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*Original Paper*

## Changes in Emotional and Sexual Intimacy during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Literature Review

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### Abstract

The Covid 19 pandemic has wrought many changes in cultures all around the world. The pandemic has impacted children, adolescents, adults, and families in many ways. This paper explores the impact of the pandemic on the development or lack thereof of social and emotional intimacy, particularly of adolescents as a result of the Covid pandemic.

**Keywords:** sexual intimacy, emotional intimacy, COVID

### 1. Introduction

On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) a global pandemic. Most countries, including the United States, imposed national stay-at-home orders from March to May 2020 to counter the spread of this infection. The orders included social distancing, increased hygiene and sanitation, and mask mandates. Families were asked to stay at home except for essential needs and avoid contact with non-cohabiting people. Overnight, the lives of 42 million U.S. adolescents changed rapidly. With the stay-at-home order in place, schools closed, and the youth had to adapt quickly to virtual learning, which created uncertainty about their studies and the near academic future. Adolescents in higher education settings experienced additional difficulties, such as preparing for university entrance exams, taking semester assessments, or doing practical training that online instructions could not adequately replace. It is important to study this topic as it has long-range ramifications and repercussions for schools, society, and our culture.

Extracurricular activities (e.g., sports or school clubs) and out-of-home leisure activities were canceled, leaving limited opportunities for face-to-face social contact (Muñoz-Fernández & Rodríguez-Meirinhos, 2021). Even though statistics showed that children and adolescents were under a minimal risk of hospitalization from Covid-19, adolescents still had to follow all policies the state and local governments put in place to protect others within the community.

During adolescence, teenagers and youth undergo physiological changes associated with puberty and feel more sensitive to social belonging. They want to be part of a peer group and be accepted. To accommodate the wish for independence from parents, adolescents shift their attachment needs to friends and romantic partners. Therefore, adolescents spend more time with friends than with parents, and the parent-child relationship experiences tension around adolescents' emerging independence.

Parent-child conflict intensifies while, on the other hand, friendships and romantic relationships emerge as a critical source of social support and identity exploration (Rogers et al., 2021). The Covid-19 stay-at-home order and the move to virtual learning for most of the 2020/2021 school year restricted adolescents' interaction with friends and increased time spent with parents at home. This may have challenged adolescents' need for intimacy and autonomy. In addition, adolescents experience more intense positive and negative emotions compared to adults. These emotions play a crucial role in the underlying mental health of adolescents. For example, covid-related stressors such as social isolation, unemployment, parents-child conflict, and worrying about possible Covid infection may contribute to fluctuations in adolescents' emotionality (Rogers et al., 2021).

Finally, emerging evidence shows that COVID-19 confinement has increased the risk of social isolation and loneliness among youths, as adolescents may have experienced restrictions in their personal space.

In contrast, parents have faced an increase in daily stressors. In addition, studies among children and youths reported high rates of anxiety and stress, along with difficulties concentrating and worrying (Muñoz-Fernández & Rodríguez-Meirinhos, 2021).

Peer relationships become more prominent in adolescents as they contribute to satisfying the needs for intimacy and companionship. Emotional intimacy during Covid-19 moved to online settings such as social media sites, chats, and video calls, which compensate for the lack of in-person interaction. It should be noted that this is a narrative review.

Research from Spain showed that youth often used new technologies to feel supported by their friends. Adolescents' most frequent online activities were conversations via instant messaging applications and using new technologies to conduct activities simultaneously with peers. Girls used the internet more often than boys, and younger people tried to see their friends more, even through the screen, using challenges or doing the same activities simultaneously with peers. All these interactions related to spending time together are traditionally known as companionship or intimacy.

However, intimacy and closeness decreased when communication was only online, suggesting that the online context is only helpful for socialization. Still, the internet alone could not compensate for, or replace, face-to-face interaction (Muñoz-Fernández & Rodríguez-Meirinhos, 2021).

Another study from the United States examined adolescents' time use and family and peer relationships during Covid-19. Adolescents reported using social media as an essential outlet for social connection. Social media usage is related to higher perceived social support and self-esteem for adolescents who go online to nurture existing friendships. Also, conflicts with parents during Covid-19 may drive adolescents to spend more time with friends online to find peer support and validation.

However, adolescents who spent more time virtually with peers during Covid-19 reported higher depression (Wray-Lake et al., 2022). Another U.S. study focused on understanding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and campus closure on college students' romantic relationships. After college campuses had to close due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many students experienced a disruption or even dissolution in their intimate relationships. Finally, the research examined college students' intimate relationships at two-time points—before the Covid-19 pandemic and in April 2020. The study showed that about 25% of students experienced their partnerships becoming long-distance, while 14.5% reported that they and their partners had broken up (Herbenick et al., 2022).

This caused many college students to feel like the pandemic created distance from their partners. Single students at the campus closure lost opportunities to meet potential romantic and sexual partners and engage in romantic activities like dating. Students, who remained geographically close to their partners, had to deal with the reality of stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions, and many families' choices about limiting contact with non-household members. This translated into less in-person time with partners and missing out on important sources of support as they were trying to navigate the stress and anxiety brought on by the pandemic (Herbenick et al., 2022).

Another mixed-method study about adolescents' perception of the socio-emotional impact of Covid-19 found that many adolescents identified the inability to gather with others as distinctly challenging physically. This referred to friends and romantic partners but occasionally included extended and nonresidential family members.

For example, one adolescent stated, "The hardest thing is not having my friends around. I do not feel normal anymore" These adolescents desire emotional connection and social support (Rogers et al., 2021). Finally, a small subgroup explained that social distancing had led to improvements in their friendships, often by proving these relationships (e.g., "I feel like I have found who my real friends are because they make an effort to text me every day" [white female, 15]). In contrast, others noted the lack of in-person interaction with friends. Finally, adolescents were spending far less time with their friends. Despite the ability to interact electronically, they still noted a lack of emotional connection and a perceived decrease in overall friend support (Rogers et al., 2021).

Lastly, a U.S. study investigated the relationships between self-isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic; technology use for romantic relationship maintenance, and romantic relationship quality.

Relationship quality is an essential component of the well-being of adolescence. Youth are usually interested in companionship, help, affection, nurturance, intimacy, emotional security, and components of positive relationship quality (Wright & Wachs, 2021). In addition, difficulties coping with the external stressors associated with pandemics might disrupt romantic relationship functioning, including relationship quality.

Such external stressors for adolescents include not interacting with peers, friends physically, and significant others, not being able to attend special events (e.g., graduation), and increased family stressors related to unemployment, food insecurity, and housing instability. These stressors might diminish romantic relationship quality. However, technology could improve such relationship quality. Interactive technology allows couples to connect, and such interactions enhance their closeness, increase their confidence, open communication, and emotional connection, and promote interaction. Using technology for communication increases intimacy, quality, and satisfaction within romantic relationships.

Although unable to interact face to face, the use of technology to maintain adolescents' romantic relationships could buffer against the effects of the pandemic on romantic relationship quality. The study indicates that self-isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic was related negatively to romantic relationship quality and positively to technology use for romantic relationship maintenance. Finally, the technology helped buffer against self-isolation and helped maintain the relationship (Wright & Wachs, 2021).

With the stay-at-home order in place, adolescents were limited in their ability to have physical intimacy and had to find new ways to stay in touch with their romantic partners. The use of technology helped these young to stay in touch. During adolescence, youth start to explore and develop their sexuality. Sexuality is an inclusive category encompassing how adolescents describe, feel, or express their sexual selves. They also discover their sexuality by creating sexual fantasies, masturbating, and searching for sexually-explicit internet materials (SEIM) (Maes & Vandenbosch, 2022a). The internet's widespread availability and broadened cyberspace arena have provided adolescents with the widespread availability of cybersex, digital intimacy, and pornography with a click of a button. Forms of this digital intimacy include cybersex, electronic sex, chat/cam sex, virtual sex, sexting, and so on (Banerjee & Rao, 2021). Sexually explicit internet materials (SEIM) are generally referred to as "professionally produced or user-generated pictures or videos intended to sexually arouse the viewer" (Peter, J., & Valkenburg, 2011).

Seventy-seven percent of adolescent boys and 33% of girls retrospectively reported watching SEIM in the USA. Since SEIM is anonymous and accessible, it seems appealing as a sexual information source next to peers and parents (Maes & Vandenbosch, 2022a). A study from Belgium revealed that in times of social isolation, adolescents generally,

"do not seem to turn more frequently to SEIM use to cope with challenges raised in the context of the pandemic. Other contextual changes may be more profound in predicting such changes in adolescents' SEIM uses. For instance, a relationship break-up may be a more powerful trigger to use SEIM to compensate for the lack of sexual interactions with a former partner" (Maes & Vandenbosch, 2022a, p. 116).

Furthermore, the results did not demonstrate a significant change in SEIM use during the pandemic according to adolescents' gender identity, sexual orientation, sensation seeking, and pubertal status. However, they showed such a gender change. At baseline, boys consumed more SEIM, but the results showed that girls used SEIM more significantly than boys (Maes & Vandenbosch, 2022a). This needs to be explored further by other researchers.

One U.S. study investigated how social distancing measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19 during the early stages of the pandemic affected youth's involvement in romantic and sexual relationships. The results showed that youth in romantic relationships spent less time with their partners during the Covid-19 pandemic than before, and one-quarter spent no time in person with their partner during the first three months of social distancing. Young adults were more likely to spend time with a partner than adolescents (38% vs. 23%,  $p = 0.003$ ). The percentage who saw a partner weekly declined from 13 to

8%, while those who saw a partner daily declined from 13 to 9% (Yarger et al., 2021). Romantic relationships are a central part of adolescent development. Therefore, prolonged restriction to social contact with their peers may have lasting impacts on youth. Several participants reported that being physically apart from their partners negatively affected the relationship by fueling more arguments.

Others reported increased communication with their partner via FaceTime texts and calls. One-third (34%) reported that they could not spend time with their partner during the lockdown because their parents or their partner's parents would not let them go out due to Covid-19. Another issue was the lack of transportation to meet with the partner in person (21%). Most youths agreed (47%) or strongly agreed (12%) that "it is okay for intimate partners to spend time together in person during shelter-in-place if they are only dating one person." In comparison, 29% disagreed, and 13% strongly disagreed with this statement (not shown) (Yarger et al., 2021).

The study showed that even though adolescents communicated better with their partners, many showed concerns of ongoing depression and anxiety due to the uncertainty of the covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the youth reported restrictions in accessing health services and access to contraception, forcing the health system to develop new methods, such as telehealth, to provide these services (Lindberg et al., 2020).

A study investigating the romantic partnership of undergraduate students during the pandemic confirms the previous study's findings. Campus closure disrupted students' lives as many found themselves living with family members losing some of the privacy and autonomy that students enjoyed on campus. Results showed that most students who had a partnership before their university closed were still with their partners. Geographic changes in the proximity to partners and the reality of stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions, and choices many families made about limiting contact with non-household members also account for the changes in partnered sexual behaviors (Herbenick et al., 2022). In addition, students reported that solo masturbation stayed steady throughout the lockdown while in-person partnered sexual behaviors we assessed (i.e., partnered masturbation, oral sex, vaginal sex, and anal sex) had decreased throughout the two-wave study (Herbenick et al., 2022). The Yarger study showed similar findings; a third of youth (32%) indicated they had never had oral, vaginal, or anal sex, and 22% had sex in the past three months during the Covid-19 pandemic (Yarger et al., 2021).

Lastly, students reported an increase in sexting among unpartnered students and those with a geographically distant partner. These findings can be confirmed by a study from Austria that investigated sexting during the Covid pandemic.

One way to stay close to their intimate partners was through sexting. One study from Austria investigated the predicted willingness to engage in sexting during the lockdown and whether young adults were concerned about privacy. The results showed that "even individuals with high privacy concerns were more willing to sext under conditions of social isolation, suggesting that the need for intimacy outweighed the need for privacy protection" (Thomas et al., 2022, p.157). The study also revealed that people resorted to online sexual activities such as pornography and dating apps during the first pandemic-related lockdown.

Apart from consuming the sexual content of others, adolescents showed the desire to self-disclose and actively send intimate content. In addition, adolescents reported that they engaged in sexting to satisfy the need for closeness (Thomas et al., 2022). A second study confirms this finding reporting an increase "in online social connections, as 65% of teenagers used texting or interaction via social media more often than usual as online connections seem to be rather important, as they offer options to connect despite the social distancing and stay-at-home orders" (Stavirdou et al., 2021, p. 12).

For some adolescents, sexting can be part of their sexual repertoire to explore their emerging sexual feelings, discover their sexual preferences, and establish their sexual identity. Adolescents like to explore different sexual activities such as petting, kissing, and foreplay. Therefore, youths may also like to experiment with different types of sexting, from broad to more explicit forms of sexting, over time. Sexting during Covid was used to replace face-to-face interaction and develop a healthy sexuality. Others reported using sexting to flirt, gain romantic attention, or preserve romantic relationship quality.

Lastly, some research reports that adolescents are pressured into sexting by their partners. It is likely that adolescents may have been the victim of sexting pressure and responded to such pressure to maintain their intimate relationships during a strict lockdown period.

Existing studies further show that adolescents' expectancies regarding the extent to which peers approve of sexting predict their engagement in sexting. Given the absence of in-person peer interactions during a strict lockdown period, adolescents may have turned to sexting to gain peer approval. Lastly, adolescents may turn to sexting for body image reinforcement (Maes & Vandebosch, 2022b).

Overall, the results from the Belgium study by Maes & Vandebosch (2022b, p. 7) show,

“that 40.9% of the adolescents engaged in at least one of the four types of sexting during this exceptional context. Presumably, social distancing stimulated sexting behaviors in adolescents as in Belgium in normal contexts; studies point to prevalence rates of 6.3% among early adolescents (12–15 years old) and 15% among late adolescents (15–18 years old). Such presumptions need to be interpreted with caution. For example, the current study did not examine adolescents' sexting frequencies before and after a strict lockdown period and, therefore, could not test a possible evolution via the implementation of latent growth modeling” (Maes & Vandebosch, 2022b, p. 7).

The findings further indicated that adolescents mainly turned to sexting due to sexual arousal and intimacy needs. This implies that sexting may have temporarily replaced offline sexual behaviors with intimate partners. The study also found that peer approval was the least prominent motivation of adolescents to engage in sexting during a strict lockdown period. Sexual health scholars highlight the necessity of engaging in sexting behaviors as an individual choice rather than being stimulated by external factors such as peers and one's need to 'fit in' a specific group (Maes & Vandebosch, 2022b).

Another way for adolescents to engage in sexual activities is by watching pornography. Based on a large-scale adolescent study from the US, Canada, and Europe, “63-68% of adolescents reported lifetime, and 23 to 42% reported past-year pornography use” (Bóthe et al., 2022, p. 139). Since the pandemic, an increase in pornography use has been documented, raising the question if adolescents are at risk of developing potential adverse health effects such as problematic pornography use (PPU). PPU is the repetitive, uncontrollable pornography use causing significant distress and functional impairment. Adolescents reported viewing pornography once a week or more in the past three or six months. In addition, boys reported weekly or more frequent pornography use than girls who reported monthly or less frequent pornography use.

Only 5 to 14% of adolescents who have used pornography before report excessive, compulsive, or problematic use of pornography (PPU), with boys reporting higher levels of PPU than girls. Adolescents reported the following motivation for the use of pornography use including;

“sexual pleasure (i.e., to increase sexual arousal or help masturbation), sexual curiosity (i.e., to seek information and learn about sexuality), emotional distraction and suppression (i.e., to cope with negative emotions), stress reduction (i.e., to reduce stress), boredom avoidance (i.e., to reduce boredom), fantasy (i.e., to escape from the real world and fantasize about being part of pornography), lack of sexual satisfaction (i.e., as a result of not being satisfied with or missing something from one's sexual life), and self-exploration (i.e., to identify one's sexual needs and preferences)” (Bóthe et al., 2022, p. 141).

Overall, the results from the longitude study did not show significant changes in the frequency of pornography use compared to pre-COVID-19.

Eleuteri and Terzitta (2021) confirm the findings of increased use of technology to maintain social and sexual intimacy. The use of digital communication has been an excellent strategy for maintaining a certain level of sexual activity during the pandemic. Websites like Pornhub offered free access to the Premium version to encourage everyone to stay home to ensure physical distancing.

Worldwide traffic to Pornhub was up 11.6% on March 17th. The most significant use (31.5%) occurred in the early morning, as people who did not need to go to work the following morning spent more time

on the site. For most young people, social distancing has led to a reduction in sex, but during the first peak of the pandemic, about one-third of young people reported that they were still meeting close friends and having sex. As a result, switching to online entertainment and technology seemed to be easy for the youth as they are used to communicating via the Internet (Eleuteri & Terzitta, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused many psychological and mental health concerns.

Shaughnessy and Johnson (2021) have discussed the realms of depression and suicide, indicating the need for awareness of various signs of suicidal cognitions and lethality. Shaughnessy (2021) has examined the impact of Covid 19 and the resultant forms and types of anxiety disorders emanating from this pandemic. Shaughnessy and Johnson (2018) have described the components of anxiety and treatment concerns. How the pandemic will impact the growth and development of children and adolescents and how it will impact emotional and sexual intimacy, in the long run is still to be determined by future research.

## 2. Summary and Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused massive upheaval in many different domains. The present paper has focused on the changes in emotional intimacy and sexual identification and exploration of alternative sexual realms of gratification, maintenance of interpersonal relations, and even the development of non-sexual interpersonal relationships.

This paper has attempted to provide an overview of the current research concerns to assist future researchers and policymakers. There are shortcomings to this article, but it does provide a comprehensive literature review, though scant of the research being conducted worldwide in various realms. Future developments may include attitude research conducted via surveys and Qualtrics methodologies. Further, researchers may want to consult the following websites for additional information on this topic. Indeed, there are limitations to this brief introductory literature review which is presented to make others aware of some of the issues for further exploration, study, and empirical examination.

For Future Examination and Exploration:

<https://www.redalyc.org/journal/138/13866195005/movil/>

<https://www.redalyc.org/journal/582/58269267005/>

<https://www.redalyc.org/journal/559/55969796016/55969796016.pdf>

<http://portal.amelica.org/ameli/journal/84/842876011/movil/>

[https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1665-05652020000200265](https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1665-05652020000200265)

[http://www.injuve.es/sites/default/files/adjuntos/2020/11/monografico\\_rpcna.pdf](http://www.injuve.es/sites/default/files/adjuntos/2020/11/monografico_rpcna.pdf)

<https://revistapublicando.org/revista/index.php/crv/article/view/2197/2416>

<https://repository.ucatolica.edu.co/bitstream/10983/25287/1/DEF%20GOMEZ%20ROJAS%20GARCIA%20%26%20ORJUELA.pdf>

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344026814\\_Confinamiento\\_distanciamiento\\_social\\_y\\_vida\\_sexual\\_en\\_tiempos\\_de\\_COVID-19](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344026814_Confinamiento_distanciamiento_social_y_vida_sexual_en_tiempos_de_COVID-19)

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