. Your participation made my project what it is, and I will forever cherish the conversations we shared. It was a true pleasure and honour to get to know each and every one of you, and get an invite into your world.

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# Chapter 1

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 – Introduction of Thesis

Coronavirus disease emerged in 2019 (COVID-19) and is a respiratory infectious illness caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Jiménez et al., 2020; Koh et al., 2020; Mari et al., 2020). In the early stages, containment strategies for COVID-19 relied on the ability to regulate viral transmission using non-pharmaceutical treatments in the absence of available effective medicines or vaccinations (Koh et al., 2020; Mari et al., 2020; Shafer et al., 2020). During this stressful time, physical separation measures were enacted by governments all around the world, with varying degrees of rigour and timeliness (Jiménez et al., 2020; Koh et al., 2020; Shafer et al., 2020). School and workplace closures, cancellation of public events, prohibitions on large gatherings, public transportation closures, stay-at-home orders, internal mobility restrictions, and foreign travel controls were among the government-mandated measures put in place (Jiménez et al., 2020; Koh et al., 2020; Shafer et al., 2020). In a 2020 study conducted in Spain on the psychological impact of quarantining, fear was indicated in over 20% of the surveyed population, with 18% admitting that they experienced despair, and 10% experienced guilt, with a high incidence rate of anxiety, stress, melancholy, and low mood (Jiménez et al., 2020). Further, women and sexual minorities have been shown to experience more severe psychological impacts and lower residual mental health outcomes in response to COVID-19 restrictions due to institutional constraints including prejudice, exclusion, assault, and harassment as well as a smaller amount of familial and platonic support systems (Abreu, 2021; Jiménez et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020).

The emergence of COVID-19 and government-mandated stay-at-home orders have impacted every facet of life, including relationship dynamics and overall well-being among cohabitating romantic couples whose time together dramatically increased during the pandemic (Chen & van Ours, 2018; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Shafer et al., 2020). When taking into consideration the effects resulting from the advent of COVID-19 and government-mandated stay-at-home orders on couples' mental health and increased time spent together, the junction of shifting relationship dynamics and the growing environment of cohabitation grows especially evident. In the last several decades, the number of unmarried couples living together in intimate unions in the United States has risen dramatically, from 3.2 million in 1990 to 7.5 million heterosexual couples living together in 2010 (Sassler & Miller, 2017). This figure is only expected to rise as an increasing number of young people are choosing to live with their romantic partner without committing to marriage, resulting in what Sassler and Miller (2017) refer to as a "cohabitation nation." However, important sexual and gender disparities between unique couple pairings regarding the ways that romance emerges and other relationship dynamics are often glossed over in discussions of this new normal.

Relationship dynamics refer to a couple's sense of comfort, security, support, and sexual pleasure. These factors are important sources of mental and physical health, and they also help to stabilize as well as enhance the relationship as a whole (Chen & van Ours, 2018; Mari et al., 2020; Malouff et al., 2015; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Verger & Duymedjian, 2020). At this point in the pandemic, research has demonstrated that COVID-19 complicates relationship dynamics and that pre-existing vulnerabilities such as social class, minority status, and compromised emotional health directly impact relationship structure and functioning (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). However, additional data are needed to better understand how things like reduced social activities,

occupational shifts, and prolonged lengths of time living together under the uniquely challenging conditions of the pandemic have impacted relationship functioning, dyadic coping and support strategies, and relational resilience among different groups of cohabitating romantic couples (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

Given the extensive focus on heterosexual relationships in pandemic research to date, exploring the impact of COVID-19 on queer and/or same-sex relationships is vital. In our increasingly intersectional climate, considering the range of variability of relationship structures is essential to ensuring that our research is not only inclusive, but that it is also representative of the diversity of human experience. The insights and perspectives of cohabitating same-sex women during COVID-19, in particular (Peterson et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2020), have received little scholarly attention. This is an important gap to fill as it has been shown that early trauma exposure during COVID-19 among sexual and gender minority individuals contributes to increased risk of mental health challenges and an increased burden of poor mental health in these demographics (Abreu, 2021; Chen & van Ours, 2018; Peterson et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2020). This study is designed to address this gap by including and examining the experiences of two sets of participant couples, namely heterosexual and female same-sex couples.

## **1.2 – Research Rationale, Aims and Questions**

COVID-19 has introduced unforeseen changes to the conditions of life and relationship dynamics among romantic dyads and learning how different kinds of couples develop dyadic coping strategies, including participating in new or arousing activities (e.g. taking a road trip to a new destination, exploring sexual fantasies), will reveal important findings about how couples respond

to conditions of profound stress and how gender impacts these responses (Mari et al., 2020; Muise et al., 2019; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

My study seeks to address these pressing research gaps by exploring how heterosexual and female same-sex cohabitating couples navigate COVID-induced stressors, including dyadic coping strategies. This unique focus will shed much needed light on how gender and relationship dynamics impact the ways that couples navigate COVID-induced relationship stressors. The following research questions are designed to facilitate the collection of quality data that will enable the principal investigator to meet these study aims:

1. What kinds of relational resilience and dyadic coping strategies are cohabitating heterosexual and female same-sex couples using to mitigate COVID-induced stressors?
2. How are these relational resilience and dyadic coping strategies impacted by the couples' uniquely gendered relationship dynamics?

### **1.3 – Terminology**

It is important to provide clear definitions of some of the key terms related to this study, including gender, relational resilience, and dyadic coping.

#### **1.3.1 – Gender**

Haslanger (2000) defined gender as a set of culturally and socially produced modes of being that are linked to an individual's sense of self and position within society. Gender also corresponds to the socioeconomic and tangible practises that people adopt to express who they are or their identity along the increasingly diverse spectrum that has developed to include the variety of ways

that people wish to identify, including but not limited to, identifying as a woman, man, non-binary, or trans individual (Butler, 2009; Connell, 2009; Haslanger, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Haslanger (2000) further suggests that gender groups are determined by the manner in which one is socially positioned, which depends on factors like how they are perceived by others, how they are treated within professional and social contexts, and how their life is organised on a societal, constitutional, and monetary basis (Connell, 2009; Haslanger, 2000). In this understanding of gender, women are traditionally socially situated as inferior to their male counterparts, in the context of socioeconomic inequality and oppression (Haslanger, 2000). In recent years, power dynamics, patriarchy, and the ways that women resist many of the oppressive ways their gender is managed and policed have been seen as strides away from Haslanger's more traditional view on gender. According to queer theorist Judith Butler (2009), gender, in the context of queer and feminist theory, is found to be fluid, performative, and shifting away from heteronormative ideologies.

### **1.3.2 – Relational Resilience and Dyadic Coping**

Relational resilience has been conceptualized by Jordan (2005) as a “movement toward mutually empowering, growth-fostering connections in the face of adverse conditions, traumatic experiences, and alienating social-cultural pressures” (p. 83). In other words, it refers to a couple's capacity for connection and endurance in the face of disconnection (Afifi et al., 2016; Jordan, 2005). The foundations of relational resilience are shared empathy, empowerment, and the cultivation of fortitude (Jordan, 2005). As outlined by Afifi and colleagues (2016), one way to achieve relational resilience is through the use of communal coping, also referred to as dyadic coping. Dyadic coping has been defined as a collaborative effort towards stress management

wherein dyads, in this case romantic partners, work together to overcome stressful events by pooling their resources, using effective communication strategies, and problem-solving in an interpersonal rather than individualistic context (Afifi et al., 2016; Berg et al., 2008; Mari et al., 2020).

## **1.4 – Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis is comprised of six chapters, starting with the present introduction and opening discussion of romantic cohabitating relationships during COVID-19.

### *Chapter Two:*

The results of the scoping review and empirical data pertaining to the experiences of heterosexual and female same-sex couples during lockdown, as well as the use of dyadic coping strategies within intimate relationships, will be provided. Literature pertaining to relational resilience and female same-sex dynamics will also be reviewed in this scoping review. The search strategy and technique used for this review, which adhered to the PRISMA extension for scoping review criteria released by Tricco et al. (2018), will further be discussed in this chapter.

### *Chapter Three:*

The methodology that guided this study and the precise techniques employed to gather and analyse my data are both covered in detail in this chapter. I start by outlining my ontological and epistemological positions within the feminist constructivist paradigm before describing how this study was designed using a thematic analysis technique. This is followed by an explanation of how I conducted my research and practiced reflexivity in the process. After that, a summary of the study's design is given, along with details on the sampling and study sites, data collection



techniques, and data analysis procedures. I also address other factors, such as the quality standards and ethical issues during the research process.

#### *Chapter Four:*

This first findings chapter features research data pertaining to my participants' interviews in relation to cohabitation dynamics throughout COVID-19, and the use of dyadic coping and relational resilience in stress mitigation. This chapter is organized into four sections that are organized according to the most salient themes raised during the interviews that pertain to the themes of COVID-19 as a catalyst, cohabitation in quarantine, dyadic coping, and relational resilience. The first theme, COVID-19 as a catalyst, is presented in four subsections which focus on how COVID-19 impacted couples' relationship trajectories, enhanced their level of familiarity, created shared stressors for the couples to cope with, and highlighted existing dysfunctions within the relationship. The second theme discusses the couples' specific experience of cohabitating in quarantine, and how adaptability as well as additional bedroom space played a role in improving that experience. The third theme is centred on the couples' engagement in dyadic coping, split into four subsections. Respectively, these sections, as outlined by the study participants, focus on the importance of intentionality, effective communication, shared physical activity, and commitment to novelty in the form of shared novel and self-expanding activities. The last theme focuses on relational resilience outcomes, specifically in the form of an increased sense of commitment to the relationship, and positive post-COVID takeaways and reflections.

#### *Chapter Five:*

The second findings chapter features data about gender, specifically gender roles among both sets of couples and female same-sex experiences of exclusion within the context of COVID-19. The first theme explores the gendered messages and expectations that men and women receive in the

context of their relationship, as well as the idea of gender expression and how the women in this study express their femininity with shifting understandings of what it means to be a woman. The second theme focuses on the specific female same-sex experience during COVID-19 and beyond. This includes discussion of external fetishization, experiences of discrimination, a developed sense of creativity and adaptability among female same-sex couples, and the inherent level of comfort and understanding that ensues as a result of these shared experiences of exclusion.

#### *Chapter Six:*

The most important findings that came out of this investigation are discussed in this concluding chapter. These results are examined in relation to previous research on romantic relationships during COVID-19, and the unique perspectives gleaned from this study are also presented. The limitations of this project are then discussed in the paragraph that follows. Directions for future research are offered, along with recommendations for couples counselling and sexual policies and practises related to public health emergencies moving forward, based on the study's findings. The significance of this research in regard to the relational resilience of heterosexual and female same-sex couples, and the effect of dyadic coping on relational health is then discussed in this chapter's conclusion.

## **Chapter 2**

### **2 Literature Review**

#### **2.1 – Introduction**

In accordance with the study's research questions and aims, this chapter presents an in-depth review of the academic literature that supports my qualitative investigation of the impact that

COVID-19 had on romantic cohabiting relationships, the use of dyadic coping and relational resilience, as well as the role of gender on relationship dynamics. When I was writing my prospectus in June 2022, I conducted a scoping literature review that contributed to parts this review. I chose a scoping review as my aim was to investigate a broad spectrum of literature to comprehend the scope of the issue and discover clear gaps, which will be discussed in the conclusion. I start by outlining the review technique, which includes the eligibility requirements, search plan, and selection processes. The literature review's thematic findings are then presented, followed by a conclusion that offers a final overview of the most prominent themes. The examined literature includes qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research in diverse fields such as psychology, psychiatry, health studies, sociology, and women's studies.

## **2.2 – Literature Review Methodology**

### **2.2.1 – Eligibility Criteria**

The inclusion criteria used for my searches comprised following topics: COVID-19's impact on cohabiting romantic relationships, the influence of dyadic on relationship dynamics; the general use of relational resilience or dyadic coping strategies in cohabiting couples; dyadic coping strategies used during COVID-19; COVID's impact on the LGBTQ+ community; and differences in the use of dyadic coping or relational resilience strategies among different gender groups, or female same-sex relationship dynamics. These topics allowed me to uncover the current literature that lends towards answering my research questions and identify gaps. Articles were specifically chosen if their coverage included dyadic coping methods used during the COVID-19 epidemic, as well as how female same-sex couples used these methods. Exclusion criteria included articles where the primary group studied was non-cohabiting couples or families with children. If

the data centred mainly on the negative impacts of COVID on intimate relationships, if it addressed coping or resilience techniques outside of a relational or dyadic context, or if it focused on topics beyond the scope of this research, such as intimate partner violence, the article was not included.

### **2.2.2 – Information Sources and Search Strategy**

For my proposal and ongoing study, I explored databases like Scopus, Google Scholar, PsycINFO (ProQuest), and LGBTQ+ Source to find relevant literature. COVID-19, intimate partner, romantic relationship, cohabitation, LGBTQ+, lesbian, same-sex relationship, resilien\* strateg\*, coping strateg\*, relational resilience, and dyadic coping were among the key phrases used in the search, limiting the search to articles written in English. These key words and phrases were selected to allow for a broad yet concise set of search results, that adhered to the topic but permitted flexibility in researcher communication styles. The AND and OR Boolean operators were used to combine the important terms. Due to the lack of research specifically about relational resilience among cohabiting couples during COVID-19, particularly with regard to female same-sex couples, there were no constraints on the publications' dates. The databases yielded approximately 160 papers based on these key terms, with research done all over the world, making it global in scope. The titles and abstracts of these publications were reviewed for relevance to dyadic coping and relational resilience discourse among cohabiting romantic couples during COVID-19, as well as for inclusion and exclusion criteria. There were 23 articles and books left to synthesise and uncover emergent themes from, once the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Data obtained from the search results and limitations in this field of study was incorporated in the review to be summarised.

## **2.3 – Literature Review Results**

### **2.3.1 – Dyadic Coping and Relational Resilience**

Using an open-ended online questionnaire and subsequent coding analysis, Malouff and colleagues (2015) examined the use of exciting dyadic activities and relationship-maintaining activities on relationship quality and satisfaction. Specifically, they found that effective communication patterns, engagement in joint novel activities, and maintenance of autonomy within the relationship increased overall relationship satisfaction (Malouff et al., 2015), consistent with the earlier ideas presented by Perel (2006) and Muise (2019). Building on self-expansion theory, Verger and Duymedjian (2020) developed a novel theoretical framework to examine the effects of romantic, or dyadic, creativity on well-being. Using a mixed-methods approach, they found that dyadic creativity is instrumental in promoting relationship flourishing and individual well-being (Verger & Duymedjian, 2020). This framework claims that "homeodynamic bifurcation," or the preservation of each partner's identity, may facilitate the co-construction of innovative and meaningful experiences that stimulate self-expansion within the dyad (Verger & Duymedjian, 2020, p. 36). Thus far, it seems the most impactful processes in relationship strengthening and maintenance are related to engagement in novel activities, having effective communication, and maintaining a sense of self.

To provide context, an older study done by Levesque and colleagues (2014) was examined for its findings about specific dyadic coping processes that have contributed to increased levels of relationship satisfaction in times of distress. They found that perspective-taking and empathic sensitivity considerably improved dyadic coping strategies in both men and women (Levesque et al., 2014). This implies that the capacity to comprehend and partake in a partner's emotional

experience is connected to the individual's ability to vocalize their own stress (Levesque et al., 2014). In other words, dyadic empathy helps people deal with difficult conditions.

Shifting the focus to self-expanding activities and dyadic creativity, the following literature was examined and included in this review to elucidate the importance of keeping excitement alive in long-term relationships, specifically in times of monotony or distress, both of which were experienced by cohabiting couples throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Eleuteri et al., 2022; Mari et al., 2020). Quoted from Esther Perel's *Mating in captivity: Reconciling the erotic and the domestic* (2006), "We all share a fundamental need for security, which propels us toward committed relationships in the first place; but we have an equally strong need for adventure and excitement" (p. viii). Throughout the book, Perel (2006) advocates for the use of novel activities and sexual exploration to avoid stagnancy and boredom within a cohabiting relationship. A study conducted in 2019 by Muise and colleagues reaffirms this sentiment by showcasing the impact of using self-expanding activities in a dyadic context to promote sustainable relationship quality and satisfaction. According to self-expansion theory, trying new things with a long-term partner can reignite levels of desire from the start of the relationship (Muise et al., 2019).

Insights on relational resilience and dyadic coping strategies used by female same-sex couples provide a wealth of value and the following articles and books aim to outline that. An older study conducted by Zacks and colleagues (1988) in the United States looked at a group of female same-sex couples in comparison to heterosexual couples, on measures of cohesion, adaptability, and relationship satisfaction. In comparison to heterosexual relationships, female same-sex couples reported markedly greater levels of cohesion, adaptability, and satisfaction (Zacks et al., 1988). According to the authors, this may result in female same-sex couples being better able to operate

in a mostly heterosexual environment (Zacks et al., 1988). Female same-sex relationships may also be more cohesive and adaptive than heterosexual relationships due to women's socialisation (Zacks et al., 1988). Consistent with Zacks' (1988) implication that we have much to learn from women, particularly with regards to intimate relationships, Perel (2006) notes "In our contemporary model of committed coupledness, the female influence is unmistakable" (p. 42). She goes on to assert that women have offered their long-developed communication skills to an era in which new forms of connection were being sought out. Simply put, years of restricted access to power have urged women to hone their relationship-building skills and modern socialization of girls still works to cultivate those skills (Perel, 2006). Further, Perel (2006) believes that sexual freedom was first defined as an intrinsic right by the feminist and queer movement. This is echoed by Ward (2020) in her book on *The tragedy of heterosexuality*. She, too, contends that the LGBTQ+ community has long-ago spearheaded a movement towards less conventional forms of intimacy, involving a variety of kinks and toys that heterosexual couples now partake in themselves, after initially scrutinizing the LGBTQ+ community for doing so (Ward, 2020).

Finally, a qualitative study on resilience in long-term cohabitating female same-sex relationships asserts that the long-term stressors faced by these couples tend to be counteracted by the protective relational resilience skills they have acquired over time (Connolly, 2005). Most notably, processes of closeness, reciprocity, harmony, and interdependence worked to protect against these longstanding stressors (Connolly, 2005). More specifically, personal commitment to the relationship, creativity, and alignment of lesbian identity have all been demonstrated to aid in the quality and longevity of lesbian relationships (Connolly, 2005). It is also worth noting that the dyads in this study appeared to expend their efforts on connecting rather than trying to avoid conflict; they looked to focus on their mutual strengths rather than overcoming their weaknesses

(Connolly, 2005). Female same-sex relationships have distinct challenges, but they also show success and durability, resulting in a wealth of critical relationship skills to offer to heterosexual and other romantic relationships.

### **2.3.2 - Dyadic Coping and COVID-19**

In 2020, Mari and colleagues set out to examine whether intimate relationships may play a role as a mediator in stress, future challenges, and coping techniques during the COVID-19 lockdown in Italy (Mari et al., 2020). Giving assistance to a partner in stressful conditions was proven to improve not only the quality of the committed relationship, but also the physiological and emotional well-being of the individual partners, in both everyday and exceptionally stressful conditions (Mari et al., 2020). These findings are explained by theories of positive dyadic coping, which see stress management as a social rather than individualistic process, wherein the individual does not handle stress in a vacuum but rather within a collaborative context (Mari et al., 2020; Romeo et al., 2022). This sentiment was echoed by Genç and colleagues in 2021 when they examined the impact of COVID-19 on couples' perceived relationship satisfaction, and the use of dyadic coping as an adaptive mediator. They, too, found that dyadic coping served as an effective mediating tool to increase or maintain relationship satisfaction in times of extreme distress, brought on by the pandemic due to the perceived closeness and support (Genç et al., 2021). Furthermore, Mari and colleagues (2020) posit that the COVID-19 pandemic has created a unique circumstance with relation to stress, coping mechanisms, and cohabitation, resulting in a newly complex and nuanced type of cohabitation, emphasising the need to develop and refine tools that can be implemented in unforeseen situations.



Using a self-report approach, Randall and colleagues (2021) set out to explore this association between dyadic coping and relationship quality during the COVID-19 pandemic, across 27 countries, making for a uniquely multinational sample. This study was conducted in the early phase of the pandemic, collecting data within the first couple of months between March and July of 2020 (Randall et al., 2021). The findings revealed that perceived partner positive dyadic coping was positively associated with relationship quality and satisfaction, along with being negatively associated with psychological distress (Randall et al., 2021). On a global scale, these findings confirm the earlier studies' results and reaffirms the idea that positive dyadic coping is an instrumental tool in promoting both relational and individual health and well-being among romantic couples. Alternatively, perceived partner negative dyadic coping was negatively associated with relationship quality and satisfaction, while being positively associated with psychological distress and inter-partner conflict (Randall et al., 2021). In order to promote the former scenario where partners experience positive dyadic coping, it would be beneficial to speak to the dyads who achieved this type of dynamic, and gain insights into the specific strategies they used.

Using narrative responses followed by a thematic analysis, Jones and colleagues (2021) aimed to investigate these dyadic coping strategies and their use throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis findings showed four themes of relationship instability and eight coping methods used by individuals (Jones et al., 2021). The findings show that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted romantic relationships in four ways: interdependent dynamics, closeness, heightened anxiety and insecurity, and shifts in communication (Jones et al., 2021). Participants also reported eight different types of coping activities in this study: finding escape, maintaining intimacy and connectivity, establishing routines, staying connected to other social networks and supports,

mindfulness practices, meaningful spending of time, defining healthy personal boundaries, and preparing for the future (Jones et al., 2021). With some outliers, the findings show that couples were motivated to partake in dyadic coping by accepting shared responsibility for the pandemic's stresses and purposefully working collaboratively to overcome these challenges (Jones et al., 2021). Jones and colleagues (2021) believe that these dyadic coping tactics will be beneficial to couples outside of the COVID-19 context, as they will also work to support couples in becoming stronger, closer, and more securely attached. In a 2021 study conducted in Italy, Donato and colleagues echoed these findings after a nation-wide questionnaire was distributed. The findings revealed that anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic posed a serious risk to people's mental health (Donato et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these anxieties predicted overt stress communication, which further forecasted perceived partner dyadic coping behaviours, along with individuals' psychological health (Donato et al., 2021).

### **2.3.3 – Relational Resilience and COVID-19**

In their descriptive literature review on COVID-19 and interpersonal relationships, Bevan and colleagues (2023) present promising findings surrounding the constructive aspects of quarantine on relationships' quality, coping, social support, and resilience. They discovered that participating in particular dyadic coping strategies and attending to pertinent personal weaknesses, particularly those connected to the COVID-19 external stressor, can help to preserve relationship quality and equilibrium (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). In line with this finding, Rivers and Sanford (2020) created the Interpersonal Resilience Inventory and promoted its use during COVID-19 to assess the level of relational resilience, which they deem crucial for traversing obstacles of a long-term stressor like the pandemic. In this measure, resilience is a relational adaptive strategy that is

affected by a number of persistent personal vulnerabilities including mental wellness and insecurity.

Mazur and colleagues (2023) further examine the theory of resilience and relational load in line with relationship maintenance during COVID-19. The notion of relational load refers to the "wear and tear" on relationships as a result of frequent, stress-related interactions and a decline in personal or social resources (Afifi et al., 2016). This theory suggests that in order to avoid relational strain, and develop resilience and potential flourishing, individuals must continue to invest in their connections (Afifi et al., 2016). Afifi and colleagues (2016) specifically outline the importance of dyadic coping in times of heightened stress as a way to achieve relational resilience and ensure that as a couple, they are best geared towards future unforeseen circumstances, having both the personal and social resources in place. Regardless of ethnicity or gender, relationship maintenance did function as a preventative measure across all populations. Married individuals reported that their stress decreased after experiencing more relationship maintenance at the start of the pandemic (Mazur et al., 2023). Couples who prioritized relationship maintenance before the pandemic reported feeling less stress overall. This, in turn, had an impact on how much tension these dyads encountered and, ultimately, how much anger individuals expressed as COVID-19 progressed (Mazur et al., 2023). It was therefore found crucial to consistently put effort into our intimate relationships through maintenance measures as a pre-emptive approach, as well as a response strategy, according to the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016; Mazur et al., 2023). In this way, if anything distressing occurs, it may seem less challenging than it might otherwise. This relational maintenance and resilience technique could also be utilised as a plan of action when families or couples anticipate an upcoming stressor, such as an intensive surgical operation, a major

examination, a relocation, or a baby on the way, to ensure that both partners feel equipped to take on the new challenge as a team (Mazur et al., 2023).

Aydogan and colleagues (2022) sought to learn how the pandemic affected the development of relational resilience in cohabitating couples and to examine the mediating roles of both positive and negative dyadic coping strategies on emotional strain and relational resilience. Approximately 400 Turkish couples responded to an online survey and the findings demonstrated that negative and positive coping have moderating effects on married couple's psychological stress and their relational resilience in these times of isolation (Aydogan et al., 2022). Notably, positive coping mechanisms used by the couples to deal with these circumstances, particularly during quarantine days, were seen to play a significant role in boosting relational resilience (Aydogan et al., 2022).

### **2.3.4 – Female Same-Sex Couples and COVID-19**

In order to find ways for scholars and healthcare providers to support LGBTQ+ individuals during the pandemic, Goldbach and collaborators (2021) undertook a cross-sectional investigation. 220 self-identifying LGBTQ+ individuals from the United States participated in this survey-based project. The research team were interested in assessing the effects of resilience as a moderator between COVID-19 and symptoms of anxiety. Greater capacities for resilience were observed to act as protective buffers against the detrimental impacts of the pandemic on anxiety alongside other health parameters. Relational resilience was also found to act as a buffer for decreased social support networks, which is often the case in LGBTQ+ couples (Goldbach et al., 2021). They therefore suggested an emphasis be put on the need for relational resilience and a sense of connectedness within our intimate relationships and promoting these insights widely within the

community (Goldbach et al., 2021). These findings were echoed and cited by Gonzalez and colleagues (2021) who suggested that although resilience strategies are essential for everyone, LGBTQ+ individuals are especially in need of them given that they frequently experience discrimination, ostracizing, and social stigma. Findings of this qualitative study imply that LGBTQ+ people's resilience has, in many respects, assisted them with more effectively preparing for and coping with the challenging circumstances that surrounded the COVID-19 pandemic, as LGBTQ+ people have developed their capacity for resilience in the midst of adversity by combining self-reliance techniques with their social networks.

More recently, Eleuteri and colleagues (2022) conducted a literature review to examine COVID's impact on romantic couples' and LGBTQ+ individuals' sexuality. COVID-related burdens were found to predict a decrease in relationship satisfaction and a rise in dysfunctional relational behaviours like increased conflict (Eleuteri et al., 2022). Furthermore, decreased sexual desire, arousal, climax, and frequency of intercourse were all linked to psychological distress, constrained cohabitation, monotony, work-related anxiety, relationship dissatisfaction, and loss of freedom (Eleuteri et al., 2022). On the other hand, many respondents, particularly those cohabiting with their partners, saw a rise in the amount of sexual activity they were engaging in during the epidemic (Eleuteri et al., 2022). Additionally, others reported indulging in less conventional sexual practises such as group sex, swinging, using novel sex toys, or playing out their sexual fantasies since the start of the pandemic (Eleuteri et al., 2022). Referring back to Perel (2006), intimacy is a discursive process, whereby partners develop a more intimate dynamic through the use of communication and mutual trust. Alongside overall relationship quality and satisfaction, dyadic coping also serves to enhance these processes in romantic relationships, creating a space within the relationship to comfortably voice their needs, desires, and fantasies (Levesque et al., 2014; Randall et al., 2021).

## 2.4 – Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was viewed as a largely negative, destructive, and tumultuous experience for most individuals, and the research reflected these agonizing times with studies about declining mental, physical, and social well-being. However, emerging research suggests constructive insights and learning experiences for both individuals and romantic couples that came as a result of the pandemic. Literature geared towards dyadic coping and relational resilience tends to view the pandemic as a hurdle that couples had to overcome as a unit and became stronger as a result of. The underlying message is that dyadic coping and relational resilience require effort, intention, and an employment of effective strategies to combat the various stressors presented by this period of isolation and other stressful events that may lie ahead. While navigating increased time together may have been one of the hurdles, it was also widely viewed as a privilege to have a partner to share the load with and make the unpleasant moments a lot more tolerable.

Clear limitations in existing literature include a lack of insight into relational resilience and dyadic coping dynamics among LGBTQ+ couples, specifically female same-sex couples. In conversations around cohabitation dynamics, such as in Sassler and Miller's (2017) publication on the "Cohabitation nation", there is little to no mention of these processes in an LGBTQ+ context. Despite discussion of egalitarian relationship dynamics, heterosexual couples are the ones being predominantly discussed and analyzed, resulting in relationship science literature that is mostly relevant towards one population. Within the relationship literature that does touch on same-sex dynamics, few focus on one group (i.e. female same-sex couples) in isolation. Rather most tend to lump together a sample of various minority groups (Whitton et al., 2023) without teasing apart the different nuances that might make each group's experience unique. In our current climate,

adaptability and openness are crucial for the cultivation of sustainable relationships. For this reason, including female same-sex couples in the conversation on dyadic coping skills in times of crisis adds a tremendous amount of value as they have the insights and perspectives that heterosexual couples may not. More notably, LGBTQ+ individuals have been historically found to experience higher levels of emotional distress, depression, substance abuse, and self-harm (Abreu et al., 2021; Eleuteri et al., 2022; Peterson et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2020).

## **Chapter 3**

### **3 Methodology and Methods**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The methodological strategies and qualitative framework that guided my study and overall research process are featured in this chapter. I begin by discussing my ontological and epistemological positions within the context of queer and feminist theory, which directly impacted the conceptualization of the study and my preferred phenomenological approach. I then examine the sampling and recruitment strategies employed, as well as the data-gathering procedures and analytical process. The chapter comes to a close with a summary of the ethical factors that influenced the planning and conduct of this research project.

#### **3.2 Study Design**

To address the research questions that guided this study, a qualitative constructivist phenomenological technique was adopted. Constructivism is a research paradigm designed to

acknowledge and make room for multiple realities that are actively being constructed by individuals through the use of their personal knowledge and experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology that offers relevant principles designed to capture and understand various aspects of human experience in particular ways, specifically the two participant groups' cohabitation experiences and utilisation of dyadic coping and relational resilience strategies (Wright-St.Clair, 2015). Phenomenology is further founded on the examination of people's lived experiences (Alase, 2017; Byrne, 2001) which served to help me gain an understanding of the pandemic's impact on cohabitating romantic relationships. Phenomenology additionally seeks to examine how different people interpret and make meaning of their experiences (Wright-St.Clair, 2015) which can lend itself to exploring how the pandemic has driven people to adjust and reconsider their romantic connections. A key factor in selecting this methodology was the flexible nature of this approach (Tuffour, 2017). I had the room to adjust to the nuanced discussions that came about in my interviews and give couples the space to holistically share their experience without any topical restrictions. Finally, and most importantly, the human experience is placed at the forefront of research guided by phenomenology (Byrne, 2001), which is crucial when examining the effects of a major and frequently traumatic event such as a global pandemic on mental and relational health.

Critical feminist health research as well as queer theory was used to further frame the study design, data collection, and final analysis of the dyadic coping strategies and relational resilience techniques adopted by the two participant groups, in conjunction with the ways that they discuss the impact of COVID-19 on their relationship. Queer theory exists in conversation with feminist theory, which rejects the idea that sexual orientation and gender expression are essentialist categories defined by nature and hence scientifically measurable (Piantato, 2016). Sexual and



gender identities are destabilised by queer theory, which allows and encourages various, unrestricted interpretations of cultural occurrences (Piantato, 2016). Researchers have long urged that studies involving queer and/or same-sex participants must employ queer theory to fully account for the unique factors, terminologies, and shared experiences among sexual minorities in the face of adversity and trauma (Meyer, 2003). Serving as a vast and varied theoretical framework, feminist theory aims to explain and counteract gender-based inequities by employing several principles relevant to this study (Ferguson, 2017). To start, the idea of intersectionality, which recognises that people's lived experiences are impacted by a variety of social constructs, notably gender, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation, is frequently embraced by feminist theorists (Ferguson, 2017). Researchers are encouraged to take into account how the experiences of individuals are impacted by these overlapping identities. In order to empower the voices and viewpoints of marginalised people, particularly women, feminist-oriented phenomenology focuses on their lived experiences and what extent social conventions, frameworks, and disparities impact participants' daily lives and relationships (Alcoff, 2000). These ideas are consistent with my study goals, and more specifically, these theories will support the exploration of my second research question in identifying how the couples' uniquely gendered dynamics influence their use of dyadic coping strategies. Given the powerful impact of gender and sexuality on virtually every facet of life, perhaps especially those related to intimacy, relationships, and navigating life challenges, this project is attentive to the complex roles that sex and gender play in the shaping of couples' responses to COVID-19 stressors as well as their navigation of these unforeseen conditions (Peterson et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2020). Recognising participants' lived experiences, particularly those from marginalised or unconventional gender and sexual identities, requires a more compassionate, socially conscious, and critical approach. Feminist and queer theories tend

to contribute to this and make it possible to explore human experience's intricacies in greater depth, which may not cleanly fit into conventional frameworks (Meyer, 2003).

### **3.3 Researcher Positioning and Reflexivity**

When preparing to enter the research field, it is critical for the researcher to understand her positionality to get an understanding of her viewpoints and presumptions. To give context, I'm a 25-year-old Ashkenazi Jewish woman pursuing a master's degree in health and rehabilitation sciences from Western University. I come from a two-parent home with a stay-at-home father and an educator mother. Following high school, I attended York University to pursue a bachelor's degree in psychology. Although I came from a largely post-positivist epistemological background, I've been positioning myself as a feminist constructivist from the onset of my master's.

I identify as a bisexual woman who has had experiences in both heterosexual and female same-sex relationships, and I am a member of the LGBTQ+ community. A study of this nature, conducted by a researcher with similar experiences as both sets of participants, may be positioned to make a significant contribution to the existing literature on female same-sex relationship resilience strategies but it requires a balancing act, as suggested by Punch and Rogers (2022), to navigate my insider and outsider roles. Throughout the interviews, respondents seemed to be more willing to disclose their experiences with me when they felt we could relate, so I made a point to naturally share this piece of myself with the couples as it came up in conversation, and it seemed to enhance our rapport. The intricacies, lingo, and cultural facets of the queer community were also better understood, as I am a researcher from the community. This allowed me to engage in richer dialogues during data gathering and interpretation throughout the analysis. On the other hand, by being an investigator with a similar background, from the same geographic location, I

was cognizant of the fact that participants may have felt less willing to be honest or open in their interviews due to anonymity concerns. For this reason, I made sure to highlight the confidential nature of our study at the onset of each interview. An impartial researcher may also add neutrality to the study, lowering the possibility of preconceptions that can develop from prior experiences. As I was in a relationship with a woman during the data collection portion of my study, I found that I had certain biases relating to how I viewed my previous relationships with men. Prior to engaging in my first couple interviews, I used my reflexivity journal to write out any assumptions I may be going into the process with. I then made a conscious effort to consult this list while interpreting my data to ensure that these biases were not resulting in an impartial analysis but rather that I was keeping an open mind during the data collection and analysis process.

Reflexivity is a continuous and iterative process of conscious self-awareness whereby researchers can obtain a deeper knowledge of their findings and gain insight into different study contexts that might otherwise require further investigation (Finlay, 2002; Tracy, 2010). Taking a reflexive approach aids in the development of qualitative work that is ethical, rigorous, and trustworthy by encouraging self-awareness and thoughtful evaluation of the investigator's biases, preconceptions, and involvement in the research process (Tracy, 2010). Therefore, my insider-outsider role (Punch & Rogers, 2022) worked to stimulate critical self-reflection and ongoing reflexivity over the course of this project. I was able to acknowledge my role as a student researcher with an understanding of power dynamics (Finlay, 2002) and privilege as a bisexual, cisgender, white woman who has experienced both types of relationships but has not cohabited with romantic partners throughout COVID-19 or prior. I made a point to remain mindful of my access to the support and knowledge that has worked to inform my current understanding of relationship science and resiliency. I started practicing reflexivity in the planning stages of my study through keeping

record of my observations and reflections regarding the literature and the lived experiences of my study participants. In order to sustain my self-awareness regarding the dynamic development of this knowledge, I also made notes describing my ongoing experiences with the data throughout the analysis and thesis writing processes. These notes tell the story of the development of my project and how it took unexpected turns at every corner. My participants were brilliant and introduced ideas to the story that I had never even considered. Most surprising to me was how much COVID had done for these couples in the sense of accelerating their connection and the gratitude with which the couples discussed this phenomenon. As the interviews went on, the story became clearer, and my notes consisted of attempts at piecing it together while marveling at the insights that were kindly shared with me. Finally, my journal included a lot of proud moments wherein I noted my participants' kind words at the conclusion of each interview. Hearing that they felt comfortable, enjoyed the experience, and were pleasantly surprised by my demeanour meant the world to a second-year master's student conducting her first independent research project.

### **3.4 Study Sites, Recruitment, and Sampling**

Prior to conducting data collection, the study aims and methods were submitted, revised, and finalized according to the stipulations of Western University's Ethics Review Board, along with the guidance of my supervisor and thesis committee members who were assisting in the study. Once ethics approval was received (see appendix F), recruitment began in November 2022. Qualitative data were collected from heterosexual and female same-sex couples within Ontario. Eighteen couples (n=18) were interviewed, including ten heterosexual couples and eight female same-sex couples. Most of the couples (n=11) resided in London, Ontario. Others were from Toronto, Hamilton, Waterloo, and Ottawa, with ages varying from 20-35 years old.

To ensure that data that directly tie into the study aims were collected, purposive sampling was employed (Palinkas et al., 2015). The idea behind using purposive sampling is to ensure that the study groups accurately represented a specific variety of cohabitation experiences throughout COVID-19 and it gave me the opportunity to deliberately choose individuals who have rich and relevant experiences relating to the study issue via the decided upon inclusion and exclusion criteria: heterosexual or female same-sex romantic dyads between the ages of 18 and 35 who speak English and had been living together for at least a year. I chose this criteria in hopes of hearing from couples that were able to offer a vast range of experiences within their time together in quarantine. Participants were excluded if they were not in a cohabiting heterosexual or female same-sex relationship, have been living together for less than a year, fell outside the age range, or if they did not feel safe or comfortable discussing their relationship. Purposeful recruitment strategies were used to locate participants, including Western University's (UWO) mass recruitment email, Instagram stories posted on several UWO Instagram pages, LinkedIn posts, and posters displayed around UWO's campus. Each dyad was going to be provided with an honorarium in the form of a \$25 Amazon gift card to acknowledge the importance of their time and contribution to the research.

The recruitment strategies altogether resulted in an overwhelming response to the eligibility survey, bringing in over 400 responses from interested participants. The majority noted finding the survey through the UWO mass email recruitment system, and many shared that the honorarium served as a highly motivating factor to participate, alongside the evocative nature of the research. By employing an honorarium, researchers run the risk of participants embellishing or outright lying about their answers or experiences in an effort to satisfy the study's needs and collect the honorarium. As a result, the integrity of the study could be compromised, and the data may be

deemed erroneous. I was aware of this risk and while there were several interviews where I felt the participants were not as engaged, I think the vast majority of my participants seemed to wholly enjoy their time in the interview and our conversations surrounding their relationship. As many of the couples noted, we often spend a lot of our time discussing our relationships as it is, so why not do it in a more organized fashion?

### **3.5 Data Collection**

Data were gathered during dyadic interviews with heterosexual couples (n=10) and female same-sex couples (n=8), each of which completed one semi-structured interview on one occasion. The interviews typically lasted 45 to 60 minutes, with several interviews going over the one-hour mark, with participants' consent and enthusiasm. Along with these interviews, fieldnotes were collected to make note of the respondents' disposition, affect, and demeanour while being interviewed, and was used as a complement to the ongoing data collection. These fieldnotes were entered into my reflexivity journal.

In attempt to reach a broader spectrum of couples and make the experience more accessible, as well as adhering to social distancing rules that were still in effect in parts of Ontario, interviews took place over Zoom. Couples were provided with the Zoom link ahead of time and the process was generally smooth, with some minor troubleshooting necessary to configure audio. To establish rapport, I made a point to engage in friendly small talk and introductions when I first met the participants. I began by asking about their day, where they were from, and how they came about the study. Following this exchange, I went over the letter of information and consent with each dyad and asked them whether they felt comfortable being interviewed and recorded over Zoom. Taking into account the digital aspect of this study, verbal and written consent was noted. This

consent included approval to utilise non-identifying quotes and approval to video record the interview for transcribing and analysis purposes (see appendix C). Each participant was also made aware of their liberty to refuse any questions, end the interview, or ask for the video recording to be stopped at any point.

Every interview adhered to the same interview guide. The main goal of this guide was to list the key topics I wanted to discuss with the participants. However, in keeping with phenomenological technique, I gave the participants a chance to go into detail about their experiences without interruption (Bevan, 2004). I made notes of the participants' main remarks and followed up with questions to elicit clarification or further information. I would move on to the following unasked question in the interview guide when they had finished with their answers. This technique of being open to multiple ways of storytelling, in line with queer and feminist approaches (Tungohan & Catungal, 2022), allowed respondents to convey their experiences in a way that felt genuine and comfortable, within a more conversational and less formal environment that honored different perspectives and expressions of individuality. In this way, the interview was more relaxed than a traditional semi-structured interview to provide participants enough space to express themselves and engage in dialogue with myself and with one another.

Couples were first asked why they were interested in taking part in the study so that I could learn more about their viewpoints and motivations surrounding the subject matter. I then began posing general questions like how they had first met and how long they have been dating, as well as living together. I then included questions like "How did the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine periods impact the dynamic of your relationship?" and "Did you face any challenges in experiencing

increased time spent together?" that were meant to shed light on cohabitation experiences during COVID-19.

Following that, questions about gender and sexual identity, as well as how those factors influence a dyad's relationship dynamics were posed to the study couples. The personal anecdotes that couples would share in response to these inquiries allowed me to move on to more in-depth follow-up inquiries based on the information they had provided. The participants were then asked to talk about how they view coping and resilience in the context of their relationship, in the following section of the interview. They were asked to provide examples of specific coping strategies they used while cohabitating in COVID. Couples frequently emphasised the value of intentionality as it related to their quality time, intimacy, communication, and household tasks. The participants discussed various strategies for maintaining novelty and excitement while under quarantine, which prompted further queries regarding how this has been carried out in the post-COVID era. After that, the discourse generally shifted to expressions of gratitude and reflection for this unique shared experience that enabled the development of relational resilience within the dyad. At the end of the interview, I sought out suggestions from the couples on who should be informed of the study's key findings and how it would be best to get that information out there.

During the debrief at the end of the interview, I also asked them about their experience taking part in this study, including how they felt the interview went and whether they had any unanticipated experiences. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and participants acknowledged their appreciation for my interviewing style and how at ease they felt during the interview. I invited them to get in touch with me if they had any questions about the subjects discussed or if they felt the interview had negatively affected them in any way. I also addressed whether they



preferred the online interview approach versus an in-person interview. Most participants favoured Zoom since it allowed them to participate without having to leave their homes, although a few couples indicated that they would have been pleased to participate in person because it could have been more intimate that way. I concluded by asking the couples whether they thought it would be worthwhile to do a follow-up research and how we may expand the project in the future. The interview ended with some light chats and words of appreciation before signing off.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

In order to identify and make sense of the underlying beliefs and ideologies about dyadic coping and relational resilience strategies in romantic relationships of various sexualities, a latent-level thematic analysis was applied (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Latent level thematic analysis is often implemented to explore various interconnected themes, issues, or interpretations in a dataset. It enables researchers to identify and thus interpret more subtle, in-depth meanings and insights that may be implied or hidden within the data alongside those that are more explicitly communicated by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Another reason for adhering to latent level analysis is because of its roots in the constructivist paradigm, which has also been utilised in the design of this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An interpretive lens was further adopted to conduct and launch this analysis of the subjective experiences that were elucidated throughout the interviews. In qualitative research, an interpretive lens speaks to the theoretical or conceptual framework that allows researchers to analyse and derive the meaning of the collected data, especially within the realm of latent-level thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It entails evaluating the data's deeper implications and patterns using a certain theoretical framework such

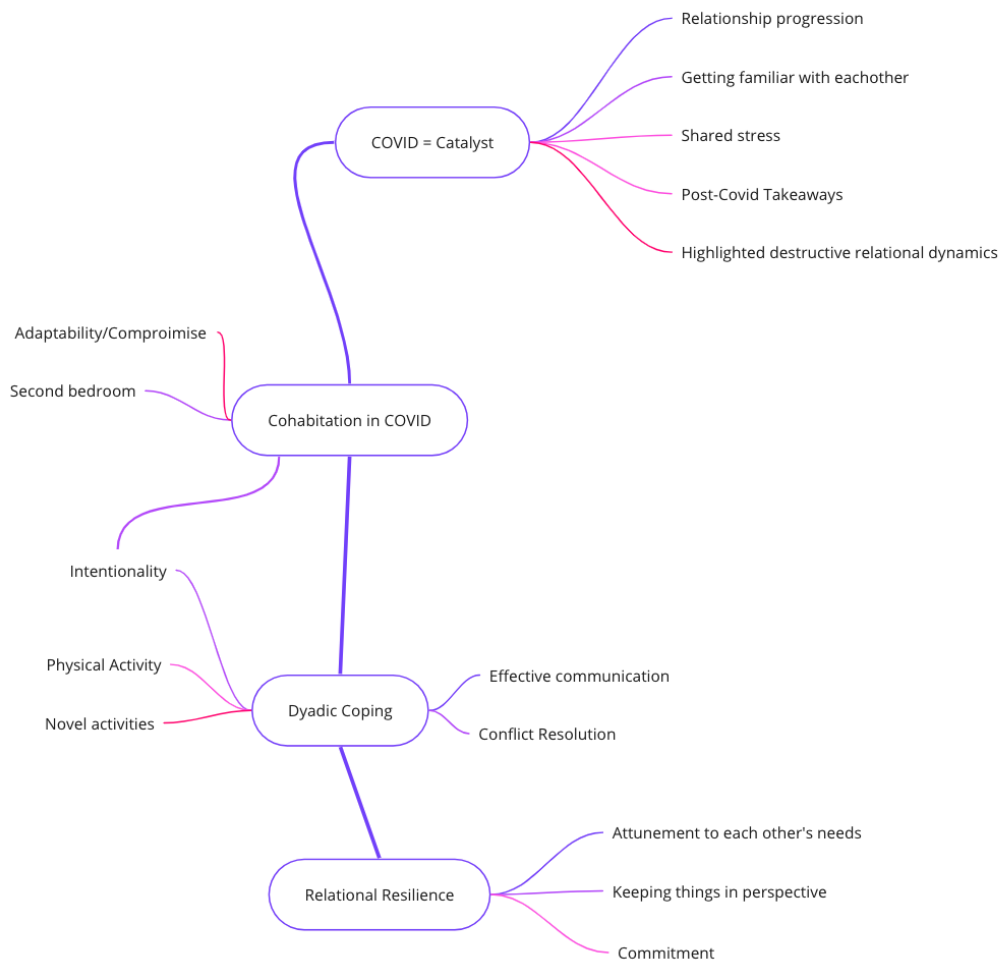
as a sociological, psychological, or anthropological lens (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A constructivist, critical feminist, and queering perspective was used in this research study.

In accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide on conducting a thematic analysis, the first stage of my data analysis process started with listening to and manually transcribing the interview data using Microsoft Word. This gave me the opportunity to become acquainted with the content discussed. I would then watch the video of the interview and use this to double check my transcription as well as add in nuances surrounding body language. The verbatim transcriptions comprised over 300 pages of written, double-spaced information.

I then uploaded the transcriptions into Quirkos, a programme for qualitative research that serves as a visual help for easily managing and analysing data. My categories were represented in Quirkos as coloured nodes that were then added to a virtual board to graphically illustrate how I arranged the data. As additional codes were grouped into each category node, the category node's size visually grew to represent prominence. As Quirkos does not use AI for analysis, I carried out all interpretive analysis manually with the use of mind maps in Miro. Figure 1 presents an example of my analysis process using the Miro canvas to illustrate my thought process, and the story I hoped to tell with my findings.

## **Figure 1**

*Visual Example From Miro*



The categories that reflected important, significantly prevalent sub-themes within the data set were created by grouping together the categories with overlapping concepts. In accordance with the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006), these categories were given an identifying term to express the key idea spanning the collection of codes included. The developing of these categories, both graphically and conceptually, helped me better understand the overarching themes present in the data and revealed crucial insights that influenced the development of the main themes discussed in the findings chapters. Categories that had no relation to any of the developing themes suggested

the need for a miscellaneous category which was later reassessed to determine suitability within the established themes.

Finally, I organised the remaining categories into more significant and broad themes. Although not all the themes were explicitly related to the study questions, the themes were devised to reflect the data that captured the key study aims in the most representative way, and this was done across study populations (Brooks et al., 2014). For instance, the broad theme "Dyadic Coping" included the categories "Conflict Resolution" and "Novel Activities." Following are the major topics that our study revealed to be most prevalent:

1. COVID-19 as a Catalyst;
2. Cohabitation in Quarantine;
3. Dyadic Coping;
4. Relational Resilience;
5. Gender Roles, and;
6. Female Same-Sex Experiences of Exclusion and Response to COVID-19.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Qualitative research can provide unique ethical challenges in terms of acquiring access, establishing rapport, interpreting results, and disseminating findings (Creswell, 2007; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). According to the 2018 Tri-council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS-2), researchers and REBs should examine concerns of consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and connections among researcher and the respondents in

the planning, evaluation, and implementation of research. Discretion, good judgement, and adaptability, appropriate with the degree of risk and possible benefit, proved necessary if any ethical difficulties were to arise during the investigation (TCPS-2, 2018).

Prior to the interview, each participant was emailed a letter detailing the study's goals and design, as well as the rights, risks, and advantages of taking part, which they were encouraged to keep for their records after signing and sending back the written consent form. Before the interview, I reviewed the information on this form verbally and recorded an additional verbal consent. Throughout the interviews and other participant interactions, respondents were disclosing private and sensitive information (Creswell, 2007; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). As a result, a conducive environment for participant-researcher interactions was aimed to be created. In the context of this project, semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private setting where others were not able to hear what was being said. Participants were made aware that their involvement in the project was completely optional and that they could withdraw consent if they choose or need to, especially if the interaction is upsetting or emotionally unpleasant (Creswell, 2007; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). They were also informed of the usage of pseudonyms in order to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality and I encouraged them to get in touch with me if they had any questions or wished to exclude any information from the final thesis write-up. (Creswell, 2007; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Any research project must take data security into account, especially when collecting sensitive personal data. All of the material, including consent forms, transcriptions, and other personal details, were kept on my password-protected laptop, which only I have access to. On this same personal laptop, a separate password-protected document with administrator access

included the list connecting the names of the participants to their assigned pseudonyms. Finally, the Quirkos qualitative analysis application ran on my laptop and was not linked with any cloud-based tools.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

This chapter featured an overview of the study design, researcher positioning and reflexivity, the recruitment and sampling process, as well as the data collection and analysis processes. I conducted this research using a thematic analysis method that was influenced by the ontology and epistemology of feminist and queer theory. 18 couples from the heterosexual and female same-sex relationship groups participated in a virtual semi-structured interview to provide the data. Ten of the interviews collected were from the heterosexual group and eight were from the female same-sex group. Using the software Quirkos, interviews were verbatim transcribed and subjected to an inductive thematic analysis. Finally, I discussed the ethical principles I used to guarantee complete anonymity for people taking part and to minimise the possibility of harm. The next two chapters offer a detailed overview of the data analysis findings.

## **Chapter 4**

### **4 Findings: COVID-19 as a catalyst, Cohabitation in COVID-19, Dyadic Coping, Relational Resilience**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The findings of this research have emerged through nuanced and captivating participant narratives, discussing how COVID-19 and the associated quarantine periods influenced intimate relationship development in cohabiting heterosexual and female same-sex couples. As the first of two findings chapters, this chapter describes the thematic insights shared most frequently by our study participants, as they discussed various aspects of cohabitation throughout COVID, the dyadic coping mechanisms that they developed during this time, and how these strategies contributed to the dyad's overall relational resilience. The first portion of this chapter will focus on the unexpected ways that the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for relationship progression. The next section will discuss specific cohabitation experiences and adaptability methods that were adopted to alleviate stressors that were coming up. Following that, I will get into dyadic coping strategies that our couples found most beneficial in managing these internal and external stressors together as a team. Finally, I will be examining the couples' views on relational resilience and how they feel this heightened experience played a role in their level of security, attunement, and commitment towards one another. The chapter will end with post-COVID takeaways shared by our brilliant participants, primarily marked by expressions of gratitude and deep relationship satisfaction.

The themes in this chapter are arranged so that those that are presented first lend essential context on how our dyads felt COVID-19 positively influenced the trajectory of their relationships. This initial theme is then followed by those that build on these insights and show how COVID-19 had an impact on the cohabitation experience, the dyadic coping strategies that were used, and the relational resilience that was developed as a result. A chosen number of references will also be included in the discussion of these themes to contextualise significant information or to offer

definitions as needed. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of our participants, as per the consent form signed prior to the interview.

These findings offer fresh perspectives on the most effective approaches to cohabitation and what may be gained from experiences of shared stress and dyadic coping. Additionally, this information will be of great benefit to the present health literature, which has not been able to show how COVID-19 enhanced certain romantic relationships thus far. These insights further mirror current social discourse among heterosexual and female same-sex couples about the challenges that arise from wanting to satisfy your partner while remaining attentive to one's own needs, as well as the propensity to fall into patterns and routines that promote relational stagnancy rather than growth.

## **4.2 COVID-19 as a Catalyst**

### **4.2.1 Relationship Trajectory**

In the early stages of project development, I expected most of the study couples to have already been living together before COVID-19 and I was curious about how the pandemic may have impacted or shifted that experience. To my surprise, all of the couples with the exception of one shared that COVID-19 was what pushed the couple to take the step towards living together or initiating the dating process altogether. A great example is Linda and Claire who met on a dating app and expected a short-term casual fling but found themselves, thanks to COVID, which they describe as an “incubator”, in something more long-term:

I feel like if it wasn't for COVID, we would not have started dating nearly as quickly. We were going to be a hookup cause she [Linda] was going back to Europe and so we didn't



hook up until we were literally already dating, which was not our intention. But I lived with my friend, and it was awkward and COVID I think had an impact on that [...] We wouldn't have been dating for months otherwise. I think we would have waited a lot longer and we would have waited a long time to move in together. [...] It was like an incubator.

The couples interviewed in this study brought forth a vast array of terms that they felt described their COVID-19 experience. Among the terms used were: catalyst, incubator, pressure cooker, and speed-run. This catalyzation's main driving force appeared to be accessibility and convenience. Couples who were already in a committed relationship and spending a substantial amount of time together revealed that they found it more convenient and practical to move in together because COVID-19 restrictions involved stay-at-home orders and restricted social connections. Living together made it possible for them to keep their relationship going without having to deal with travel limitations or having limited access to one another's living quarters. Many people also revised their relationship goals and long-term plans as a result of the outbreak. People in pre-existing committed partnerships indicated that the pandemic gave them a chance to move forward with their intentions to move in together or get married. Future uncertainty and the need for stability appeared to have an even greater impact on this choice:

It [COVID-19] added six years to our relationship because you're just having to navigate, you know, so many more conversations and time with each other. Like we were already gonna get married, but our relationship moved pretty quickly. Like suddenly we were engaged, what? We were together for a year, engaged for a year, and then we were planning to get married. [...] We're totally codependent now. [laughs]

Another female same-sex couple that got engaged during COVID, Veronica and Joyce, similarly shared that:

It [COVID-19] also sped up and changed the closeness of our relationship. One year of a relationship in regular time is equivalent to a couple months of pandemic time just because of that increased amount of time that you spend together. And so we got engaged in March of last year, which when you've only been together year and a half or so feels very, very quick and something to really be considering. But then you take into account the fact that it's only been a year and a half, but it's in pandemic terms where everything has kind of been... Condensed, almost? So it felt natural and right.

#### **4.2.2 Familiarity**

Within this relationship pressure cooker, couples reported that their level of emotional intimacy was significantly heightened by the fact that they got to know each other at an accelerated speed. Normally when dating, it is customary to take a few weeks or months to get to know our significant others and more difficult conversations are not usually had until later in the relationship. The study couples shared that living in such close quarters and having this much one-to-one time prompted valuable, and at times challenging, conversations that were ultimately essential in building this sense of comfort and familiarity. Miranda and Alice shared:

We also had to talk like from the very beginning about our values in terms of political values for example. With the vaccine and the pandemic, and what sort of side of the fence

you sat on... We had to have all those conversations up front and right away too, not six months in.

In the absence of external distractions, outings, and time apart, couples experienced an acceleration in the process of getting to know one another. This seemed to lay a solid foundation for couples through which they can evaluate future decisions and move forward as a unit. This was the exact sentiment brought forth by Caroline and Leanna:

I think you get to know each other a lot faster when you're at home all the time because the amount of conversations and time together is so amplified that you would have otherwise probably taken weeks or months to get to know how people are in certain situations, how they like to live, etc.. Within the first month we spent 24/7 hours of a day together, so I think you just really intensively get to know each other faster and how to live together. I guess also because you have each other and you depend on each other so much and then you see that you do everything successfully and everything's working, you become a family unit super fast. If anything, the pandemic was actually beneficial cause right away I kind of learned what upsets you. Whereas I feel like if we didn't have as much time together, maybe it would take me like a lot longer to pick up on that. So maybe that would have been detrimental if I didn't learn as quickly.

Alice and Miranda mentioned that in past relationships, what can happen is that after spending a lengthy amount of time, money, energy, and resources, what they refer to as the “noise and excitement”, you realize that person is not quite right for you. Instead, they suggest that COVID

provided them with a period of uninterrupted time to truly assess whether or not they were well-suited as a couple:

I think when you're dating under those circumstances, you, like Miranda said, experience the flashiness of oh, I'm so excited because we're going to Cancun together or, oh my God, we went to this great spa resort on the weekend. Like all of that goes away and all you really have is this one person who's in your life. And you get to talk to them and be with them and all you can really do is go, you know, on a walk or something and just talk. And so I think it kind of got rid of the noise and the excitement that can sometimes cloud your judgement. Like I've been in a relationship before where all that exciting stuff really clouded my judgment of the person and then you're too far in and it's like oh well now I'm in love but you know this person actually isn't that great or... and with you, I feel like nothing really clouded my judgment, it was really just about getting to know you as a person.

Couples also spoke about how living together throughout COVID-19 eliminated the tendency to perform a particular kind of 'best self' to their partners, especially in the early stages. Instead, they discussed having the opportunity to show up authentically and guide one another through certain triggers, anxieties, and fears, which would typically emerge later on in the relationship as something they learned to do. As Leanna noted:

At the start, you put your best face on, but you can only keep that front on for so long. And then couples who maybe even later into the relationship get upset in front of each other, at

some point the clock is ticking and you're gonna go home so you can go and deal with a lot of it independently. So you might just play it off for however long in that window until you go home because you don't want to always start something. But when your lives are so intertwined and you're in each other's face 24/7, you have to pick up on those things, you do pick up on those things, and you learn how to avoid certain triggers.

### **4.2.3 Shared Stress**

COVID-19 brought forth a multitude of stressors ranging from relocation, job loss, and health-related scares. As discussed in literature on dyadic coping, dealing with stress as a team rather than in a vacuum works to enhance relationship satisfaction and security, and overall individual well-being (Donato et al., 2021). Oftentimes stressful situations or events make people feel lonely or alienated in their struggles. Knowing that that they were not alone, seemed to provide comfort when partners were undergoing shared stress. Stress management together therefore seemed to foster a sense of cohesion and cooperation in the partnerships, increasing their mutual dependence and trust in one another. Anita and Evan shared:

A: Because the pandemic had so many different stressors, we saw each other in a lot of stressful situations, where for example one of our roommates got COVID or, you know, all our research was going up in flames-

E: My uncle got really sick.

A: Yeah, his uncle got really sick with COVID. So I feel like we went through a really stressful period of time together, which I think even though it was difficult, it strengthened

our relationship because we kind of had to dive in and really help each other and support each other.

Greta and Jason shared that they experienced several relocations together during the pandemic, including moving to a different country:

We actually moved three times during COVID. So I quit my job during lockdown and moved back to Shanghai for half a year and my boyfriend moved with me. And then we came back to London and continued to live together. So our relationship, I think the strength of our relationship, changed with the development of COVID and having to adjust to Canadian lockdown policy, and also China's COVID policy.

As beautifully expressed by Donette, having a significant other during profound times of stress is, in a sense, a privilege:

I think there's so much privilege there as well. Like we spoke a lot about our friends that were single and you know, as much as some of the challenges we faced were, you know, not having enough space and being in each other's space all the time, we had friends that were single that were feeling very isolated and so there were times throughout the pandemic when we would say like, "I'm so glad that I'm going through this with you. This would have been so much harder without this solid foundation."

In order to effectively handle stress as a team, couples also mentioned sharing coping mechanisms. Partners found they were able to benefit from one another's skills and shortcomings to build a toolbox of strategies that were effective for the couple as a whole. Mary and Veronique shared that Mary is prone to anxiety and while Veronique does not experience her anxiety in the same way, they worked together to ensure that both of their needs were met and developed coping skills that were beneficial for the partnership as a whole:

V: You need to figure out what your partner needs to cope and then that becomes the relationship's coping strategy, not just the one person's strategy. You're both going to adapt. I see it as if there's something that you need me to do for you to cope, then that's now *our* strategy.

M: One thing that she did for me when I had high anxiety is she bought me a little journal and it was so cute and organized inside. It had a calendar, prompts like 'what are you grateful for today?', 'What is one thing you want to accomplish today?' Little things like that. So then every day I would write in it. I had a few pages to fill out and that really, really helped me.

In the long run, this exchange of knowledge can strengthen the bond between the two people by giving them useful tools to deal with stressors in the future.

#### **4.2.4 COVID-19 as Magnifying Glass**

In addition to acting as a catalyst, COVID-19 and the quarantine periods also served as a magnifying glass, that highlighted pre-existing or underlying dysfunctions within the relationship. In the absence of external distractions such as going to school, work, and social events, the couples were forced to confront relational issues that were otherwise flying under the radar. For example, Tina and Glen spoke about the lack of effort they were putting into spending quality time together. They mentioned that this was a pre-existing situation but during COVID they began to acknowledge that this might be something worth addressing:

I would say that before the pandemic we were already not going on dates as much but then during the pandemic the change was that I also wasn't going off and doing, you know, my other hobbies because everything was shut down, so that made it more obvious to me. As a result of spending more time together during COVID we really did have that realization that hey we're really not doing much else other than just working and then when we see each other, we are working and we're eating dinner and then we are going to bed so we decided to put a little bit more energy into fixing that.

In the same vein, COVID prompted couples to have difficult conversations that allowed them to repair any issues that may have snowballed if left unresolved. Linda and Claire spoke about a particularly sensitive conversation that they dove into during this time in order to improve their sexual intimacy:

I still have a lot of trauma from being with men. And I've been healing vaginismus for many years and also just a lot of anxiety around sex. I love having sex now and it's really



a positive experience for me, but we've had instances where it would take me longer for arousal and Claire maybe wasn't used to that cause her experience is a bit different, so even communicating those types of things and explaining why that's happening became necessary. I told her it's not a reflection of how I feel about her and I think COVID just really forced us to talk about everything all the time and has allowed us to work with each other's personalities one-on-one. And we couldn't run away from it, we literally had to deal with everything head on. And we had like, a year and a half to do that. So I think we know each other better than if we were in a five year relationship outside of COVID. Now when we do have these issues, I know that you're probably thinking this, this and this. And my reaction could be this or this, but you'll react like this. Not that I know everything about you, but I think we're a lot better at kind of knowing what the other person is feeling and needing based on previous COVID experiences.

Engaging in these difficult conversations seemed to allow partners to witness each other's dedication to resolving conflicts rather than avoiding or dismissing them, and this ultimately worked to increase trust within the partnership that helped partners feel safe and supported in confronting issues. Sharing one's vulnerabilities, worries, and intense emotions can be challenging but it also encourages a more intense emotional bond between the romantic partners. COVID-19, therefore, gave couples the avenue to settle disputes and forge a more positive dynamic by proactively addressing these concerns through uncomfortable dialogues. Individuals reported an enhanced sense of unity and long-term relationship satisfaction as a result.

### **4.3 - Cohabitation in Quarantine**

### 4.3.1 – Adaptability

Cohabiting with a romantic partner during COVID-19 was a novel experience for the study participants for several reasons. These couples were both newly living together *and* adapting to a global change in circumstances. As a result, partners had to learn to navigate many of the uncharted waters of their relationship and the shifting world around them together as a team. The primary skill that couples mentioned needing to hone during this time was adaptability. This looked different in every pair, but the underlying idea was that they had to be able to adapt to not only the societal and physical changes that were taking place, but also to the ways of being of their cohabiting partner. Many couples discussed finding a balance between spending time together and apart, with often varying needs amongst the two partners. Rachel shared:

Something that I try to communicate is that I need my own alone time because I think at the beginning, partners get really attached and excited to be around their person all the time. And then when I sink into having my own, like building my own space with somebody, I have to try and build boundaries without hurting his feelings.

Other couples mentioned having to build a stricter routine in order to feel like they were optimizing their days and time together. Caroline and Leanna in particular found this to be imperative, and highlighted the spatialized nature of this aspect of their adaptability:

We reorganized our apartment many times and then we made an, I feel like, adamant effort to have routine in the evenings. We basically tried to separate it by routine instead of space, since we didn't have much... the desk was on the sofa pretty much. But we would go on

our walk to break up the day and then we would work out in the living room and watch TV as our evening routine.

Linda and Claire also shared a moment in their early cohabitation where they discovered a misalignment in their sexual needs and their internalized narratives around sex. Claire used frequency of sexual intimacy as a marker of relationship strength while Linda needed to be in a specific headspace in order to enjoy sexual pleasure. The impact of the quarantines on Linda's mental health was paired with a decline in her desire to be intimate and while at first this felt personal to Claire, she soon realized that they just had varying ways of approaching and viewing sexual intimacy and so they decided to normalize masturbation in the home:

L: I think part of navigating our different sexual expectations came from normalizing masturbation for each other. Because I think both of us kinda pretended like we didn't, because we had this idea that oh, if you're masturbating when you're in the same apartment as your partner that means you don't wanna be with them anymore. And then I think also just talking about what our needs are, the type of headspace we wanted to be in when we were having sex, and also different things that we could do to set the mood. For instance, making date nights was really hard obviously during COVID cause you couldn't really go out but we'd go on a drive and sit in a parking lot and drink coffee. And that was our date night. And then we'd go home and we'd both, you know, be more in the mood to actually have sex.

C: Yeah, I think we also had a lot of discussions about just a lot of individual things that were impacting it. Like when you're living together, you're touching each other 24/7. Like there is constant physical contact. So it's difficult to sometimes separate that from foreplay where it's like, okay, if you're touching like that all day, does that lead to sex or is that kind of just like... I'm kind of exhausted now?

In whichever way that adaptability showed up in the relationship, that sense of being open to their partner's needs, and being willing to make physical and lasting changes that will improve the relationship quality for both parties, demonstrated further commitment to the partnership and instilled a greater sense of trust in one another.

#### **4.3.2 – Additional Bedroom Space**

The second most common issue discussed in relation to optimizing the cohabitation experience was investing in additional bedroom space, whether by clearing out a room or moving to a bigger space, if the circumstances permitted it. Most couples mentioned that having additional space created an opportunity for both partners to have individualized environments, which they were able to customize and make their own. Miranda and Alice spoke about this as a positive turning point in their cohabitation experience:

I think it's important that we have our own space and then also that that space just becomes what you want it to be. Like Miranda is a great decor person, but I would not want to work in the living room with what's there like, I just wouldn't feel good about it. But when I'm up here in my office. You know, it's cozy. It's my space. I get to make it however I want

it. And if you don't like it, you don't come in here anyways, right? And vice versa. We were talking about this just a couple weeks ago where I was like, I feel like I don't have my own space and I'm always with you and I'm starting to feel claustrophobic, almost. I'm very introverted, so I really need that space and so I kind of started turning my office into literally my own little haven. And now I'll come up here in the morning, have coffee, send out a couple of emails, and I'm so much happier.

Similarly, Evan and Anita shared:

E: Originally we didn't have a second room for you, but then once she moved in, she technically did have her own space separate from the shared space here. And I mean, it's not to say it's like a lot behind a lock and key, but she had the option to go there and work there if she wanted some quiet time. And then that would leave me the room here for my work.

A: I think having our own separate and designated space was a good way to maintain a sense of self. And I think we talked about it at one point that this makes more sense and it's also a cue to be like, oh, if I'm in that room, I'm doing something, I'm trying to focus, or I just want to be alone for a bit.

This opportunity to be alone in times of heightened togetherness served to maintain relationship satisfaction and prevent relationship burnout. Laura and Conrad suggested that having separate

spaces provided them with the time alone that they needed to later show up as their best selves for their partner:

We do currently have separate bedrooms just because of the way the roommate situation worked out. And as our trial run, we wanted to make sure that if there were any bumps along the way, we would have separate spaces to go to as we transition into living together, which I think really helped us because it was very gradual and natural in that sense. Especially with COVID we were doing a lot of online work and being together 24/7 would make us both cranky. So as much as we love spending time together, we needed to have that time to ourselves and that separate space where we could kind of do our own thing and then rekindle later. We're actually going to get our own apartment soon and we're hoping to get a 2 bedroom so we have an office space where we can go do our studying and then a bedroom to share as well.

This unique experience gifted couples with the opportunity of, what felt like, endless trial and error attempts but it also allowed them to understand what works for them as a unit and how they plan to take these lessons into their future.

## **4.4 – Dyadic Coping**

### **4.4.1 – Intentionality**

As previously discussed, dyadic coping refers to the mutual methods in which partners in a relationship help one another in coping with stressors and challenges. Together, they must make concerted, collaborative efforts to control their stress (Donato et al., 2021). Dyadic coping

acknowledges that stressors and related outcomes impact the dyad as a whole, and transcend beyond the one person. In dyadic coping, couples actively converse, open up about their challenges, and collaborate to come up with adaptable coping mechanisms (Verger & Duymedjian, 2020). It entails not only supporting one another emotionally but also addressing problems practically and lending a hand when necessary. Dyadic coping is especially important in romantic partnerships since it recognises that partners are crucial in promoting each other's resilience and well-being under trying circumstances, such as COVID-19. Couples that practise dyadic coping can create a solid base of support, improve relationship satisfaction, and manage adversities more successfully as a team going forward (Verger & Duymedjian, 2020).

In the context of dyadic coping, intentionality refers to the deliberate commitment and proactive effort that partners take to encourage one another and engage in coping strategies together (Antoine et al., 2020). It entails attentive communication, shared problem-solving, and a dedication to the relationship's long-term health. The primary way that intentionality showed up in the study couples' relationships during COVID was in being intentional with time spent together. Though date nights looked different in the context of the pandemic and social restrictions, the couples found that carving out time to spend together was crucial in sustaining, and even increasing, their level of relationship satisfaction. As Tina and Glen mentioned earlier, COVID highlighted for them the fact that they had stopped prioritizing the amount of quality time they shared. In the pandemic, they describe making a concerted effort to reinstate the passion back into their relationship:

G: If I reflect on it, I think that we did instinctively fall into that pattern where we just didn't really feel the need to go out and sort of formally do romantic things because we were spending so much time together already. So for example we just went on a five day vacation together and it was the first time we've actually gone away together just the two of us because other vacations we always have been with other people, and it did sort of strike me that that yeah this is the first time we've done something that wasn't just part of our natural day to day life.

T: Yeah we now have started to make more of a concerted effort to be more romantic in that way.

G: After we had been not been going on dates for long enough that it became something we knew we wanted to do, then you know we talked about it and then it became a thing that is part of our relationship. I also learned to take a step back, because when you have the same day to day routine it's easy to just be in that headspace where you're not thinking retrospectively about your own life, you're just thinking about what's in front of you. So, I tried to take a step back, think about, okay so this is what we're doing now, these are the lives that were living this year, is this how we want to be doing it, what do we want to change, how should I change that right now... and then when I took that step back, that would often change my behaviour like I might for example choose to talk about something about our relationship or something romantic rather than just talking about a chore that we have to do that day.



Other couples spoke about adding a scheduling piece to their quality time together which at first glance can sound like the spontaneity is being removed. However, it helps in the creation of dedicated time together and demonstrates how partners are showing up for each other and that they are committed to their time together. Sofia and Clarice shared:

We started to schedule things like watching a movie or making a fun meal or baking something or trying a new drink recipe, just something different. And I think putting a temporal aspect on it helped us feel somewhat normal, because I think for me I missed that aspect of “we're leaving the house at 7 to go get dinner”. So we found that if we couldn't leave the house, still having that “time” to look forward to, made it feel more like a “date” rather than just another task we were doing that day.

Joyce and Veronica took it a step further by scheduling weekly activities that they had to look forward to:

We instituted a weekly game night on Sundays because she's adorable and she loves me very much. My family has always been super into board games and strategy games and stuff, and so we're slowly dragging Veronica in, I would say kicking and screaming, but she's amenable to it. [laughs] But so we try on Sunday nights to play. Whether that's a longer form game or whether that's just a couple of rounds of Rummy cube, just a way to intentionally spend time together and have some fun together with something that... I think we both enjoy. [laughs]

Lastly, Laura and Conrad discussed intentionality within their relationship that showed up in the form of intentional communication, which will be further elaborated on in the next section:

I think we've worked on, especially since getting back into school, being in person and everything, setting aside time to be like, "hey, listen I think we need to work on this because this isn't working for me or this isn't proving to be a positive interaction in this sense for us. How can we sit down and work on a plan?" And we've been practicing that on an ongoing basis where we make time for each other and make each other a priority in that way.

#### **4.4.2 – Effective Communication**

By way of fostering mutual understanding, compassion, and cooperation between partners, effective communication supports the development of dyadic coping in romantic relationships (Bodenmann & Randall, 2012). Sharing stressors, emotions, and needs enables partners to offer suitable support and collaborate on problem-solving (Bodenmann & Randall, 2012). Couples who communicate well together can handle pressures more skillfully and create a stronger base of support for their partnership (Pagani et al., 2019). During COVID-19, couples reported having endless opportunities to practice their communication skills and find ways to ensure that both partners are heard, understood, and able to take meaningful action towards relationship enhancement.

The first most commonly talked about communication strategy goes back to our previous section and involves incorporating intent into the conversation. This looks like taking a step back, knowing

what it is you want to get across, and ensuring the conversation is had in a timely manner so as not to let the issue fester. Evan and Anita described their communication style and how intentionality played a part:

A: I think we've tried to establish being open and addressing things kind of right away, and not shoving things under the carpet for them to build up. I think early on we talked about how we both kind of like to resolve things or communicate our concerns right away, so I think dealing with things as they arise helps us kind of cope with things more effectively.

E: I think we're pretty good at communicating even when we're upset with each other. I find I don't like to have any kind of lingering, um, situation or not to say aggression, but upset energy between us that leads to very quick discussions about okay well like what did I do or what happened. And I agree that we do a good job of resolving things in a very timely manner. I find it just results in an overall positive day rather than, you know, going to bed angry or things of that nature.

A: I think another effective communication piece is trying to listen first. I think sometimes it's hard as a partner like you want to get them out of that state. Like if I would see him upset about something, I'm like, oh I need to get him out of that mood. But I feel like I needed to sort of stop that and be like, okay, let me listen to your problem and ask you what you need versus assuming what you need. So I think effective communication is also listening to what they're telling you and then trying to do what you can to help.

Similarly, Veronica and Joyce spoke about benefitting from a cool off period:

V: Very early on it would have been the case of just talking to each other and mentioning it when we think of it. But now it's very much bringing in that intentionality to it and taking things a little slower than before, and actually thinking out what our communication is and why we're feeling X, Y, or Z and how we are recognizing that in the other person. I know, especially with myself, everything is very in the moment, say it now while you're thinking of it, and getting those feelings out there. But we have kind of had to work towards taking that step back and actually engaging with the situation personally before bringing it up to the person.

J: I think it's also a lot about approaching each other with kindness, knowing that each of us wants it to work and is coming from a place of not wanting to hurt each other. We both want this to work, but we also want other things sometimes as well. So knowing that each person is coming from that place and approaching it in that positive, like trying to find solutions, trying to work together, trying to understand how each other's brains work differently and how to speak that language.

Further, couples also spoke about creating a safe space for one another in the context of effective communication. Tina and Glen note: "I think part of it is feeling the safe space and then the other part of it is being willing to enter the safe space the person is creating for you." Alice and Miranda elaborate on this:

I think communication is effective when nobody's afraid of losing. It's never an issue of I win, you lose. It's always an issue of I'm trying to tell you how I feel and you're trying to tell me how you feel. We're trying to figure this out together and at the end of the day, like I always say, there's nothing on the line here. We're just, you know, getting through this together. And the outcome is going to be that something changes or that we both feel heard and then sometimes that's enough, like sometimes it's enough just to be like, yeah, you know what? You're right, what I said hurt your feelings. I'm so sorry that I hurt your feelings.

The last major issue the study couples shared in promoting effective communication is providing one another with a sense of empathy, understanding, and an attunement to the others' needs. Laura and Conrad did a beautiful job of describing this dynamic in their relationship:

C: I think one of the things that we built off of the most is voicing appreciation for one another and making sure that empathy is a big part of our communication along with understanding how the other person's feeling about what they're going through, or understanding how they feel about certain decisions. Basically realizing the impact of everything that you do on your partner.

L: I think there's a point where it's like we don't have to agree with each other, but we can try and understand where they're coming from and how that would make them feel, even though it wouldn't make us feel the same way and kind of seeing how we can approach that. And it's definitely been a learning experience for us both, because I personally, I've

said to Conrad multiple times like I've never had this good of communication in a relationship before and it's really special, but it's definitely not easy and something we have to maintain. We both have also come from different homes and that in itself brings different issues and different learned adaptations that might be positive or negative towards our relationship. And we've been kind of recognizing those and how they impact the other. I think at first we didn't realize that these learned adaptations from when we were kids, and how we respond to things, can actually trigger something emotionally negative for the other person, and we've actually had to sit down several times and have conversations, and sometimes long conversations, about different scenarios and how different intonations of voice can bring up emotional trauma for the other person, and how to specifically attack those situations in different ways.

Evan and Anita likewise mentioned getting familiar with one another's coping and communication styles, and being mindful of these differences when engaging in conflict resolution:

E: So I often try to use humor and make light of the situation like a very quick 'oh, if you're sad, maybe if I get you to chuckle a bit, you'll feel better.' But her stance on it is more I want emotional validation before the humor. And that's still kind of... it's not a challenge, but we kind of have to work on that in terms of resiliency and coping as a couple. Because for me, I don't know, I think I would probably like the inverse of just like 'oh, that's unfortunate'. I'd prefer something that cheers me up. But then she's more validating my emotions, and I find I end up lingering a little more on the issue.

A: Basically, I feel like we realized that we have different coping styles and I think we figured out what those styles were during the pandemic, but also how to best help your partner cope in the way that they prefer.

#### **4.4.3 – Physical Activity**

A popular trend that emerged during the pandemic was the increase in recreational and leisurely walks. Without fail, each couple who was interviewed mentioned implementing daily walks into their routine, which were instrumental in strengthening their bond, increasing quality time, and ultimately enhancing the closeness felt by both partners. Aside from walks, couples spoke about trying cross country skiing, hiking, roller blading, and even just doing joint home workouts: “It’s really important for us to exercise. That’s the best way we cope with and reduce anxiety. So we made sure to do that a lot and go for walks a couple times a week.”

Caroline and Leanna were especially passionate about the role that daily walks played in their relationship:

C: I think we just had to find different ways to have fun, I guess. Because we couldn’t go anywhere or do anything, we pretty much lived in a shoe box, so we took up walking and that was our new favorite activity. It was honestly so much fun. It sounds kind of ridiculous, but it was great.

L: Yes, so much time to talk on those walks. It was our quality time and they still are. But it was just way better to go on a walk and talk and have a change of scenery. They made

the cooped up time at home more fun also. [...] And it's physical activity which is the most magical part of, like the mental health of it all, the fresh air. We also started working out together, that was a big mutual hobby that really became our thing.

Engaging in walks together as a couple offers an opportunity for intimate time, shared exercise, and a change of scenery. This, in turn, promotes intimacy, conversation, and recuperation. Couples who go on walks together further appeared to benefit from collaborative stress management, the development of a dyadic coping strategy, and an overall improvement in both parties' mental health, all of which are crucial components within dyadic coping.

#### **4.4.4 – Novel Activities**

In addition to taking up leisurely strolls and other forms of shared physical activity, couples spoke about embarking on new adventures together and engaging in novel activities of various sorts to keep their romance alive. Novelty in long-term relationships allows for a continued sense of excitement and adventure, as well as opens doors to getting to know our partner and their different layers (Perel, 2006). Furthermore, novel activities may strengthen bonds and connections by fostering enduring memories and mutual jokes and anecdotes. Additionally, engaging in novel activities fosters personal development and broadens perspectives, which ultimately aids in relational and individual growth (Muisse et al., 2019). In the absence of traditional dates, the couples in this study used their increased time together and the free time granted by the pandemic to teach each other new skills, explore different activities together, and find new ways to engage in nonsexual intimacy. Rachel, for example, spoke about teaching Jacob how to sew among the other activities they explored together:



I think we would plan a lot of activities like shows to watch and games to play, puzzles to do. You [Jacob] love question games. So we would get those decks of cards and, you know, get to know each other more in depth. I also began teaching him how to sew.

Alice and Miranda had a similar shared teaching experience when Alice bought a house during the pandemic, which they took up as a shared renovation project:

So Alice you had bought a home in between all of that and she was renovating it. So I kind of joined the project and helped her with the renovation and that was a huge test of our relationship because we really had to learn how to work together. And I don't think we would have otherwise done that if it weren't for the pandemic.

Other couples shared a vast variety of activities that they tried out during COVID, including these examples from Greta and Jason:

J: Well, we would try to find common hobbies between us. For example, we would play a Chinese game called Mahjong. And we also tried out other games like Monopoly. We even tried to play against AI. We also developed the habit of camping. We love to camp now in different Ontario parks. And that's definitely something new for both of us [chuckles].

G: In the winter at Christmas time, we also drove like 8 hours or so to a cottage Airbnb. We decided to leave our phones and be a bit disconnected from the world.

Leanna and Caroline also shared some ways that they practiced non-sexual intimacy in the context of quarantine measures:

L: Uber eats was our novel activity cause it was like the only thing our social bubble basically allowed us to do. There wasn't like going to places anymore or dates or anything extravagant. So when we started, like once every couple of weeks Uber eatsing and having a spread and a movie night, it was thrilling.

C: This is not of the sexual nature, but a massage. Just small things like that to make the other person feel good.

L: I think it's that you have more quality downtime together. You have more chill time, you have less busy evenings. And it's like you're not going to the spa, you're not going to a massage, but you and your partner can still recreate that. It's something that both people want and maybe one person loves even more than the average [laughs]. But it's amazing.

During regular non-COVID times, people are often wrapped up in their responsibilities, external distractions, and daily tasks that they often neglect practicing this level of mindfulness when it comes to their relational health. While COVID-19 brought on a lot of stress, it also slowed things down and allowed couples the room to reconnect in novel and meaningful ways.

## **4.5 – Relational Resilience**

### **4.5.1 – Increased Commitment**

Relational resilience refers to a relationship's capacity to adjust, recover, and retain harmony and wellness in the face of difficulties, pressures, and adversities. It encompasses the ability of partners

to successfully handle challenges, uphold a positive connection, and strengthen their relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). Further, relational resilience involves the capacity to communicate, resolve challenges, offer assistance, and uphold a sense of dedication and trust even in trying circumstances. It serves as the basis for the relationship's long-term well-being and stability (Afifi et al., 2016). The study couples offered up some fascinating analogies in relation to their dyad's understanding of resilience. Some couples viewed it as eating a bag of salt, and others as sitting through the fire together. The underlying message among all these analogies was the idea that building relational resilience involved a level of deep understanding and a strong commitment to one another.

Several couples focused on the importance of keeping matters in perspective and looking at the bigger picture rather than lingering on small-scale day-to-day disagreements, as Laura and Conrad share:

I think the resilience aspect is just to keep on keeping on and keep trying and keep checking in with each other and making sure that we can bounce back from any issues. Just because we had a fight and it might feel like the end of the world for us at that moment, we realized it isn't and we put enough trust in each other to believe that we can work through it together. That's what resilience means for me. A fight can only make us stronger if we build upon it and understand how to avoid those issues in the future. There are always gonna be things you disagree about, but it's how we come out of it and how we work on it and move forward that is going to define our relationship.

Tina and Glen also mention:

T: Resilience for us is the ability to kind of, I want to say look at the bigger picture, and kind of understand things from that perspective.

G: If there is a certain way that you want to live, there are certain things that you want to do, that you want to have and then there are unwanted forces that want to disrupt that, whether it is other people that are trying to mess with your life or-or whether it is your own you know temptations, resilience is just the will to fight back against that. Resilience is the will to cope, so, those external stressors or whatever that are messing with you, it's being able to take certain steps to overcome those challenges. I would say that coping is the act of doing it and resilience is the strength to do it.

Other couples discussed resilience in the context of their relationship as the daily choice to keep going, push through difficult times, and still care for one another in the process. It may sound like a simple task but according to our couples, this level of commitment requires a tremendous amount of work and dedication. The result, however, is a strong foundation upon which couples can build the future that they desire. Alice and Miranda referenced a James Bond movie when describing the way they understand resilience:

A: Resilience is waking up every day and choosing to love you. And some days that's a choice [both chuckle], you know, like some days it's like oh my God I'm so frustrated with what you did or what you said, but the choice is that I love you. And as easy as it would be

to be so fed up with whatever it may be that day that's on your mind or bothering you... You continuously make the choice to love, and continuously choosing you, I think is what resiliency is. There is nothing in me that would ever put our relationship at risk, because I'm always making that choice and holding myself accountable to that choice.

M: When I first met Alice, she had said to me, you know, I want someone who's willing to sit through the fire with me, and that's never kind of left my mind only because when I think of our relationship, we've obviously gone through a lot. And I think being able to sit through the fire with somebody through, you know thick and thin, and then going to bed at the end of the night, you know, consciously being okay with what happened and ready to move on is resilience.

A: I said to Miranda before I proposed that there was this scene in 007 that was like my favorite movie scene, and it's where she has just shot someone. She's in the shower, in her clothes, bawling her eyes out and just devastated. And he just goes into the shower and sits next to her and that's it. Like he's just physically there. And I think for me that was always what love really looked like. Love is what's there when you have to be resilient, when times are tough. And it's not really about fixing, it's not about doing, it's just about sitting in that really tough time with that person and being able to just love them through it even if you know that you can't fix it in that moment. And it's in those tough moments, I think where love really shows up.

Leanna and Caroline offer a similar analogy:

When you start dating at first, you think you're strong and you're good and you know, you're in the honeymoon phase. As you keep going, different circumstances come up that can make things a bit harder, like real life, real jobs, real families, real circumstances, COVID, money, everything. So resilience is like eating a bag of salt together and then still wanting to be together. And we don't even know what kind of bag of salts you know can await. But we see it as like you have a small bag of salt at the beginning and then each time seeing how you communicated through it, how people reacted, how you maneuvered. Can you eat that bag of salt together?

#### **4.5.2 – Post-COVID Takeaways and Reflections**

At the end of the interviews, I asked the couples to reflect on their experience of living together throughout COVID-19 and assess their level of relationship satisfaction. In every case, I noticed partners' faces light up as they spoke about feeling satisfied, at ease, and confident in their dynamic. This was often a moment of gratitude and pride in their ability to overcome this hurdle and come out on the other side stronger. Many of the couples expressed gratitude in relation to being handed an opportunity to spend an increased amount of quality time together, in comparison to non-COVID times. Couples communicated that this resulted in partners feeling better equipped to take on future challenges together as a team. Evan and Anita expressed this sentiment at the conclusion of their interview:

A: It was almost like we didn't have as much distraction. I feel like we had a lot more time to really get to know each other and spend time with each other. And I was telling my

friends, like, I think it changed in the sense of, when you start dating you get to do dates and activities and things like that. But I feel like we got really used to just talking and spending time with each other, without other things going on. I think relationships are hard work. And I think that the pandemic was such a way to really get yourself into a situation where there's a lot of challenges coming all at once, but I think I'm really satisfied with how we communicate and how we take care of each other. We have a lot of fun together and that's not to say we don't argue or have fights about dumb things because that happens all the time. But I think that we've really grown and I just feel so heard.

E: My parents always bring up the point of like, there's more challenges that lie ahead. Yes, the pandemic was very stressful but there will be future challenges with work, challenges with family... But I think given everything that we went through with the pandemic, I think we would be equipped, as a unit or a team, to take on those challenges.

Linda and Claire also spoke about their ability to now engage in difficult conversations with more ease:

I think now we're more comfortable with bringing things up to each other. I've never been this comfortable in a relationship like talking about the intricacies of sex for example. I would talk about sex before, but now it's like we talk about things that bother us, like with the arousal thing, and we don't get outwardly offended.

At this concluding portion of the interview I also gave couples the opportunity to discuss specific ways that these built upon strategies are showing up in their current post-COVID lives. Donette and Aly spoke about these skills in the context of Donette's recent pregnancy:

My body now has a lot of needs that are quite immediate and of course there's mood swings and all sorts of stuff, and I see the communication coming through there. With figuring out parenting and baby things, good communication I think comes down to a recognition and taking each other at good faith of, you know, what you're telling me is real and serious and important.

Lastly, Leanna and Caroline shared their outlook on life post-COVID and how meaningful their time together has become:

Early in our relationship we had all these thoughts and ideas of what was gonna happen next and we wanted to do a lot of travelling... And then life was on pause for 2 years. But in a way, you can't be on pause. It's the fact that you're able to turn and make the best of it, and accept that this is your reality. People always said, like, "Oh my God well, if you could live together during COVID like, you're fine" because it was circumstantially around us just not ideal, but we loved it anyway. Even though now you have to readjust back into the real world and for example, spending less time together is so traumatic [laughs], I think that in general we developed a good communication style, routines, and quality time that even though things get busy now we still look forward to going on our walk or doing our little things and having our quality time.



## 4.6 – Conclusion

Couples who were cohabitating during COVID-19 had the chance to take advantage of the pandemic's conceivable benefits. Due to a decline in the typical responsibilities of jobs, social lives, and various other obligations couples were able to devote more time to one another. With more time spent together, they had the chance to interact more deeply, engage in new activities together, and forge stronger bonds. Couples had the ability to have more in-depth discussions and improve their communication. Lack of external influences and time constraints encouraged candid and open dialogue, improving appreciation of one another's needs, worries, and desires.

Further, couples had to work together as a unit to navigate and address COVID-induced obstacles byway of dyadic coping. They also had to get used to new routines, handling domestic duties, and figuring out how to support both their own and one another's well-being. Their capacity to function as a team and develop relational resilience was bolstered by this cooperative coping approach. Couples also had more leisure time at home to engage in novel activities and explore new pastimes or mutual interests that they may have brushed aside on account of busy schedules. Participating in these activities together revived their passion, forged fresh memories, and consolidated their sense of self as a couple. Lastly, COVID-19 and the ensuing quarantine periods brought about unexpected difficulties including ambiguity, loneliness, and elevated anxiety. Overcoming these obstacles together helped the pair develop relational resilience. This ability for couples to adapt, encourage one another, and problem-solve strengthened their bond and will hopefully help them endure future obstacles.

## **Chapter 5**

# **5 Findings: Gender Roles and Female Same-Sex Experiences in COVID-19**

## **5.1 Introduction**

The manner in which people interpret their roles and allied behaviors are strongly influenced by conventional social norms related to gender expression. This study was designed to gain insight into how heterosexual and same-sex women's intimate relationships, especially cohabitation and relational resilience, are shaped by the unique conditions of COVID-19.

This chapter explores the study participants' perspectives on different facets of gender and gender roles in the context of their relationships, which is followed by a focus on female participants' experiences relative to dominant constructions of femininity. I then explore additional insights from the female same-sex couples, this time in relation to issues of external fetishization and discrimination of being in a non-traditional relationship and how that potentially equipped the pair with skills needed to overcome the pandemic hurdle. External fetishization in this case refers to remarks of a sexual nature made towards female same-sex couples by cis men, particularly if the women in the relationship are both femme-presenting. These latter data, in particular, address the current gap in COVID-19 relationship literature that seemed to leave female same-sex couples out of the conversation.

## **5.2 Gender Roles**

### **5.2.1 Relational Gender Expectations**

When asked about the role that gender played in the study couples' dynamics, the participants often began by talking about the gendered expectations that informed how they grew up, including messages in the media and in their personal lives about how men and women should contribute to a romantic relationships and domestic settings like the household. Many of these expectations reflect long-standing notions of masculinity and femininity that are based primarily on patriarchal ideals regarding reproduction, other forms of work (paid, household chores), and economic contribution (Adams & Coltrane, 2005). Participants reflected on what they were taught about men, who were typically presumed to be the sole breadwinners who provide for the financial needs of their household. Male participants spoke about being frequently urged to exhibit proto-male qualities like power, assertiveness, and authority. On the other hand, women participants mentioned expectations like taking on the role of the housewife, managing household duties, and emotionally supporting their spouses. Evan and Anita discussed how these dominant notions of gender impacted their response to the pandemic and their relationship. Specifically, they spoke about the messages they received from the families with regards to how they should be handling COVID-related crises that came up:

E: I feel like- And we often joke about this, that I feel I have to be a provider. It's not to say that I come from a background where it was a single income home, but my impression was just that the guy has to contribute a lot in order to support his family and so I kind of feel like even though we don't have kids or pets or things of that nature that I have to kind of be very driven for the day that we ultimately do have a family together, or I guess pets. During COVID my parents often had conversations with me where they were like 'you know you need to be strong during this time', and that sort of thing.

A: I think gender does have an impact in, yeah, the messages you receive about the way you're supposed to be acting. I think also as women, you're expected to be the caretaker. Like for example when you got sick- Evan didn't get COVID one time but he got some other thing during COVID and it was extremely stressful. But I was basically taking care of you, like changing your shirt at night when you were sweating, taking your temperature. I think I just naturally took on the caretaker role.

Linda and Claire are a female same-sex couple who shared a similar experience of receiving traditionally gendered messages from their social networks when they got new furniture during the pandemic. Claire described herself as masculine-presenting while Linda is more feminine-presenting, and this has shown up in the expectations that others have in relation to their domestic and sexual roles:

C: Half of it's like gender expression, where obviously I think I'm more masculine and you present more femininely. So it definitely impacts the way that our relationship is perceived. Like I've had friends come over and literally be like, I think in the most kind way that they could, they'd comment on our sex life and there'd be assumptions.

L: Or even we got this futon off Kijiji, and I was building it while Claire was talking to her friend. And then he's like, 'why is Linda doing that over there? Isn't that your job?' And I was like, girl I'm the one who builds all the furniture.

C: I hate building furniture [laughs].

The couples in the study are progressively aiming for equitable relationships, in which tasks and responsibilities are distributed more fairly based on people's talents and passions rather than according to gendered expectations. This promotes more candid dialogue, reverence for one another, and collaborative problem-solving. Couples have the chance to develop partnerships that celebrate variability, encourage personal autonomy, and work towards relationships where gender has the kind of impact they want to see and is not necessarily the defining feature. Tina and Glen echo this sentiment when describing how domestic duties are split up in their household:

G: I've always actually really opposed the idea of if somebody does something, they're taking on that role because of their gender. I really don't like that, and I don't like the idea that somebody would expect me to behave a certain way just because I'm a guy. I think ideally what we are working towards is just equal sharing of everything.

T: I would say like maybe to a certain extent the types of activities that we do around the house like for example, Glen does a lot more of the maintenance kind of things whenever something is broken or if any major heavy digging needs to be done. Whereas I am more involved with the cooking and cleaning. More recently we have kind of switched things up and do have a bit more balance with that where Glen helps out a lot more with some of the 'feminine roles' and correspondingly I'm involved with other projects that, you know, might involve using equipment.

G: I think Tina is very skilled as a chef and I think that I tend to do, you know, more of the manual stuff not because I prefer it, I like cooking just as much, it's more that I think Tina prefers not doing as much of the manual stuff.

Similarly, Laura, in a heterosexual relationship with Conrad, shared her experience when it comes to balancing gender roles within their relationship and how reciprocity in terms of spending and gift-giving looks for them:

We very much see each other as equals on an equal playing field and as someone who grew up predominantly raised by their father, I have a very close relationship with him and Conrad has a very close relationship with his mom and it was always kind of like we'll go out for dinner and maybe he'll get it one time and I'll get it the next time. And I think I do in a sense, as the female, I do enjoy when he instigates being like 'oh, let's go on a date' or like 'here I brought you flowers', but at the same time I like to show in my own way, on his terms of what he appreciates, an equal or similar kind of thing like 'oh, do you wanna go throw the football outside?' or 'do you wanna go watch your favorite show?' So I think for us it's trying to not necessarily follow those norms, but do what works for us and I think generally those gender roles do come into play sexually quite a bit, but otherwise, in all other emotional aspects, it doesn't.

### **5.2.2 Gender Expression**

Women have traditionally been assigned very rigid notions of femininity, that work to govern and restrict their behaviour, appearance, and goals (Fielding-Miller et al., 2016). These limitations are

created by societal expectations, cultural precedents, and fundamentally entrenched gender preconceptions that are frequently passed down through the generations. There has been a rising understanding of the necessity to dismantle these limitations and redefine femininity in recent years among the LGBTQ+ community and beyond. Women, men, and non-binary folk are questioning conventional norms and asserting their autonomy. There is no rulebook on being a woman, thus the idea of femininity is developing to encompass a wider spectrum of expressions and representations. For instance, conversations concerning gender expression, wardrobe, and the idea of "suitable" clothing for varying genders are the subject of recent large debates (Glickman, 2015). Disputes emerge when people experience limitations or prejudice because they defy gendered dress conventions, such as males wearing skirts, notably within educational or professional environments.

Femininity refers to a group of cultural and societal characteristics that society associates with being a woman, including qualities like compassion, providing care, and showing emotion. From an optical perspective, femininity frequently involves traits and appearances that are typically linked to being a woman, which include skirts, dresses, cosmetics, and hairdos that highlight elegance and tenderness (Helgeson, 1994). It draws attention to the manufactured aspect of gender, showing how society's conventions and standards, as opposed to biological variables, impact behaviors and roles depending on perceived gender. It further emphasizes the need to question conventional gender norms and prejudices, encourage a culture of inclusion, and acknowledge that people can showcase their gender identity in unique and meaningful ways. Study participants shared the ways in which these confines have shaped their relationship with their own femininity, and this sub-section will focus specifically on how the female same-sex participants navigate

societal expectations surrounding appearance. In heterosexual and female same-sex partnerships, cultural expectations about femininity frequently result in the notion that one partner should take on a more conventionally feminine role, while the other undertakes a traditionally masculine role.

This can be seen in Alice's experience growing up:

When I was younger, I knew and from a very young, that I wanted to be with a woman, but to me that meant I had to be like a man. And so I had started my life as a tomboy, very masculine going into high school. Always kind of felt like I have to be that way to get the girl who is the feminine girl. And that was what I understood at that time. But as I got older and got more comfortable with my sexuality, I realized I can just be me, whoever I want to be. And that has become a lot more 'feminine' over the years. I think that's because I've accepted that there are so many different components of 'masculine' and 'feminine' in every person, so I can just be who I want to be. It doesn't mean I have to be a certain way, and so I've I think become a little bit more 'feminine' in a lot of what I do and a lot of how I present myself or how I behave. And I feel less concerned about being vulnerable. Even in my relationship, being able to be a little bit more like touchy feely and cutesy and stuff like that. All those things that you think are so 'feminine', you know.

The quotes used around the word "feminine" reflect how Alice is critiquing the stereotypical definition of what it means to be a woman and present in a "girly" fashion. This critique of a one-size-fits-all approach to femininity further shows up in Alice's adult life, specifically in her place of work:



I think for me it's maybe that I don't necessarily present as a feminine female at all times, and so I'll get comments or surprises like, 'oh my god you're wearing your hair down' and it's like yeah well, I just don't normally do that. I don't like it in my face but it's not anything noteworthy. I also think that probably has led to me gaining respect in a lot of areas where it maybe otherwise wouldn't, especially with male colleagues, because I'm not as feminine presenting.

From a young age Alice was suggested the idea that femininity comes with restrictions and rules. If women want to be well-received by men for romantic purposes, then they ought to be passive, femme-presenting, and subordinate. However, if they want to gain the respect of their male coworkers or romantically engage with a woman then they need to adopt masculine features, including dominance, a conventionally masculine clothing style, and a provider mindset. This is further showcased in Claire and Linda's recount of Claire's experience as a masculine presenting cis queer woman:

C: Well I can't go into public bathrooms at Western. That is one thing that sucks is not being able to go into gendered spaces because I've had women yell at me and kick me out and I'm not confrontational, so I'll just be like 'okay', and I often will make my voice deeper in situations where we either need the safety or if I think someone's gonna be really uncomfortable with me, and I've been doing that for most of my life. So it's kind of like I'm used to it but when I think about it, it's kind of sad.

L: Claire is usually mistaken for a man in public, unless it's other lesbians or gay men. But like you said it does afford us a lot of safety. I've just noticed that it's almost like you have to be kind of in one category or the other and people will force you into those categories. Like I found people will refuse to believe that Claire actually identifies as a woman. So they will use - which obviously using they/them pronouns in the beginning when you're meeting someone is great and no problem with that - but then I'll be like 'she, she, her thing, she' and then she'll also be like 'yes, as a woman' and just making it very obvious but they just refuse to use her correct pronouns. And not that it matters that much, like it's not the biggest issue in the whole world, but it's just so weird and it just happens here so often for some reason.

In order to challenge the restrictive boundaries of femininity in intimate relationships, it is important to have open lines of communication, redefine gender expectations, and affirm each other's agency and sense of self. Many of the female same-sex participants discussed doing this by trying to be attentive to these boundaries and working to release one another from them in ways that support their individual development, self-expression, and collaborative problem-solving. In this way, couples have the chance to create healthier, more rewarding connections founded on respect, equality, and a recognition of each partner's unique personality and desires.

Veronica, in a relationship with Joyce, shared her relationship with her femininity, expressing a sense of developed self-assurance and comfort with its fluid nature. She further speaks about her subjectivity, being a sexual person who's queer, sort of butch, and balances feminine and masculine ideals:

I think I've always been fairly confident and comfortable as a cis female. Since I started exploring the queer side of my sexual identity, I have very much come into my own as not a butch but pretty close. Like I'm comfortable and happy and very at peace with being the “man” in the relationship and even when I was dating a male, it was kind of my role. But as much as I am the ‘man’ in the relationship, I also very much revel in my femininity at times and so finding people who are comfortable with both aspects of me was always important to me. I will happily work on my car while wearing the most feminine thing that I have in my closet.

The ability of same-sex couples to navigate conventional gender stereotypes in unique ways is one of the many strengths that they bring to this research. Based on their individual needs, wants, and values, same-sex couples are able to reimagine gender norms, expectations, and relationships. They can design frameworks for their interpersonal interactions that are more flexible, versatile, and representative of their unique and shared identities.

## **5.3 Female Same-Sex Experiences of Exclusion and Response to COVID-19**

### **5.3.1 Fetishizing & Other Experiences of Discrimination**

In an attempt to bridge the research gap, this study seeks to highlight the specific experience of female same-sex relationships with regards to unwelcome fetishizing attention and exclusion on the basis of their sexuality during COVID-19 and beyond. Fetishizing often comes in the form of hypersexual objectification and predatory attention that views female same-sex couples

as objects of desire (Marquis, 2021). In addition to fetishizing, the most talked about themes that emerged from this portion of the interviews were: discrimination experienced during COVID-19, and the inherent sense of adaptability and familiarity that comes from participating in a non-traditional relationship structure such as a same-sex relationship, as well as how that contributed to their coping with the quarantine periods. This section will discuss experiences of female same-sex couples being fetishized when in public and discriminated against when trying to build a future (i.e. finding living space, adjusting to new workplaces, securing a mortgage, etc.).

Leanna and Caroline describe their experience with fetishization and how it impacted their social activities during COVID-19:

C: I think one thing I've really noticed being in a same-sex relationship is the attention, and sometimes negative attention, that we get. I noticed that we got that a lot when we lived in our old place where sometimes it was funny remarks, and sometimes it was disgusting gestures. I guess the attention, depending on the circumstance, it definitely will leave me concerned about are we safe? Is it going to go past just the remarks? Am I being followed?

L: And it's like we're aware that we're both on the smaller side. We're aware that for example in the winter, when we go on walks, we're in long dress coats and the two of us are holding hands and it's obvious that we're two women. And so when we lived in that sketchier area, depending on what time it was and where we were, we would be a little bit more aware and maybe not hold hands in some areas downtown because even if it's not gonna amount to anything, we're both I think aware enough that we're okay to not hold

hands for five seconds to not even attract the attention that could lead to something. Since we are both more feminine-presenting we find we're often hypersexualized in these instances and I think it would be a bit different if let's say one was more masculine. Like when we were downtown with the young university guys, the things that they were yelling from their balcony I think wouldn't have been the case if one of us was more masculine because it was stuff that was geared towards fetishy feminine things, you know?

Alongside this hypersexualization, the discomfort from heterosexual folks when it comes to dialogue surrounding same-sex relationships was also raised often. Caroline discussed this in the context of buying a house and socializing with her coworkers in the workplace:

Even when buying our house sometimes there would be some awkwardness around it and people didn't know how to refer to us, and sometimes that can have negative impacts. Like I was speaking with a financial advisor and he thought I was Leanna's friend and it's like you know you don't buy a house with your friend. It seemed kind of ridiculous but it's almost like people don't have the right terminology. And even sometimes at work there's uncomfortableness around it in terms of how to address her properly. I think because of this I tend to seem a little more closed off to my coworkers and not as open with them in terms of my personal life.

Bella and Erin share a similar experience when they were looking for a place to live during COVID: "So we had found a really nice place and I went to sign for the house, but when the

landlord realized that we are dating each other, he started embarrassing us with uncomfortable remarks, so we ended up not signing with them and had to find another place”.

This type of discrimination suggests the idea that female same-sex couples should be aware of how they express themselves, how open they are with the people around them, and that in certain settings, it is safer to mask one’s sexual identity. As a result, female-sex couples have long developed a heightened sense of unity and security within the relationship that has allowed them to exist and grow within a society that is not yet wholly accepting (Connolly, 2005).

### **5.3.2 – Developed Creativity and Adaptability**

Same-sex couples have a history of extraordinary ingenuity and adaptability in the face of hardship (Zacks et al., 1988). During COVID-19, these attributes came in handy when navigating the various challenges posed by the pandemic. In the past, same-sex couples have used their flexibility to reinterpret the meaning of familial and other support networks. In response to having minimal social support, many of them have formed "chosen families" while creating robust communities of friends, allies, and LGBTQ+ community members (Kim & Feyissa, 2021). In overcoming the particular difficulties posed by the pandemic, which disproportionately affected marginalised populations, same-sex couples exhibited this developed capacity for creativity and adaptation. As described by Donnette and Aly:

D: I would call myself ambiamorous like I'm happy to be with partners in ways that work for them and for us, in our relationship, I'm super happy to be monogamous with Aly at

the moment but I let her know at the start that since it is her first relationship with a woman I'd be open to exploring whatever works for us both.

A: Being in a queer relationship is just like... there isn't necessarily a guidebook or playbook or, you know, models of relationships that are available to us. So we talk about imagination and creativity a lot and those being values in our family and in our life. And I think that kind of plays into dealing with change and being creative in terms of like, how are we gonna get through this together? And you know what does that look like? So I don't know if that's tied, but I think there's something there around resilience that involves this imagination and creativity of we're going to find a way to get through this together and do what we need to do to stay sane in this craziness.

D: I think queerness has a lot to do with how we responded to the pandemic and navigating things like the survival aspect. It's a generalization, but I think the systems that queers have to navigate are also like- a lot of it is survival or histories of survival. And so I think for some folks who maybe haven't experienced that sort of challenge or haven't thought about how people perceive them... I think all of that is stuff that queers have had to navigate for so long. I think there's a huge culture of examining coping and examining communication and feelings and it's almost made fun of sometimes and I think has become a stereotype, but it got us through the pandemic.

### **5.3.3 – Inherent Level of Comfort and Understanding**

Alongside the developed creativity and adaptability that female same-sex couples brought with them into the pandemic, the same-sex study couples also spoke about feeling an inherent sense of comfort and familiarity in being intimate with another woman and how that impacted their relational dynamics and experience during the quarantine periods. Being with a person who understands what it is like to be a woman seemed to help partners develop a solid foundation of compassion and appreciation. They were able to recognise one another's personal struggles, societal expectations, and gender-related difficulties better, thus bolstering their connection and ability to engage in dyadic coping. The female same-sex couples in this study appeared to feel more protected and understood because of their common experiences as women, which encouraged greater openness, candour, and vulnerability. The intimacy they experienced on an emotional level strengthened the ties between the couple and seemed to improve the quality of their partnership as a whole. Linda and Claire discuss this in relation to their intimacy, communication skills and division of household chores:

L: Obviously there are people in lesbian spaces that are only comfortable in one sexual role, but I've found it's so much more flexible and women are just more open to communicating and trying things. And there's, in my experience, a lot more of a respect for boundaries and stuff like that. I feel a lot more comfortable communicating boundaries with Claire and I guess that all comes down to the mutual respect.

C: Despite the pressure that I often felt to be the man or whatever, for lack of a better word, I think I still allowed myself to feel some level of vulnerability and be emotional with Linda. And so when I was upset, I would be upset and I wouldn't always hide it, or at least



not well. So that kind of allowed us to have discussions that I think wouldn't have been possible otherwise. It also allowed us to progress our relationship and have a more vulnerable relationship, which I think brought us closer.

L: What I've heard from a lot of my straight female friends is that there was so much tension because COVID really highlighted the inequalities in their relationship and especially when it came to household labor. Or even when it came to who was expected to sacrifice for childcare and who is expected to have an individual workplace if it was limited space in an apartment, like, who was prioritized? And I think that we were lucky in that a lot of those factors didn't really exist and even I know when COVID first started, I was doing more of the household chores and stuff like that cause I wasn't working and then at some point that naturally shifted depending on circumstances.

Joyce described a similar experience of exploring her personal boundaries in the bedroom and how being with a woman who understood that, allowed her to expand her sexual horizons:

I think it comes down a lot to communication and having those conversations and that trust. Just being able to say what I am or am not comfortable with, what I do or don't want, Veronica being able to ask things but also being completely open to learning things or being rebuffed or redirected. I always know with her that whatever I am not comfortable with is off the table immediately. I always know that I can withdraw or redirect consent at any moment and it will be 100% respected. And I find that interestingly, that kind of... Expands my boundaries? Like if it was someone who I didn't know if they were going to

stop when I asked like, you kind of have to stop it before you reach the point where you're actually uncomfortable. Whereas when it's with someone who you know will stop instantly, you can actually kind of reach out and be like, okay, where is the boundary, is it here? No, we're okay with that, is it [raises hand higher and higher] No? okay. We're okay with that. Is it here? Don't like that. Okay, we're back to the other one. Instead of having to be like, I don't know if I like this step or if I'll like the next two steps so we're gonna try to cut it off here before it gets to the third step [chuckles]. And so I've had a chance to learn a lot about myself and my comfort levels and kind of try new things. And she's been very supportive in that.

Lastly, Leanna and Caroline discuss how this inherent level of ease and mutual understanding shows up in their relationship and how their closeness and compatibility made for an overall enjoyable quarantine experience:

L: There's something about being a little bit more on the same wavelength when you're both women. I think even when you live together, like I'm sure it's not the case for everyone, but I think in general women might experience and have more similar expectations of living. Like cleanliness for example, how we do things around the house, I feel like we both really participate and like our expectations of living together, I think are a lot more on set. I think that there's a lot more emotional communication that happens on a more probably regular basis too, because we're both women. And I think that we have a lot of empathy for each other, so for a lot of situations I think it's easier to communicate.

C: Intimacy is also not so much one-sided or for one person's benefit but it's more equal in that respect.

L: I do think that so much of intimacy is mental and emotional. Maybe that's the difference where it's not just pure physicality, I think it's a reflection of being in tune and emotionally taking care of each other, being in a good mental space, and communicating that causes this ripple or snowball effect. I don't know, it's just awesome what can I say? [laughs] It's so hard to compare because I don't know how being not gay or not a woman would be but I'm trying to think of the people we know and what their experience looked like... I think that for us it was that we really had each other emotionally and just developed a really deep connection and so we loved spending time together. So during COVID, when people would struggle we were like, 'really? we're having such a good time.' You know what I mean? We felt lucky. I think seeing that stuff around us made us feel really grateful for one another.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

Societal perceptions have steadily changed over the past few years, with many social groups, advocates, and individuals tackling and reframing conventional gender standards (Barker & Iantaffi, 2019). However, gender remains under attack, and these contested issues tend to place harsh expectations on individuals based on their gender identity and the numerous traditional gender roles that continue to exist as persistent holdovers from the past. For women, this shows up in the messages they receive about needing to be nurturing, caring for their partner and the home, as well as dressing in a hyperfeminine fashion. For men, this looks like providing financially

for the relationship, staying “strong” during moments of hardship, and taking care of the manual labour required around the home.

The study couples' responses to COVID-19 indicate strong intersections between gendered societal expectations, narratives around femininity, and the intrinsic comfort and flexibility felt by female same-sex couples. Female-sex couples showcased their ability to adapt by shifting gender roles within their partnerships, as a result of their propensity to challenge social standards. Heterosexual couples shared a similar shift towards a more equal distribution of household chores, moving away from the traditional gender messaging that they grew up with. This chapter further showcased experiences of objectification and exclusion experienced by female same-sex couples both during the pandemic and outside of it. This demonstrated a need to work together as a team, find community within the dyad, and practice relational empathy. As a result, the study female same-sex couples frequently found it simpler to adjust and navigate through novel experiences during lockdown and working from home, as well as communicate through issues connected to intimacy and mental health, because they had an elevated sense of comfort and commonality as women. This innate knowledge helped partners support one another's needs, rethink domestic chores, and balance caregiving responsibilities, which in turn encouraged relational resilience and enabled them to navigate the pandemic's challenges and future challenges together as a team.

## **Chapter 6**

### **6 Discussion**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

The main objective of this chapter is to analyse and contextualise the project findings in relation to previous research on cohabitating romantic relationships during COVID-19. Given the lack of directly relevant qualitative research on many aspects of my project, references from popular culture (i.e. online newspapers and magazine, television series) are also employed to situate my study findings. The limits of the study, recommendations, and prospective paths for further research are also highlighted. The goal of this qualitative study was to investigate how the conditions surrounding COVID-19, specifically the quarantine periods, impacted cohabitating intimate relationships. In particular, I was interested in how or if dyadic coping methods, relational resilience, and gender played a role in stress mitigation among the participating couples. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with eighteen couples (10 heterosexual couples and eight (8) female same-sex couples) using a constructivist framework to address the following study questions:

1. What kinds of relational resilience and dyadic coping strategies are cohabitating heterosexual and female same-sex couples using to mitigate COVID-induced stressors?
2. How are these relational resilience and dyadic coping strategies impacted by the couples' uniquely gendered relationship dynamics?

## **6.2 Study Findings and Current Literature**

### **6.2.1 – COVID-19 as a Catalyst and Magnifying Glass**

One of the most notable findings from this study was that COVID-19 acted as a relational catalyst, prompting couples to embark on their dating journeys, move in together, or get engaged sooner than they would have otherwise. As a result of stay-at-home orders and restricted opportunities for social engagements, the conditions surrounding the pandemic produced an overall feeling of

urgency, rendering it more convenient for couples to live together, versus being alone. Participants also found themselves engaging in deeper discussions and addressing difficult matters earlier on in their relationships than they may have if not for the pandemic. In many instances, living together under quarantine eliminated the need for individuals to showcase their "best self" to their partners, which is sometimes the case in relationships, especially at the beginning (Barton, 2015).

These findings echo those of Marie Ospina (2021), who wrote about lockdown and couples for the *Metro*. She also notes the trend of a speedy move-in process during COVID and highlighted experiences similar to those shared by the participants in my study. For example, Ospina (2021) writes about a couple who moved in together just three weeks after meeting, explaining that their decision not only enhanced the financial health of their relationship, it also boosted the mental health of each member of the couple.

The pandemic also served as a magnifying glass that exposed or highlighted pre-existing difficulties in relationships in a pronounced way. Partners in the study had few options but to tackle these challenges head-on in the absence of extraneous distractions. This, however, gave the couples a platform to engage in uncomfortable conversations and work on fixing these concerns, which ultimately strengthened many of the relationships. Some of the specific challenges exposed by COVID-19 included an absence of quality time, poor communication skills, and a lack of conflict resolution strategies. These challenges and the overall magnifying effect of living under the pandemic were also identified in season 1 episode 10, "The COVID Special", of the hit Showtime program *Couples Therapy* (Kriegman & Steinberg, 2020). Viewers see just how the epidemic affects the show's couples, both in terms of intensifying existing issues and creating

opportunity for development and reconciliation. *Couples Therapy* is an engaging and emotionally charged television show that provides an inside look at the difficulties of romantic relationships. This docuseries follows real-life couples as they negotiate the ups and downs of their relationships with the help of professional couples counsellor, Orna Guralnik.

The series offers a fascinating examination of interpersonal connections, vulnerability, and the search of long-term happiness in the field of romance. Two couples in “The COVID Special” specifically stood out as I was reviewing the episode during my research. The first couple were Nina and Jon, who struggled with issues surrounding infidelity and trust, discovered that the quarantines provided them with a chance to concentrate on re-establishing trust and closeness (Kriegman & Steinberg, 2020). The second were Lauren and Sarah, who had a similarly rocky dynamic, and spoke about their time living together throughout lockdown and being forced to face their communication challenges and adjust to another method of communicating as a result of the pandemic (Kriegman & Steinberg, 2020).

### **6.2.2 – Cohabitation in Quarantine**

Cohabiting couples had the dual challenge of adjusting to their new living situation – that of living together - as well as the worldwide upheavals caused by COVID-19. As the couples navigated shifting relational dynamics, boundaries, and personal needs, adaptability became a vital skill to hone in ways that were new or more refined than those employed in earlier stages of the relationship. They attempted to find harmony between doing things together and alone, honouring the other person's boundaries and need for solitude, and they also worked on articulating their wants and needs. This period of increased closeness also brought with it certain tensions such as

needing to navigate different routines, and suppressing instinctual reactions while learning to communicate in a way that served each partner's needs.

Many of the study couples discovered that making the effort to create extra room space and reconfigure things spatially was critical to improving their living experience. This additional room enabled both parties to have a customised space that they could tailor to their satisfaction. It allowed the couple to feel a sense of control of their living situation and offered a mental and physical getaway when desired, assisting with the prevention of a sense of relational constriction and the preservation of a sense of self in the partnership. To my knowledge, there currently exists no research that has examined carving out different physical spaces in cohabiting relationship contexts, which makes this novel observation a unique contribution to the literature about maintaining relational health while living together.

Couples also recognised the significance of finding a balance between closeness and individuality, particularly during periods of increased connection and stress, such as the COVID-19 epidemic. They were able to enjoy precious moments together while also protecting their own time and identity with the use of their set environments and boundaries. This prevented relationship exhaustion and increased relationship fulfilment, which is in line with previous work on maintaining a sense of self within a relationship, specifically that of Firestone (2011), who argues that in order to remain compatible in a relationship partners are encouraged to upkeep their hobbies and interests as well as have friendships outside of the relationship (See also Perel, 2006).

### **6.2.3 – Dyadic Coping**



My study findings illuminate the importance of dyadic coping, in which partners actively collaborate to cope with hardships. Proponents of dyadic coping recognise the impact of stress on the partnership as a whole and emphasise the need for transparency, pragmatic problem-solving, and shared support (Falconier et al., 2015; Levesque et al., 2014). Couples who used dyadic coping throughout the quarantine periods discussed being better prepared to handle hardship in tandem and establish a solid support system (Donato et al., 2021; Genç et al., 2021; Randall et al., 2021). The study couples' coping mechanisms relied heavily on effective communication, which highlights the importance of being attentive, empathising, and addressing our partners with compassion and understanding. Partners sought to tackle challenges as they came up, preventing unsettled disagreements from accumulating. Effective communication enabled couples to handle stress with greater ease and build a solid framework for their relationships by developing a sense of shared understanding and collaboration (Malouff et al., 2015). Furthermore, as couples endeavored to sustain and nurture their relationships during quarantine, they increasingly emphasized the importance of intention. According to Allo Health (2023), intention is described as the fundamental element for achieving a successful relationship. It entails proactively resolving any concerns and investing in the necessary time and efforts to cultivate your connection, whether this involves engaging in quality time, implementing a self-care routine, or actively collaborating on tasks or objectives together. Despite the lack of feasible conventionally romantic activities, partners in this study intentionally agreed upon devoting quality time to one another in unique ways. Participating in novel activities, remodelling initiatives, introducing one another to new skills, and even exploring new cuisines gave possibilities for self-development and improved the couples' relations. These insights are in line with both academic and non-academic sources that

discuss the use of intentionality and self-expanding activities to promote intimacy and satisfaction in romantic relationships (Allo Health, 2023; Muise et al., 2019; Sharpe, 2021).

Throughout the quarantine periods, numerous couples also adopted physical activities such as regular walks, exercises, and nature excursions as a form of enhancing their connections. Participating in these physical activities often signalled a change in environment and could also enhance intimacy by acting as a coping method for stress management and psychological well-being. These findings are consistent with the outcomes of qualitative and quantitative studies that indicate how joint physical activity can increase relationship satisfaction and intimacy, as well as positively contribute to the individual and relational health of the couple (Berli et al., 2018; Pauly et al., 2020; Sackett-Fox et al., 2021).

#### **6.2.4 – Relational Resilience**

Another key finding that emerged during the study was the development of couples' relational resilience, defined by Venter (2009) as the capacity of a pair to overcome difficulties and employ relational mechanisms that empower them as a unit to emerge stronger from shared challenges and evolve into more resourceful individuals, both separately and together. When asked what resilience looked like in their relationships, the study couples described it as the capacity to withstand hard times, rebound from setbacks, and retain a strong relationship in the face of hardship. Couples further recognised that resilience meant putting their partnership in perspective, concentrating on the bigger picture, and not fixating on day-to-day conflicts, but rather choosing to continue to cherish and encourage one another, especially during difficult times. Analogies like "sitting through the fire together" and "eating a bag of salt" demonstrated how persevering

through problems and confronting obstacles in unison can enhance relationship quality and satisfaction. Couples realised that difficulties are an inevitable component of romantic relationships, but their devotion to one another enabled them to overcome these difficulties and come out stronger. After experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic together, partners indicated a high degree of intimate pleasure and progress within their dynamic. These findings echo the results of research surrounding relationship maintenance and resilience during COVID-19 (Aydogan et al., 2022; Mazur et al., 2023).

Couples were ultimately thankful for the increased time that they were able to spend together while quarantined, as this time helped them strengthen their bond and learn more about one another. This post-COVID gratitude was influenced by the successful communication, personal progress, and capacity to cherish the little things that was developed in the dyad over time. Partners learned to freely share difficulties, earnestly listen, and handle challenging discussions with compassion and respect. These abilities not only assisted them in dealing with the tribulations of COVID-19, but they also established a solid basis for their continued partnership. Several quantitative studies echo these ideas by offering statistical outcomes to demonstrate an increase in gratitude towards one's partner during times of heightened dyadic support in COVID-19 (Jiang et al., 2021; Militello, 2020). Specifically, the University of Denver carried out a study that comprised of 300 respondents. Most notably, 68% reported feeling more gratitude for their partners after the pandemic and 60% felt that COVID-19 had a positive impact on their dynamic (Militello, 2020).

### **6.2.5 – Gender Roles**

Gender roles, as outlined by Blackstone (2003), are the positions that people have been historically expected to fill in accordance with their sex, which are often rooted in or referred to through binary frameworks involving two genders, those of women and men. In many cultural settings, there remain assumptions about the emotional tendencies and capacities of different genders with women, for instance, often being assumed to be more caring than males (Blackstone, 2003). As a result, the conventional understanding of the feminine gender role specifies that women ought to be subservient to men and behave in a caring and nurturing manner (Blackstone, 2003). Men on the other hand are expected to show minimal emotion, exert dominance and leadership, provide financial support, as well as make critical choices involving the family and household (Blackstone, 2003). However, contemporary understanding acknowledges that there are multiple gender roles and identities beyond this binary construct, reflecting a more inclusive and diverse perspective on human gender experiences (Barker & Iantaffi, 2019).

The study respondents recounted the gendered expectations they were raised with, especially within the context of family as well as mainstream media, that shaped their idea of how men and women ought to participate in romantic relationships and home life. These norms were frequently founded on patriarchal ideas of gender and sex and reflect heteronormative social expectations regarding women's expected role as a nurturing emotional support system (Adams & Coltrane, 2005). Male respondents reported frequently experiencing pressure to demonstrate attributes such as strength, dominance, and leadership, mirroring the conventional position as the main provider.

Several couples were consciously challenging and redefining these traditional constructions of gender norms in their partnerships. They attempted to allocate duties on the basis of individual

abilities and preferences rather than traditional gender roles, which was often discussed as helping encourage open dialogue, respect for one another, and collaborative problem-solving. In Dew's (2021) analysis of literature pertaining to marriage and cohabitation, he corroborated these results by highlighting a transition away from conventional gender roles within households. This shift entails women increasingly engaging in paid employment, resulting in a more balanced distribution of responsibilities that aligns with the specific needs and dynamics of each couple.

Another study finding highlighted the nuanced experiences involved with resisting or not adhering to traditional expressions of gender identity. Some individuals, particularly those in same-sex partnerships, demonstrated ease with gender fluidity. They highlighted their capacity to mix conventionally masculine and feminine elements of themselves, therefore defying the tight bounds of the dichotomy between genders. Overall, the couples respected one another's liberty to showcase their gender identity and sought to foster an open and tolerant community within their relationship, and outside of it. These findings echo the research conducted by Eliason & Schope (2007), which focused on the process of identity formation in individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, transgender, or bisexual. They discovered that many of these individuals often displayed behaviors that were considered "gender atypical" as they navigated their journey of sexual identity exploration (Eliason & Schope, 2007).

However inclusive the couples reported being towards one another, we do not live in a society that is as forgiving or accepting. Several female same-sex participants talked about being misgendered when out in public and dealing with preconceptions concerning their gender identity based on their physical appearance. This misgendering was further reported to be followed by actions of

ostracism where cis-gender women exhibited overt discomfort sharing a bathroom with a cis-gender female participant that presented more masculine, leaving the participant feeling unsafe and unwelcome. This is not an isolated incident as can be seen by Billson's (2022) article on a cis woman with short hair being misgendered in a public bathroom and harassed as a result. Numerous academic sources speak to this phenomenon as well where transgender, gender-nonconforming, and androgynous individuals are faced with discomfort when trying to use gendered public spaces, namely public bathrooms (Councilor, 2020; Coy-Dibley, 2016; Levitt & Horne, 2002; Platt & Milam, 2018).

### **6.2.6 - Female Same-Sex Experiences of Exclusion and Response to COVID-19**

A pattern that came up in the interviews with the female same-sex couples was that they are frequently subjected to unwanted fetishization by cis-gender men when out in public, which entails hypersexual objectification and unwelcome attention. They feel uneasy concerning their security as a result of the attention they get, which might range from vulgar statements to unpleasant gestures (Marquis, 2021). One couple specifically referenced this experience when discussing their relationship as two femme-presenting women. They shared their concerns about attracting unwanted attention and feeling unsafe when engaging in public displays of intimacy, like holding hands. When being interviewed, one of the partners mentioned: "I noticed that we got that a lot [of attention] when we lived in our old place where sometimes it was funny remarks, and sometimes it was disgusting gestures. I guess the attention, depending on the circumstance, it definitely will leave me concerned about are we safe? Is it going to go past just the remarks? Am I being followed?".

Exclusion related to housing and job environments, which several of the female same-sex couples encountered meant that they were wary about disclosing their sexuality to strangers or unfamiliar people in their daily lives. Similar experiences of discrimination are discussed by Friedman and Colleagues (2013), who note less favourable treatment of same-sex couples in the housing market. In response to these challenges, same-sex couples have reported experiencing a deeper sense of togetherness and safety within their relationships. This heightened bond allows them to thrive in an environment that may not fully embrace their identities and partnerships, as observed by Connolly (2005). The adversity they face externally fosters a stronger internal connection, enabling them to find solace and strength in each other's company in the face of exclusion and discrimination. As said by Donette, in a female same-sex relationship with Aly, "I think the systems that queers have had to navigate, [...] a lot of it is survival or histories of survival. [...] I think there's a huge culture of examining coping and examining communication and feelings [within female same-sex relationships] and it's almost made fun of sometimes [...], but it got us through the pandemic."

The study's female same-sex couples widely expressed a natural sense of ease and understanding within their dynamics, especially in sexual contexts. Partnering with an individual who recognizes the female perspective aided participants in developing greater empathy and admiration for one another. Due to the shared experiences, couples were able to better understand one another's innermost struggles, cultural nuances, and gender-related challenges. This natural sense of comfort and familiarity translated to a generally favourable quarantine experience. This phenomenon is under-studied with no current literature exploring this inherent dynamic of familiarity and understanding among female same-sex couples.

### 6.3 Limitations

The study's principal drawbacks were the lingering effects of the COVID-19 epidemic, the lack of varied demographic representation, and the fact that the interviews were solely dyadic in nature. The couples that were interviewed were predominantly white and came from middle to upper middle class. Having a predominantly white and middle-to-upper-class sample in qualitative research might pose as a drawback because it limits the range of perspectives and experiences captured, which could lead to skewed or incomplete findings that do not accurately reflect the experiences and ideas of the general population. It has long been believed that race and socioeconomic position are social determinants of health (Williams et al., 2010), therefore including this variety of experiences in future research will provide a more comprehensive view of how a global pandemic might affect different romantic relationships. Relationships in which one or both parties identified as transgender, non-binary, or gender nonconforming were not depicted in this study either. Data collected through a broader spectrum of gender identities might have facilitated a more in-depth examination of the way these specific couples and individuals navigate the aforementioned traditional gendered expectations, particularly when they inherently fall outside of social definitions of masculinity or femininity (Adams & Coltrane, 2005).

Another restriction of this study was the residual effects of COVID-19, which made Zoom the only feasible way to conduct this investigation. While all of the participants expressed feeling comfortable and enjoying their time participating in the interviews through Zoom, personally meeting with the couples could have influenced rapport formation in unexpected ways. Additionally, the benefits of interviewing both partners together in one interview consist of



documenting the intricacies of their dynamic and promoting open conversation within the dyad (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014). On the other hand, there may be certain disadvantages to facilitating combined interviews with couples and asking potentially difficult questions such "Did you face any challenges in experiencing increased time spent together?". The first limitation to this interview approach is the social desirability bias, which may manifest itself in this scenario as couples being more likely to offer answers that are socially acceptable or filter their comments in order to prevent conflict or preserve their partner's feelings (Taylor & De Vocht, 2011). This may result in fewer genuine or honest replies. In certain partnerships, one partner might also steer the discussion or exert control over the other's reactions and responses. This may result in the latter partner's opinion being underrepresented, particularly if they tend to be more reserved or have less authority in the partnership (Taylor & De Vocht, 2011).

## **6.4 Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

### **6.4.1 - Implications for Future Research**

It is anticipated that the findings from this study will contribute new insights into the impact of COVID-19 on two distinctive kinds of romantic relationships and the inclusion of same-sex couples, in particular, is very novel. These data will hopefully enhance the development of couples and marriage counselling practices among heterosexual and same-sex populations, while also contributing valuable data with which to inform sexual policies and practices related to public health emergencies going forward. Study couples suggested that academic counsellors could also benefit from learning these insights into how interpersonal stressors require an equal amount of attention as individual struggles. A greater emphasis being placed on promoting relational health

would ultimately increase students' well-being and contribute to a greater sense of connectedness and fulfillment. It is therefore recommended that mental health agencies work to establish and implement interventions that foster relational resilience and investigate how couples may successfully establish and sustain resilience in times of hardship, including tactics for keeping matters in perspective, maintaining intimacy and adventure, and concentrating on future goals.

This project is well-situated to address current knowledge gaps about how COVID-19 quarantine mandates are impacting heterosexual and female same-sex couples' cohabitation experiences and how gender shapes their deployment of dyadic coping strategies and relational resilience techniques to alleviate the impact of external stressors and improve the overall functioning of dyadic relationships. Notably, future studies are encouraged to examine the incidence and consequences of fetishization and exclusion faced by female same-sex couples, particularly in public places, real estate, and employment sectors. These findings offer context with which these public sectors can create methods and actions for tackling and reducing these barriers. Further, professionals that centre their work around promoting relational health whether in the context of therapy or media can consult these findings to create dyadic interventions that are tailored to the requirements of same-sex couples, taking into account the specific issues they may confront, such as objectification and prejudicial attitudes.

Via relevant seminars, meetings, or training programmes, I hope to share my results with experts in the field of relationship and marital counselling as well as mental health agencies. I will also investigate the possibility of partnering with public health organisations or institutions to publicise these results. These organisations may utilise this data to enhance public health policy and provide recommendations on how to sustain relational health in future crises. Further, I plan to connect

with organisations dedicated to the rights and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals so that they can utilise this study to push for modifications to policy and offer queer couples relevant support and services. Finally, I will use social networking sites and blog posts to reach a larger audience and disseminate the insights in that way.

#### **6.4.2 - Recommendations for Future Research**

When I asked the couples what their recommendations might be for a possible follow-up study, a large portion of the couples mentioned conducting the interviews in person. It was suggested that in-person interviews may lead to an even more natural interview environment. From a researcher perspective, an in-person interview might also allow the interviewer to better assess the couples' unspoken dynamics and body language off-screen. Further, to circumvent the constraints of only having dyadic interviews to analyze, researchers conducting COVID-19 interviews with cohabitating couples in the future may wish to use a mixed-methods approach. This might entail doing joint interviews to record shared experiences and interpersonal dynamics, as well as solo interviews to collect more private and personal opinions. Combining these techniques can give a more thorough assessment of the pandemic's influence on romantic relationships, taking both the communal and individual components of the relationship into consideration.

Future studies with larger sample sizes are further proposed to investigate the nature and prevalence of dyadic coping and relational resilience in pandemic couples, as well as the impact of gender on these processes. It is also advised that future investigations examining the viewpoints of cohabiting same-sex couples include male same-sex couples, female same-sex couples, and partnerships comprising transgender and non-binary persons. Hearing these varied

viewpoints may help us in refining our knowledge of the nature of intimate relationships in the LGBTQ+ community, as well as how coping and resilience look within these different relational contexts. Further, future researchers are encouraged to consider how varying demographic identities within couples intersect, among them race, ethnic origin, sexuality, and income level. Investigating how these overlapping identities affected couples' experiences throughout COVID-19 and their capacity to confront issues that arise will offer nuanced cultural experiences and notions surrounding romantic relationships.

Many couples spoke about their socialization and how their unique upbringings contributed to their response to COVID-19 and living with a partner during lockdown. For example, some couples mentioned being predominantly raised by one opposite-gender parent and how that played into their relationship's dynamics. Doing a future study that investigates the relationship between one's familial background and socialization experience on their relational response to a global catastrophe like the lockdown could offer fascinating insights in the realm of child psychology. In the same vein, it would be important to investigate the function of outside support networks, such as relatives, close friends, and community connections, in mitigating the effects of the pandemic on romantic relationships and examine how these networks of support enhance the relational resilience of intimate couples. It is finally recommended that future research takes a longitudinal approach in examining how these developed coping skills, relational resilience, and mutual understanding translate into the post-COVID world.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This study's findings shed light on the effects of COVID-19 and the quarantine periods on cohabiting relationships in heterosexual and female same-sex couples, specifically the move-in

experience, dyadic coping strategies, relational resilience, and the unique experiences shared by female same-sex couples relating to their gender and sexual identity. Each of the dyads conveyed favourable feedback about their experience being interviewed and thanked the researcher for giving them the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings about subject areas that are important to them but have not had the opportunity to discuss in a structured manner, which many respondents found really meaningful. This study will be published to help fill the gap in peer-reviewed literature and understanding on heterosexual and same-sex relational health. Journals of interest for publishing will focus on health equality, relational health in Canada, gender and sexual inequities, and the relational resilience of couples from different sexual and gender configurations. Some examples of desired journals include: *The International Journal for Equity in Health*, *Health Promotion International*, *The Family Journal*, *The Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, and *The Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*.

The objective is for the findings to contribute to couples and family therapy practises, stigma reduction in female same-sex relationships, trauma-informed care from the global epidemic's impact on relational health, and relational resilience and dyadic coping processes in different relationship structures. While there is progress being made towards gender equality and freedom of gender expression, there remains marginalization and discrimination within both sets of dyads that require daily navigation both as an individual and as a unit. This study, however, focused on the positive impact that lockdown had on romantic couples, offering a unique take on pandemic-related relationship literature.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Recruitment Poster



# LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS



## Did you spend a good chunk of COVID cohabitating with your partner?

We are looking for heterosexual and female same-sex couples (aged 18-35) who were cohabitating for at least one year during the COVID-19 pandemic, to participate in a study on COVID and relationships.

Principal Investigator: **Dr. Treena Orchard**

For more info, contact us at: [REDACTED]

## What's Involved?

One 30-60 minute dyadic interview over Zoom.

Participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.



## Appendix B: Mass Email Recruitment Script

### Email Script- University Participants

Subject: Mass Email Recruitment

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in a study exploring the impact of COVID-19 on cohabitating romantic relationships. We are looking for any couples who self-identify as heterosexual or female same-sex couples, between the ages of 18 and 35. People of all racial/ethnic backgrounds are welcome to participate.

In this study, you will be asked to complete a 30-60 minute dyadic interview over Zoom. We will be providing each couple with a \$25 Amazon gift card to acknowledge the importance of your time and contribution to the research. This study is being conducted at Western University under the supervision of Dr. Treena Orchard. If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please contact the student investigator (██████████) or the principal investigator (██████████). Please click the link below and/or share this with others who might be interested! Please note, your participation is voluntary.

**Link:** [https://qfreeaccountssjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_3OAG4sYErZKMeuG](https://qfreeaccountssjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3OAG4sYErZKMeuG)

Thanks for your time!

Mishele Kaplan, MSc Candidate (Student Investigator)  
██████████

Treena Orchard, Ph.D. (Principal Investigator)  
216 Labatt Health Sciences Bldg.  
School of Health Studies  
Western University  
██████████

## Appendix C: Letter of Information and Consent



## **Letter of Information and Consent**

**Project Title:** Exploring How COVID-19 Impacts Relationship Dynamics Among Cohabiting Heterosexual and Female Same-Sex Couples

**Document Title:** Letter of Information and Consent

### **Principal Investigator and Contact:**

Dr. Treena Orchard, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
School of Health Studies  
Western University  
[REDACTED]

### **Additional Research Staff and Contact:**

Mishele Kaplan, MSc Candidate  
Student Investigator  
School of Health Studies  
Western University

### **1. Invitation to Participate**

You are being invited to participate in this research study about the impacts of prolonged cohabitation during COVID-19 on romantic relationship dynamics. The two study groups include: heterosexual couples, and female same-sex couples. You are being invited because you have important insights in these areas as a self-identified member of one of the two study populations of interest.

The inclusion criteria for this study are as follows: heterosexual or female same-sex romantic dyads between the ages of 18 and 35, who speak English. Participants will be excluded if they are not currently in a cohabiting heterosexual or female same-sex relationship, have been together for less than a year, did not live with their partner for most of the COVID-19 pandemic (at least one year), are not between the ages of 18 and 35, or if they do not feel safe or comfortable discussing their relationship dynamics.

### **2. Why is this study being done?**

COVID-19 has introduced unforeseen changes to the conditions of life and relationship dynamics among romantic relationships and learning how different kinds of couples develop coping strategies, including participating in new or arousing activities (e.g. taking a road trip to a new destination, exploring sexual fantasies), will reveal important findings about how couples respond to conditions of profound stress and how gender impacts these responses.



The purpose of this study is to address these pressing research gaps by exploring how heterosexual and female same-sex cohabitating couples navigate COVID-induced stressors, including the use of coping strategies. This unique focus will shed much needed light on how gender and relationship dynamics impact the ways that couples navigate COVID-induced relationship stressors.

The following questions facilitate our study aims: (1) What kinds of relational resilience and dyadic coping strategies are cohabitating heterosexual and female same-sex couples using to mitigate COVID-induced stressors?; (2) How are these relational resilience and dyadic coping strategies impacted by the couples' uniquely gendered relationship dynamics?

### **3. How long will you be in this study?**

This study consists of one activity for the dyads to take part in. This involves a 30 to 60- minute interview with both partners simultaneously. The interview will take place via Zoom.

### **4. What are the study procedures?**

You will take part in a dyadic interview that explores your experiences cohabitating throughout COVID-19, the coping strategies you employed, and how you feel that gender played a part in these processes. The interviews will be conducted by the student investigator under the supervision of the principal investigator, whose expertise in conducting these complex, in-person dialogues with research participants is important to ensuring they are of the highest quality. They will be done through Zoom or an alternate web conferencing platform, if more convenient for the participants. The interviews will be recorded through Zoom and will be typed out word for word on a computer by the student investigator. If you consent to the study, the interview will be video and audio recorded, but you are still allowed to participate if you do not consent to be video or audio recorded. If you do not wish to be video or audio-recorded, your responses can be recorded in a notebook owned by the student investigator, which is stored in her private home and locked in away in a place where only she has the key.

The student investigator may record fieldnotes throughout the dyadic interviews, as a way to capture details that are not recordable on video or audio-tape (i.e., time of day and the feel of the room, mood, body language). In addition to serving as a valuable space to record the investigators' personal thoughts about the research process and their ongoing understanding of the topics of inquiry, these experiential details are essential for documenting the entirety of the research encounter. Fieldnotes will be recorded in notebooks that the investigators will carry about with them and stored as soon as the research activity is complete in a secured cabinet that only they have access to.

Your identity will be kept private through the use of a pseudonym in the reports and publications of this study, with only the principal and student investigators having access to this information. Any paper copies of the interview data data will be kept kept in a locked file cabinet at the student investigator's house, and the electronic data will be kept on a password-protected laptop. Both sets of data will be destroyed after a seven-year period. There are no plans to utilise the video or text from the interview in any other way.

**5. What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

**6. What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study but information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole which include contributing new insights into the impact of COVID-19 on two distinctive kinds of romantic relationships, with the inclusion of same-sex couples, in particular, being very novel. These data may enhance the development of couples and marriage counselling practices among heterosexual and same-sex populations, while also contributing valuable data with which to inform sexual policies and practices related to public health emergencies going forward.

**7. Can participants choose to leave the study?**

If you want to withdraw from the study at any time, you have the right to request (i.e., written, phone call) the withdrawal of all data collected about you. If you want your data removed please let the researcher know and it will all be destroyed from our records. However, once the study has been published, your information will not be able to be withdrawn.

**8. How will participants' information be kept confidential?**

Confidentiality of the information that you disclose is of the utmost importance, and it is respected and protected. I will not report any information that identifies you and all information obtained will be made and kept confidential. This includes any personal names you may share during the interviews which will be changed when your data is analyzed into reports, presentations, or publications. Personal quotes will be used in publications stemming from the study, but they will not be associated with you- only a pseudonym will be. You will be asked to read this information and sign the consent form, and after that you may chose a pseudonym to use for these purposes. By doing this, no one who sees the study information/publications will be able to identify you. Only the principal investigator and trained student investigator will have access to the study information. The student investigator will sign a confidentiality waiver agreement to ensure they uphold the highest of professional standards regarding any information they have access to during the study.

Representatives of Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. The student investigator will keep any personal information about you in a secure and confidential information for 7 years. A list linking your pseudonym with your name will be kept in a password-protected computer file only accessible by the student and principal investigator separate from your study file. While we do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project which may be required to report by law we have a duty to report.

**9. Are participants compensated to be in this study?**

You will be compensated with a \$25 Amazon gift card for your participation in the dyadic interview. If you begin but do not complete the interview you will still receive the full compensation for the research activity.

### **10. What are the rights of participants?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary and at any time during the project, you may decide you no longer want to participate in the study. Even if you consent to participate, you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study. You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study. In order to ensure that you fully understand the nature of your participation we encourage you to read through the letter of information and ask us any questions you may have, which will be answered immediately.

### **11. Whom do participants contact for questions?**

If you have questions about this research study please contact:

#### **Principal Investigator and Contact:**

Dr. Treena Orchard, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
School of Health Studies  
Western University  
[REDACTED]

#### **Additional Research Staff and Contact:**

Mishele Kaplan, MSc Candidate  
Student Investigator  
School of Health Studies  
Western University

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics [REDACTED], [REDACTED]. The REB is a group of people who oversee the ethical conduct of research studies. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

### **12. Consent Form**

**Project Title:** Exploring How COVID-19 Impacts Relationship Dynamics Among Cohabiting Heterosexual and Female Same-Sex Couples

**Research Information:** You are invited to participate in a study exploring the impact of COVID-19 on cohabitating romantic relationships. We are looking for any couples who self-identify as heterosexual or female same-sex couples, between the ages of 18 and 35. In this study, you will be asked to complete a 30-60 minute dyadic interview over Zoom. We will be providing each couple a with a \$25 Amazon gift card to acknowledge the importance of your time and contribution to the research.

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

YES  NO

I agree to be video recorded during the interview component of this research.

YES  NO

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research.

YES  NO

\_\_\_\_\_  
Full Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date(DD-MMM-YYYY)*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Full Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date(DD-MMM-YYYY)*

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name of Person  
Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date (DD-MMM-YYYY)*

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference and we will maintain a copy for our study records.**

## Appendix D: Interview Guide

### Interview Guide

***Introduction:***

Welcome and thank you; review the screening form to determine eligibility; distribute and provide an overview of Consent Forms (including debriefing); ask about audio-recording; mention that we will be jotting down anonymized fieldnotes; and discuss the format of the Interview (i.e., 30-60 minutes). Also indicate that this is a safe space and if they need to do self-care during the discussion, feel free to. Ask if they are ready to begin and when they indicate ‘Yes’ the audio-tape is pressed and the interview begins. If they do not want to be audio-recorded, then the fieldnote books are poised for immediate use.

***Questions:***

1. Why did you want to take part this study?
2. You self-identify as X [insert sexual identity population]; is that the sexual identity you’ve always identified with?
3. How does your gender identity impact your everyday life or activities and social relationships?
4. What about your sexual relationships and activities, how are they shaped by gender?
5. How did the COVID-19 pandemic and associated quarantine impact your relationship dynamics?
6. How long have you been cohabiting prior to COVID-19?
7. How did the COVID-19 pandemic and associated quarantine impact your cohabitation dynamics?
8. How often did you spend time together prior to the COVID-19 pandemic vs. after?
9. Did you face any challenges in experiencing increased time spent together?
10. What does relational resilience mean to you?
11. What does dyadic coping mean to you?
12. What kind of dyadic coping strategies did you use to make increased time spent together manageable and enjoyable for both parties?
13. Do you think your gender or sexuality played a role in how you responded to this change of circumstance?
14. How satisfied are you with your relationship right now?
15. Do you feel the strategies used throughout the quarantine period be helpful to you as a couple in the future?
16. Who needs to hear the results of our study and what’s the best way to get this information out?

## **Appendix E: Debriefing Process Script**

### **Debriefing Script**

Once the discussion concludes do a check-in: “That concludes our interview. Great job, thank you so much! How are you doing?” before starting the debriefing.

Start with an acknowledgement: “We acknowledge that the issues discussed are important, sometimes really difficult too. Is there anything that you would like to raise or discuss?”

Offer future contact: “Sometimes these issues can trigger us later on and you are certainly free to contact me for further discussion in the future about the impact of the research on you well-being.”

Offer community resource materials (i.e., local and online mental health services for couples) in the event they want to access them as they process the interview experience or in the event they are triggered: “Would you like any additional community resources?”

The participants will also be asked for their insights about the Interview: “How did it go? Was it what you were expecting? Did anything unanticipated emerge for you? Was this a valuable exercise? Do you think we should do a follow-up study? If so, do you have any suggestions for ways we can improve upon or expand on a future project?”

Thank again: “Thank you again for taking part and we encourage you to watch for project updates on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter!”

## **Appendix F: Western University Ethics Approval**



**Date:** 15 October 2022

**To:** Dr. Treena Orchard

**Project ID:** 121407

**Study Title:** Exploring How COVID-19 Impacts Relationship Dynamics Among Cohabiting [Heterosexual and Female Same-Sex Couples]

**Short Title:** COHABITING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS DURING COVID-19

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** November 4 2022

**Date Approval Issued:** 15/Oct/2022 13:17

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 15/Oct/2023

Dear Dr. Treena Orchard

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREB application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. **All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.**

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Section 2.10 Debriefing Script	Debriefing document	08/Aug/2022	2
Section 2.5 Interview Guide Student Participants CLEAN_09202022	Interview Guide	20/Sep/2022	2
Section 4.1.6f Email Script - Mass Email Recruitment CLEAN_09202022	Recruitment Materials	20/Sep/2022	2
Section 4.1.11b Recruitment Poster CLEAN_09232022.png	Recruitment Materials	23/Sep/2022	2
Section 5.5 - ICM & Consent Form_CLEAN_09202022	Written Consent/Assent	20/Sep/2022	2

**Documents Acknowledged:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Section 2.5 Eligibility Survey	Screening Form/Questionnaire	03/Aug/2022	1

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Mishel Kaplan

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** York University  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
2016-2021 B.H.S.c

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2022-2023 M.S.c

**Related Work Experience:** Teaching Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
2022-2023

Operations Manager  
Blueprint Counselling  
2022-Present