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Exploring the Impacts of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ Intimate Communication

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Exploring the Impacts of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ Intimate Communication

Intimate and interpersonal communication research within the communication discipline, such as the “Marital Adjustment Inventory Questionnaire,” has been historically focused on the experiences of heterosexual individuals within monogamous romantic and sexual relationships (Manson & Lerner, 1962). Unconventional and Queer intimate relationships remain largely unexplored. Queer Theory poses questions about gender, sexual, and romantic identities that can help expand our understanding of different forms of intimate communication (Chevrette, 2013). In addition, the highly contagious nature of the COVID-19 virus has drastically transformed how individuals socialize (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). The ways in which communication has transformed due to social distancing have been unexplored within the communication discipline. This research project not only expands our understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted LGBTQ+ intimate relationships and communication but also proves valuable to Queering interpersonal communication scholarship, thus making the discipline more inclusive and comprehensive of diverse experiences and forms of communication.

Literature Review

Intimate Communication Research

Intimacy within communication and relationships has been defined and redefined through communication scholarship. Intimacy has been measured empirically through observations and quantitative measures, as well as subjectively in self-reported narratives of research participants. For the purpose of this research study, intimate communication is defined as “the extent to which

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there is a mutual exchange of affective, cognitive, and physical closeness in a relationship” (Schwebel et al., 1999, p. 518).

Intimate communication between couples has been a focus of interpersonal communication research since the early 1900s (Gross, 2005). In 1962, scholars developed a “Marital Adjustment Inventory Questionnaire” that asked individuals to report aspects of their intimate communication to measure their relationship satisfaction. This tool has been criticized by other communication scholars for its reliability and validity in measuring intimate communication satisfaction in a quantitative manner (Vaughn & Baier, 1999). Hendrick’s (1988) research on constructing a research tool that measures intimate relationship satisfaction is commonly cited within interpersonal communication research and literature. Hendrick’s intent in creating their relationship satisfaction tool was to build upon the “Marital Adjustment Inventory Questionnaire” developed by Manson and Lerner in 1962. The research participants were surveyed using a 7-point Likert Scale measurement in areas of attitudes toward love styles, sexual attitudes, self-disclosure, commitment, and general investment in the relationship.

A later research study by Meeks et al. (1998) also measured intimate relationship satisfaction by distributing a questionnaire to individuals involved in committed intimate relationships. This study focused on such constructs as empathy, self-disclosure, conflict management, relational competence, and love attitudes. The conclusions of this study paralleled the results of the original study conducted by Hendrick (1988). The data collected from the intimate relationship questionnaire reflected those areas such as effective communication, conflict management, love attitudes, and self-disclosure directly influenced perceived relationship and intimate communication satisfaction (Meeks et al., 1998).

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These previous studies provide valuable insight in directing future research on intimate communication. However, survey tools such as the “Marital Adjustment Inventory Questionnaire” limit the breadth of topics to the items in the survey and the depth of information to quantitative data. There is value in the lived experiences of individuals that cannot be measured through purely numerical data. Because marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ and Queer voices have been historically silenced and omitted within previous research, I collected qualitative data through interviews with LGBTQ+ individuals. Through this exploratory qualitative research study, I aimed to highlight the value of LGBTQ+ and Queer lived experiences and their narration of those personal experiences.

Queers in the Communication Discipline

LGBTQ+ scholarship and research have become increasingly prevalent across numerous academic fields, including communication. Though communication scholars have historically been leaders within Queer and LGBTQ+ studies, the majority of recent and historical intimate communication research being produced has primarily focused on heterosexual relationships and often omitted LGBTQ+ identities (Gross, 2005). The communication studies that have incorporated Queer Theory within their analysis tend to appear in lesser-known publications or within non-communication disciplines (Yep et al., 2003). Furthermore, the bulk of these studies lacks an analysis of intersectionality and interconnectedness within social identities beyond Queer and LGBTQ+ identities (Manning et al., 2020).

Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender activism throughout the twentieth century shaped our modern understanding of the terms Queer, Queer theory, and Queer methods. The term Queer has multiple and fluid definitions that have transformed over time. Within this research project,

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the term Queer is defined in three distinct ways, “As a noun, as an identity that resists traditional categories, and as a verb” (Jakobsen, 1998, p. 516-517). Within this study, the research will use the terms “Queer” and “LGBTQ+” interchangeably with the understanding and disclaimer that not all LGBTQ+ individuals identify as Queer and vice versa.

Recently, scholars have demanded that communication scholarship be conducted through an intersectional lens that analyzes multiple dimensions of social identities, including LGBTQ+ identities (Chevette, 2013). Researchers emphasize the benefits that Queering communication scholarship brings, including systematic and structural change as well as a shift in perception of the understanding of the development of Queerness as an identity (Manning et al., 2020). Within the context of this study, Queering is defined as resisting social expectations within the context of identities and implementing Queer theory within my research. Queer theory poses questions around gender, sexual, and romantic identities that can help expand our understanding of different forms of intimate communication (Chevette, 2013).

Queer theory fundamentally challenges the understanding of fixed and rigid foundations and definitions of identity, particularly sexual identity (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 4). Challenging definitions of identities contribute to the collective understanding of how individuals of all sexual identities communicate. Rather than providing a list of social identities to choose from, I instead allowed my participants to identify themselves in their own words. Queer methods were implemented within the research process as research participants were encouraged to describe their identities using language with which they identify most rather than identities that are prescribed to them through social institutions (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). My decision not only spotlighted the identities my participants felt most connected with, but also

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“Queered” research methods, analysis, and comprehension of the information shared within interviews.

LGBTQ+ Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The first cases of the newly discovered coronavirus disease, commonly referred to as COVID-19, were reported in Wuhan, China, in late December of 2019. The virus quickly spread internationally because it is transferred from person to person via respiratory molecules (WHO, 2021). Due to the high contagion rate and devastating effects of the illness, the WHO declared the Coronavirus disease outbreak a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Though the pandemic has had catastrophic impacts on economic, public health, and social spheres worldwide, there has been little peer-reviewed academic literature published on COVID-19 and communication (Sismondo, 2020). The purpose of this research study is to contribute to filling the gap in our understanding of the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on intimate communication.

COVID-19 academic research on intimate communication is still emerging within academia. People of Color and other marginalized groups, including the LGBTQ+ community, have been disproportionately impacted by the destructive economic, social, and health effects of the pandemic (Drabble & Eliason, 2021). In addition to the structural oppression historically experienced by LGBTQ+ identified individuals, the pandemic introduced new stressors and inequities for Queer people. Many of the institutional barriers, including access to health care, discrimination, and economic inequality, were only magnified by the global health crisis (McNeely et al., 2020).

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In addition to structural and institutional inequalities, social stigma has heightened the negative effects LGBTQ+ individuals have experienced throughout the pandemic. Social stigma, including Queerphobia, has amplified the rise in substance abuse, mental and physical health issues, income inequality, and further limited access to social capital, such as LGBTQ+ spaces (Banerjee & Nair, 2020). Feelings of social isolation introduced by COVID-19 have been reported by individuals around the world. This widespread sense of social separation and isolation has induced negative effects on people's emotional and physical functioning and health (Ingram et al., 2021). Research on mental health during the pandemic has reflected that LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to experience depression or worsening mental health due to the COVID-19 pandemic than heterosexuals due to social isolation and discrimination compounded by Queerphobia (Kneale & Bécares, 2021). In addition to declining mental health, social isolation also has negative ramifications on physical health and cognitive functions (Ingram et al., 2021). Ongoing oppression and pandemic-induced social isolation are contributing factors that have shaped the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. I conducted this research study to further investigate the divergent experiences LGBTQ+ individuals have had within intimate communication and relationships throughout the pandemic.

Queer Resilience

LGBTQ+ and Queer individuals face systemic oppression in addition to encountering individual prejudice regularly, both of which contribute to the marginalization of the LGBTQ+ community. Research has reflected that the marginalization of LGBTQ+ and Queer individuals have contributed to the community disproportionately experiencing substance abuse, mental

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illness, and suicidal ideation in contrast to heterosexual and cisgender individuals (Meyer, 2003).

The LGBTQ+ community has been researched within academia to explore how Queer individuals adapt and build resilience to survive systemic and personal stress due to the marginalization of their identities. A research study conducted in 2015 by Shilo and colleagues explored how factors such as familial support, resistance to internalized homophobia, and community support played roles in the development of resilience within both LGBTQ+ adults and youth. Both the LGBTQ+ adult and LGBTQ+ youth groups reported results that reflected the importance of community and friendship support as being a primary factor in Queer identified individuals building resilience (Shilo et al., 2015). Community care and interdependence play a role in Queer survival, resistance, and overall well-being.

Researcher Positionality

I am both a first-generation college student and a Queer-identified student at the University of Northern Colorado. I also hold a personal connection to the research and the research participants through a common identity. I shared some of my salient identities with the research participants to build rapport with them and to establish the researcher's positionality within this research project. I decided to implement a qualitative rather than a quantitative research approach on intimate communication. Exploratory qualitative research resists limitations of what can be examined and allows for research participants to share their own identities, definitions, and understandings of their lived experiences. Themes were not determined before conducting interviews but emerge from my participants' personal narratives that they shared with me. I deliberately made this decision as I recognize the value of qualitative

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data collection and seek to highlight the lived experiences of Queer and LGBTQ+ individuals through this exploratory qualitative research project.

Method

Research Participant Recruitment

After receiving IRB approval, research participants were recruited through advertising on the University of Northern Colorado campus, personal social media platforms, and by word of mouth. The selection criteria for this study were that participants self-identify as an LGBTQ+ community member or Queer and be at least 18 years of age to give consent. In all, five LGBTQ+ individuals participated in this research study.

Interview Procedures

In order to identify the impacts of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ intimate communication, this general or exploratory qualitative research study was conducted through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with LGBTQ+ individuals remotely via Zoom (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once research participants were identified, I scheduled interviews with them during a time when both the respective participants and I were alone and uninterrupted in closed rooms.

To gather demographic information, I asked research participants to self-report their Queerness regarding their sexual, romantic, and gender identities and self-report any other salient social identities (race, culture, ethnicity, ability, socio-economic class, religion, etc.). Interview questions focused on the lived experiences and self-reported aspects of LGBTQ+ intimate

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communication behavior and LGBTQ+ intimate communication satisfaction both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained the purpose of the research study, interview procedures, and the interview guide, and electronically signed the consent form with the research participants. I notified interview participants that they were being recorded and started recording using the Zoom recording function and Sony audio recording device as a backup. The semi-structured one-on-one interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. I ended each interview by answering any research participant questions and providing the researcher's contact information. After the interview was completed, I saved the interview audio within my password-protected Microsoft OneDrive account and deleted the interview video capture on the Zoom cloud.

Research Participant Identities

The five research participants were LGBTQ+ identified individuals living in northern Colorado. Throughout the interview process, I encouraged each of my participants to identify themselves in ways that were significant to them. My research participants all identified as young adults and came from different educational backgrounds including a high school graduate, an undergraduate student, one college graduate, and two graduate students.

My research participants held numerous romantic and sexual identities, including pansexual, panromantic, asexual, bisexual, and aromantic. Participants in the study also held diverse gender identities and gender expressions, such as transgender, transmasculine, woman, genderfluid, genderfuck, agender, and cisgender. As these terms are deeply unique and specific

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to each individual, I chose to not provide specific definitions for them within the context of my research to protect and honor the identities of my participants. In addition to romantic, gender, and sexual identities, my research participants also shared other salient identities that were central to their intimate communication and relationships such as race, class, ability, culture, and language. Some of the social identities participants used to describe themselves were non-traditional student, Brown, Asian-American, white, autistic, and disabled. Participants in this study also engaged in different forms and organizations of intimate relationships such as monogamy, polyamory, and Queer platonic relationships. Each of these identities was reported by participants as being influential in their personhood and the ways that they communicate with their intimate partners, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. These identities shape each individual's lived experiences and intimate communication and are reflected in the results of this research study.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed using the transcription software function included in Zoom and then imported into the coding software NVivo. I chose to implement In Vivo coding methods, as the research participants' words and personal narratives are the central focus of this research (Saldaña, 2016). Throughout the coding processes, I identified themes directly from the transcription data and created an original codebook. I coded the interview transcriptions using multiple coding cycles. I implemented elemental In Vivo coding methods, analyzed data inductively, and identified themes within the research participants' personal narratives (Saldaña, 2016).

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Trustworthiness

Quality control was maintained throughout this research project to ensure reliability and trustworthiness. I chose to share my Queer identity with each research participant to build trust and rapport. All the research participants were provided with an explanation of what their participation entailed and was requested to sign a consent form. Each of the research participants was provided with a copy of the consent form for reference. Research participants were also asked to provide a pseudonym to keep their identity confidential and to prevent being outed. Throughout the research study, I kept a journal to document the research process. I contacted all research participants during May and June 2021 for a member check to verify the accuracy of my findings, however, they did not respond with any suggestions or corrections.

Findings

After coding, analyzing, and synthesizing the transcription data from my interview participants, I identified several central themes, including social isolation, communication adaptation, exploration, digital communication burnout, and resilience. Each of my five participants spoke of social isolation and how it impacted their intimate communication and relationships.

Social Isolation

Social isolation brought on by the pandemic has been experienced globally. The consequences that have emerged from social isolation include negative ramifications for mental, physical, and cognitive health (Ingram et al., 2021). Though social isolation impacted people of

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all identities, enduring discrimination and Queerphobia have compounded feelings of loneliness and isolation for many LGBTQ+ individuals (Banerjee & Nair, 2020).

COVID-19 and social distancing measures have introduced new social factors that serve as additional stressors for LGBTQ+ individuals who were already living with their partners pre-pandemic. Research participant Green spoke about their frustration with social isolation from an intimate partner and limited contact with friends and community members:

In one way it's been a growth experience and, like, a positive experience in that we're spending so much time together, but also that definitely is challenging as well, because it's like after months and months of spending all my time with one person [*sic*].

Other participants who lived with their partners before and during the pandemic also echoed Green's exasperation with feeling disconnected from individuals and community members who were not their partners. My participants described sensations of social isolation that extended beyond intimate relationships. As my participants consisted of both students and working professionals, many work meetings and classes were transferred to online communication platforms and video conferencing. Social connection within personal, educational, and professional settings became increasingly limited and constrained to remote communication. This lack of in-person connections left several of my participants feeling, "exhausted," "burnt-out," and with feelings of "missing out" on genuine connections with intimate partners, peers, and other LGBTQ+ community members.

Loneliness and social isolation were central topics in each interview I had with research participants. Though pandemic-induced social isolation is not exclusive to Queer and LGBTQ+ communities, the loss of access to public Queer spaces has further contributed to social isolation. Before the pandemic, many Queer individuals relied on public Queer inclusive spaces to create

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connections with other LGBTQ+ community members (Krane et al., 2002). The COVID-19 pandemic induced social isolation and consequent loss of Queer-inclusive public spaces provides the context and environment in which the other themes found within my research emerged.

Communication Adaptation

Due to the social distancing guidelines announced by the WHO and the Centers for Disease Control, research participants had to adapt their method of communication to maintain their intimate relationships and communication with partners and community members. Research participant Nova discussed that before the COVID-19 pandemic, many of their dates with their fiancé took place in public social settings such as bars, restaurants, and hikes. The COVID-19 pandemic social distancing measures led to the closure of countless public spaces, including Queer inclusive spaces. Many Queer and LGBTQ+ identified folks created new spaces for intimate connection and a sense of community through digital communication media, such as social media platforms (Anderson & Knee, 2020). One participant using the pseudonym Rowen spoke on how they maintained intimate interactions with their partners through digital mediums, “phone calls, texts, and asynchronous communication.”

Other research participants related their experience of changing the way that they communicate. For example, research participant Alex shared their experience with increasing the frequency of intentional verbal affection during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to social distancing measures and travel restrictions, they were unable to see their long-distance Queer platonic partner in person since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020. Alex stated that:

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I think that with the pandemic, not being able to have any sort of in-person contact has made that a little bit more stressful, and so it's made that kind of more explicit verbal affection has been happening more often [*sic*].

Due to the limitations of in-person communication, Alex and their partner spent more time verbally affirming and communicating their affection to maintain their relationship. This not only demonstrated a development in the relationship, but also a shift in the manner in which Alex and their partner communicated intimately.

Another research participant under the pseudonym Stacey discussed how the COVID-19 social distancing guidelines influenced adaptation in intimate communication with her partner. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Stacey and her partner lived apart and communicated primarily through text and in-person dates. The implementation of social distancing and shelter-in-place measures introduced barriers to their intimate communication and motivated their moving in together. Stacey explained:

Especially with his family, he has two elderly people in his house, so we didn't want to be spreading germs from, like, out from my house and all the people I've been around into his house over and over again, so we really wanted to just kind of keep it closed.

Stacey's decision to move in with her partner was motivated by the social health guidelines put forth by WHO (2021) limiting contact with individuals outside of one's household. Stacey's particular situation with her partner is demonstrative of communication adaptation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of moving in with one another, Stacey's primary intimate communication shifted from phone calls and text communication to in-person, face-to-face communication with her partner.

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Exploration

Each of the participants' numerous and intersecting identities plays a role in how that individual may communicate within different social contexts. Individuals learn about their own and other identities through social interactions with others. Social identities are exchanged, understood, and reinforced through communication with others (Gans, 1979). LGBTQ+ identities also influence the ways Queer individuals navigate communication within different social contexts (Nicholas, 2006). For example, a Queer person may communicate more openly and authentically within a Queer-friendly environment. The social distancing measures, shelter-in-place, and business operation regulations introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic forced people to spend much of their time indoors. This period of social isolation allowed for participants to reflect upon their own Queer identities and forms of intimate communication.

Research participant Nova spent a majority of their time at home when they were not at work. They utilized some of their time to research online diverse ways of combining their spiritual practices with their Queerness, sexual identity, and sexual practices. Nova described:

Sexual intimacy with myself, like lowkey, I have to thank COVID for it. Because of COVID, I needed to find something that occupied my time, so I started looking into, like, sex magic and what that looks like [...] sex manifestations and how fucking powerful an orgasm is... and having that experience. I would never pre-COVID look this up because I've been taught my entire life if you masturbate, it's to get off and that's it. You're not exploring your body, you're not learning what feels good, you're just doing what you know feels good, and that's it. Because I've been practicing sex magic, my self-intimacy has gone through the roof... So powerful to my magic and so powerful to who I'm becoming as a person [*sic*].

Sexual intimacy with oneself can be a component of intimate communication. The time spent indoors and at home during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed space and time for Nova to explore various aspects of their identity and interpersonal communication. Sex magic within this

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context refers to the blending of sexual pleasure with religious and spiritual practices. Nova's experience was not only a form of exploration but also resulted in the empowerment of their Queerness, spirituality, and sexuality. Nova's journey of personal exploration through sex magic was significant to their sexual exploration, identity exploration, and spirituality.

Green also shared with me how COVID-19 had encouraged them to explore more facets of their personal, relational, and sexual identities. When I invited Green to speak on how COVID-19 has impacted their intimacy and communication, they responded by discussing the different ways in which they explored different forms of intimacy with their partner. Green stated:

More exploration in general and ways to feel sexually satisfied... I don't think that there has been an impact of COVID-19 on like masturbation. There has been an impact on my sexual relationship with my partner who I live with. Neither of us has been having sex with anyone else since lockdown stuff has happened and that includes I haven't done anything Cyber wise and he hasn't either. Just because we don't have those kind of relationships with anyone else that we wouldn't feel comfortable doing that with anyone but with each other. We have been exploring new and different ways to engage in sexual intimacy, for sure.

An individual's identities play a pivotal role in how individuals communicate with one another. Communication contributes to the creation, affirmation, and transformation of social identities such as gender, sex, and sexuality (Houser et al., 2019). LGBTQ+ individuals will often purposefully alter the ways they communicate within different spaces when considering factors such as Queer visibility, whether they are out in that social environment, and their physical safety. For individuals such as Nova and Green, who both hold multiple marginalized identities including sexuality, gender, and romantic identities, identity exploration is an ongoing and lifelong process. The social distancing conditions throughout the COVID-19 contributed to

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allowing the space and time for marginalized individuals to empower themselves to explore the realms of their personal identities, relational identities, and sexual identities.

Digital Communication Burnout

The highly contagious nature of the COVID-19 virus created a necessary shift in the format of how individuals interacted with one another, including intimate interactions and communication. Countless school districts, work environments, and universities across the United States and around the globe were forced to make a shift from in-person classes and services to solely online and digitally mediated services and communication. This swift transfer from interacting with individuals face-to-face daily to primarily digital communication introduced new communication challenges.

Pandemic-induced social isolation encouraged individuals to sustain existing relationships and to seek out new forms of connection through digital platforms. The use of virtual and remote platforms for communication such as Zoom, Google Hangout, Skype, and Microsoft Teams became a daily necessity for many university students and working professionals. Though these platforms are useful tools for facilitating connections between individuals, countless individuals experienced digital communication burnout throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The global need for accessible, affordable, and reliable digital communication and conferencing calls surged due to social distancing measures and remote during the pandemic. The digital conferencing service Zoom reported ten million registered users in December 2019 with a steadily rapid increase of 300 million users in June 2021 (Iqbal, 2021). Academic research

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and popular news media outlets reported an overwhelming sense of “Zoom Fatigue” from students and professional workers throughout 2020 and 2021. In addition to excessive harmful blue-light and working and schooling at home, digital communication platforms such as Zoom have proven to induce stress via nonverbal communication overload. Scholars suggest that digital communication burn-out and fatigue can be attributed to a multitude of factors including constricted physical movement, cognitive overstimulation, an excessive amount of eye-gaze at a close distance, and an increase in self-evaluation due to seeing oneself on video (Bailenson, 2021).

For many LGBTQ+ and Queer-identified individuals living alone during the COVID-19 pandemic, digitally mediated communication ruled their social interactions. Research participant Rowen described themselves as having an outgoing and “larger than life personality.” Due to the social distancing measures, Rowen was forced to limit their socializing with their partners to only remote, digital communication. Rowen shared their frustration with the transition and the resulting digital communication burnout:

As opposed to pre-pandemic, where I was very much getting all the social time. Like I'm never gonna say no to socializing unless I have a deadline or something, you know, or a pre-existing engagement. But now I really have to be more measured about my energy because conversations that used to be really, really fulfilling because of the [digital] mediums and the [digital] platforms are now very, very draining. So I went from being, like, an extrovert who is rejuvenated by conversation and social engagement to being an extrovert who is, like, depleted by virtually mediated communication and engagement.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Rowen sought out face-to-face and digital social interaction to experience a sense of fulfillment. While the need to stay socially distanced during the pandemic severely limited their in-person interactions with their partners, they adjusted their communication methods and shifted to digital communication. The leap to all digitally mediated

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communication contributed to Rowen feeling overwhelmed and fatigued by answering emails, texts, direct messages, and phone calls. Instead of feeling satisfaction and recharged through social interaction, Rowen struggled with feeling exhausted after engaging in digitally mediated communication with their partners, family, and peers. The dramatic shift to digital media becoming a primary method of communication led to Rowen suffering digital communication burnout.

Resilience

Throughout all the themes I identified from the interviews, each participant illustrated a sense of resilience in maintaining intimate communication despite the barriers introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Historically, Queer and LGBTQ+ communities are no strangers to resilience. Institutions upholding systematic Queerphobia and social prejudice contribute to LGBTQ+ individuals experiencing mental illness and addiction at a significantly higher rate than the heterosexual and cisgender population (Meyer, 2003). Though faced with ongoing oppression on both a structural and personal level, Queer identified individuals have developed ways to cope with Queerphobia and a sense of resilience by transforming challenges into opportunities for building strength (Asakura & Craig, 2014). Research participants in this study demonstrated resilience through the creation and maintenance of their intimate communication as well as through relational, sexual, and personal identity exploration.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in new forms of communication and altered the ways individuals interact with one another. My participants voiced the importance of remaining connected with their intimate partners and other LGBTQ+ community members, even if they were not able to meet in person due to social distancing measures. To maintain those

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connections, my research participants adapted how they communicated with their intimate partners. For example, Alex shifted towards using more verbally affectionate and affirming communication within their relationship, as they were unable to safely physically communicate with their partner. Other Queer folks had to move or change their living situations during the pandemic so that they could safely interact with their partners. To adhere to social distancing measures while maintaining their intimate relationship, Stacey and their partner made the decision to move in together. This shift in Stacey's living situation and location led to more in-person and face-to-face intimate communication. Rowen persevered in their communication and connection with their partners through digital social media platforms and scheduled video calls. Though participants engaged in different organizations and forms of intimate relationships, each participant spoke about diverse ways that they adapted their intimate communication style or format during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research participants also demonstrated a sense of resilience through sexual, relational, and identity exploration. As a Queer individual, Nova's sexual and personal identities are valuable to them and their intimate communication style. Nova spoke on how the pandemic has allowed the time for their sexual and spiritual practices to "explode" in their development. Green also spent time during the pandemic researching and expanding their understanding of polyamory and different organizations of intimate communication and Queer relationships. Moving in with their partner during the pandemic allowed Stacey to spend more time with their partner and expand the different ways they communicate as a couple. Through the exploration of their sexualities, relationships, and identities, my participants found empowerment through their Queer identities and illustrated a sense of resilience despite the communication barriers introduced during the pandemic.

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Discussion

Research Limitations

There were several limitations to this research project. I encountered barriers throughout my research process due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were conducted virtually, which limited the connection and trust I was able to cultivate with my research participants. As I conducted this research project over eight months from late 2020 to early 2021, there were also limitations to the breadth and depth of information researched. Intimate communication and Queer communication during the COVID-19 pandemic are expanding and developing topics that cannot be fully captured within a study of this length. Experiences and shifts in LGBTQ+ intimate communication since the start of March 2020 have rapidly transformed over time as new information is released about the coronavirus and LGBTQ+ folks adapt to different communication environments.

The sampling size and access to research participants were also limitations. All participants within this study identified as out in different social contexts and as Queer and/or as LGBTQ+ communities. The impacts of the pandemic may have differed for Queer individuals who were closeted or not socially out as Queer and/or LGBTQ+. The majority of research participants were UNC undergraduate and graduate students as well as residents of northern Colorado, and a limited number of participants were recruited within the time limits. As the LGBTQ+ community is comprised of countless diverse identities, my five research participants do not represent all of the impacts of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ intimate communication. Further research is needed to draw a more inclusive and in-depth analysis of the impacts of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ intimate communication.

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Future Suggestions for Research

Further research exploring the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on LGBTQ+ intimate communication is needed. If research on Queer intimate communication is conducted by LGBTQ+ and Queer identified researchers, LGBTQ+ research participants may be more inclined to be vulnerable and build rapport with a researcher as a result of the shared identity. This study focused on the experiences shared by a small sample size of five LGBTQ+ young adults living in northern Colorado. The social identities and experiences represented in this research cannot be perceived as reflective of all LGBTQ+ individuals or communities. I recommend that in future research studies a larger pool of research participants with diverse social and Queer identities should be recruited to get a broader and more inclusive understanding of how the pandemic has shaped LGBTQ+ intimate communication. The social distancing measures in place have also developed regionally and changed regularly, transforming different intimate communication settings over time. I urge that future research be conducted over a longer period to measure the effects of the pandemic on LGBTQ+ intimate communication gradually.

Conclusion

The contagious nature of the COVID-19 virus has altered the way people around the world engage in intimate communication. Throughout this exploratory qualitative research project, I investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted LGBTQ+ intimate communication and relationships. The economic and social impacts of the pandemic have introduced new stressors and amplified social isolation for countless LGBTQ+ identified individuals. Through my research, I was able to shed light on the ways that LGBTQ+ individuals have navigated their intimate relationships and communication throughout the pandemic.

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This research study examines the intersections of Queer identities and intimate communication as well as illustrates the significance of Queering communication studies and the potential of exploratory qualitative research. Through conducting informal interviews, I was able to focus on bringing attention to five LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences and understandings of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted LGBTQ+ relationships and intimate communication. Research participants described their experiences of social isolation, communication barriers, and digital communication burnout throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing encouraged my participants to reflect on their sexual, relational, and social identities and nurture a sense of empowerment through knowing themselves more deeply. Despite pandemic-induced communication barriers, my research participants exhibited a sense of resilience through identity exploration and the maintenance and creation of Queer intimate and community spaces through social media and digital communication platforms.

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