

**Does covid-19 “infect” love?
How italian emerging adults lived their romantic relationships
during the time of lockdown**

Gaia Cucci, Maria Giulia Olivari, Emanuela Confalonieri

Dipartimento di Psicologia, CRIdée
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano
L.go Gemelli, 1, 201123 Milano
e-mail: gaia.cucci@unicatt.it tel: +39 3421934039
e-mail: emanuela.confalonieri
e-mail: mariagiulia.olivari@unicatt.it

Ricevuto: 11.09.2020 - **Accettato:** 13.05.2021

Pubblicato online: 17.09.2021

Abstract

In Italy the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown have deeply changed the way Italian people used to live. Many emerging adults had to self-distance from their romantic partners and modify the way of communicating and relating to each other. Thus managing a romantic relationship could be very challenging.

The study quantitatively and qualitatively investigates the association between Lockdown related negative emotions, perception of the romantic relationship quality, changes in the relationship's characteristics and conflict within the couple. The sample consists of 171 emerging adults involved in a romantic relationship, who spent the time of lockdown apart from the romantic partner.

Results showed that the perception of the relationship quality was not greatly associated with Lockdown related negative emotions, but was associated with changes and higher conflict within the relationship. Qualitative data support and enrich these results. Changes and conflicts within

G. Cucci et al. / *Ricerche di Psicologia*, 2021, Vol. 44
ISSN 0391-6081, ISSNe 1972-5620, Doi: 10.3280/rip2021oa1222

the relationship were due to: difficulties to communicate, lack of intimacy, awareness about relationship importance or presence of emotional detachment between partners.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, romantic relationships, emerging adults, lockdown.

Introduction

On the 11th of March the World Health Organization stated that the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was a global pandemic emergency. Originally identified in China in December 2019, it quickly spread in Italy in February, bringing this latter to become one of the countries with the highest COVID-19 related infection and victim rates in the world. To counter the rapid spread of the disease in the country, on the 10th of March the Italian Government implemented extraordinary emergency containment measures aiming at limiting the viral transmission and to minimize contacts with people infected by COVID-19. Italians were ordered to stay at home, limiting their movement in the whole national territory, unless strictly motivated by reasons of work, health or state of necessity that must be proved by a written certification. Moving or travelling towards different districts was forbidden. Commercial and retail businesses, except those providing essential services, were shut down. Use of face masks was compulsory and social distancing measures were imposed. National lockdown was declared and all individuals were quarantined and forced to maintain strict social distancing from other people. These restrictive measures lasted until the 4th of May, when Italy entered in the “phase 2”, and citizens were allowed to travel within the same district to visit their relatives (people linked by a stable bond of affection), including their partners. Then, after the 18th of May Italian citizens, still following social distancing measures, were allowed to meet up with friends and attend restaurants, coffees and shops again.

These unprecedented measures deeply impacted on lifestyles and social relationships and, together with the fear of contracting the virus, strongly affected psychological well-being of individuals all over the country (Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020). Despite research on the COVID-19 pandemic among the Italian population is still at its outset, the first studies suggested that people have experienced psychological distress following the COVID-19 outbreak (Moccia et al., 2020; Mazza et al., 2020, Pagnini et al., in press), including sleep disturbances, higher levels of anxiety and distress (Casagrande, Favieri, Tambelli, & Forte, 2020), and PTSD symptoms (Forte, Favieri, Tambelli & Casagrande, 2020). In par-

ticular, COVID-19 resulted to have played a strong impact on emerging adults, being associated with increased stress (Forte et al., 2020; Mazza et al., 2020). Germani, Buratta, Delvecchio & Mazzeschi (2020) investigated peculiar impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on emerging adults showing that they reported an accurate perceived knowledge about COVID-19, experienced high levels of worry and concerns about COVID-19 for their relatives rather than for themselves and reported state anxiety and stress levels higher than the normal cut-off, even if not very high nor clinical.

Stay-at-home orders, as previously anticipated, brought to drastic changes on people's daily activities, limiting opportunities for people to share time with friends, partners and family members. In Italy, social distancing measures strongly impact also on emerging adults and their social life, especially on the way they live their romantic relationships. Since the majority of Italian emerging adults still cohabit with their parents, compared to those emerging adults from European countries (Smorti, Ponti & Cincidda, 2020), a large amount of Italian youths involved in a romantic relationship, had to deal with the lockdown being physically separated from their romantic partners. Studies suggested that, in general, being in a romantic relationship and living with the romantic partner help to better deal with stressful events and times (Greenfield & Russell, 2011; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017), protecting people from feelings of loneliness and disconnection (Greenfield & Russell, 2011). In situations that cause high levels of stress, compared to those periods of reduced stress, people tend to make more negative attributions about their partner's behaviors (Neff & Karney, 2004), about their relationship (Tesser & Beach, 1998), engage in more negative communication models (Williamson, Karney & Bradbury, 2013) and report higher levels of conflicts (Karney, Story & Bradbury, 2005). In line with this evidence, several studies suggested that stress leads to lower relationship quality and greater relationship discordance over time (Bodenmann, 1997; Conger, Rueter & Elder, 1999; Neff & Karney, 2017). For this reason, trying to maintain a high quality of the romantic relationship during the stressful COVID-19 related lockdown could be challenging. Italian emerging adults, indeed, had to quickly change the way they relate with their partners, since they could not stay physically close and they just had to rely on new technologies to communicate to each other and feed their relationships.

Studies investigating romantic relationships at the time of COVID-19 are few and mainly focused on couples living together during quarantine and sharing the experience of the pandemic. Research suggested that people who lived with romantic partners felt more socially connected

(Okabe-Miyamoto, Folk, Lyubomirsky & Dunn, 2021) and that having a partner who is perceived to be responsive mitigated the spillover of external stressors into a romantic relationship, like those introduced by COVID-19 (Balzarini et al., *preprint*).

To our knowledge, no studies have investigated the impact of COVID-19 on the perception of romantic relationship quality among individuals involved in a romantic relationship and not living with the partner during the lockdown. In the present explorative study, we aim to quantitatively and qualitatively investigate the associations between Lockdown related negative emotions, perception of the romantic relationship quality, perception of changes in relationship's characteristics and more difficulties and higher conflicts with the romantic partner due to lockdown experience.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The sample was selected from Wave 1 of an ongoing longitudinal project examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the quality of Italian emerging adult romantic relationships.

Approval for the study was obtained from the Ethical Commission of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan. Participants were recruited online with a snowballing method by promoting the research on social media sites (e.g., Facebook), by word of mouth, and through personal contacts of the researchers (through WhatsApp). Participants provided online their consent to participate in the research. They completed an online survey (launched April 20, 2020 and closed on May 3, 2020) shortly before the beginning of "phase 2" (May 4, 2020). Therefore, results of the present study concerned the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic in Italy.

Selected participants were 171 Italian emerging adults (22.8% males; 77.2% females) aged 18 to 30 years ($M = 23.86$ years, $SD = 2.8$ years), 45,5% were students, 34,7% were workers and 19,8% were both students and workers. Among participants, 87% were from Northern Italy, 2% from central Italy and 11% from Southern Italy. Participants spent the time of lockdown living apart from their partner (89% lived with their parents, 5,8% lived alone and 5,3% lived with roommates). As for sexual orientation, 95.3% of the sample was exclusively heterosexual or mainly heterosexual, 2,4% was mainly bisexual and 2,4% exclusively homosexual.

The mean duration of romantic relationship was 40.23 months ($SD = 30.52$) and none of the participants or their partners had contracted COVID-19.

Instruments

The first part of questionnaire includes *ad hoc* items with various response options that assessed relevant information concerning:

- Demographics: e.g sex and age.
- COVID-19 and lockdown related information: whether the subjects him/herself or the romantic partner had contracted COVID-19; where and with whom the subject spent the lockdown.
- Romantic relationship status and characteristics: e.g., sexual orientation¹, duration of the romantic relationship, partner age.
- Perception of changes, difficulties and conflicts in the romantic relationship due to lockdown: perceived importance of the relationships before the lockdown (on a scale ranging from 1 = “not so much” to 4 = “very much”) and if the importance has changed due to the experience of lockdown (1 = “the importance of the relationship has increased”, 2= “the importance of the relationship is the same” 3 = “the importance of the relationship has decreased”); whether and how much the subject perceived his/her romantic relationship has changed due to the experience of lockdown (on a scale ranging from 1 = “not at all” to 4 = “very much”); whether and how much the subject perceived more difficulties and/or higher levels of conflict with the romantic partner due to the experience of lockdown (on a scale ranging from 1 = “not at all” to 4 = “very much”). Concerning these aspects, participants were also asked to answer to the following open questions: “*if you believe your romantic relationships has changed due to the lockdown, please describe why and how this happened*”; “*if you have perceived more difficulties and/or higher levels of conflict with your partner due to the lockdown, please describe why and how this happened*”.

Qualitative data were translated from Italian to English by a researcher fluent in English and revised through a procedure of back translation.

The second part of questionnaire includes two self-report scales investigating the following constructs.

¹ Sexual orientation was assessed using the single item Kinsey Scale (1948).

Perception of the relationship's quality. It was assessed using the Italian version of the *Network Relationship Inventory* (NRI, Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Italian adaptation, Guarnieri & Tani, 2011) a 33-item scale measuring the perception of relationships' quality with other individuals (romantic partner, mother, father, friends...). In this study participants were asked to fill the questionnaire thinking about their romantic partner. The scale consists of 11 dimensions investigating the subject perception of both positive and negative quality of the relationship: *Satisfaction* (perception of the quality and functioning of the relationship, 3 items, "How satisfied are you with your relationship with this person?", $\alpha = .89$), *Companionship* (perception of quality and quantity of time spent together, 3 items, "How often do you spend free time with this person?", $\alpha = .61$), *Instrumental Aid* (perception of help provided by the other one, 3 items, "How much does this person help you figure out or fix things?", $\alpha = .65$), *Intimacy* (perception of closeness in terms of self-disclosure and open communication, 3 items, "How often do you share secrets and private feelings with this person?", $\alpha = .78$), *Nurturance* (perception of the care received by the other one, 3 items, "How much do you protect and look out for this person?", $\alpha = .70$), *Affection* (perception of the other one's sentimental involvement, 3 items, "How much does this person really care about you?", $\alpha = .82$), *Enhancement of Worth* (perception of the other one's admiration towards the subject, 3 items, "How much does this person treat you like you're good at many things?", $\alpha = .71$), *Reliable Alliance* (perception of relationship's solidity, 3 items, "How sure are you that your relationship will last in spite of fights?", $\alpha = .94$), *Punishment* (perception of the other one's punitive attitudes towards the subject, 3 items, "How much does this person punish you?", $\alpha = .69$), *Conflict* (perception of conflicts frequency, 3 items, "How much do you and this person hassle or nag one another?" $\alpha = .79$), *Antagonism* (perception of the degree of antagonism within the relationship, 3 items, "How much do you and this person get on each other's nerves?", $\alpha = .85$). Two main factors can be also calculated: *Support*, which consists of the first 8 dimensions ($\alpha = .93$), *Negative Interactions*, which consists of the last three dimensions ($\alpha = .86$). The items are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

Negative emotions experienced during lockdown. It was assessed using the Italian version of the *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988; Italian adaptation, Terraciano, McCrae & Costa, 2003) an instrument to assess both positive and negative affect. The items are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). In the instruction participants were asked to answer on how they felt during the previous weeks thinking to the lock-

down. In particular, for this study, we used only 7 items related to negative affect. We considered how much participants felt: afraid, upset, nervous, jittery, scared, distressed and irritable. A global mean score was then calculated for each participant, named as “Lockdown related Negative Emotions” ($\alpha = .90$).

Results

Descriptives

Concerning the importance of the romantic relationship before the lockdown, 79.5% of the participants defined their relationships as very important, 15.8% as important and 4.7% quite important. Due the experience of lockdown, the importance of the relationship has increased for 33.3% of the sample, it has remained the same for 60% and it has decreased for 5.8%.

As for the perception of changes in the relationship’s characteristics due to the experience of lockdown, 61.4% of the participants perceived a change in the relationship, while 38.6% think that the relationship has not changed. Participants also perceived more difficulties and/or higher levels of conflict with the romantic partner due to the experience of lockdown were 48.5% .

Mean scores and standard deviations for perceived positive and negative romantic relationship quality and Lockdown related negative emotions are reported in Table 1.

Perception of romantic relationship quality and Lockdown related negative emotions

Bivariate correlations were conducted to investigate the associations between perceived positive and negative romantic relationship quality and Lockdown related negative emotions. A significant positive correlation between Instrumental Aid and Lockdown related negative emotions ($r = .207, p = .007$) and significant negative correlation between Affection and Lockdown related negative emotions ($r = -.160, p = .037$) emerged.

Tab. 1 - Mean scores and standard deviations for perceived positive and negative romantic relationship quality and Lockdown related Negative Emotions

Mean (SD)

Satisfaction	4.21 (.67)
Companionship	3.85 (.57)
Instrumental Aid	3.20 (.68)
Intimacy	4.04 (.76)
Nurturance	3.78 (.72)
Affection	4.69 (.51)
Enhancement of Worth	3.78 (.69)
Reliable Alliance	3.93 (.86)
Support	3.93 (.49)
Punishment	1.55 (.53)
Conflict	2.07 (.51)
Antagonism	2.07 (.58)
Negative Interactions	1.90 (.45)
Lockdown related Negative Emotions	2.95 (.84)

Perception of romantic relationship quality, perception of changes and conflicts in the romantic relationship

Bivariate correlations were conducted to investigate the associations between perceived positive and negative romantic relationship quality, perception of changes in the relationship characteristics and higher levels of difficulties/conflicts with the romantic partner due to the experience of lockdown.

Several significant correlations emerged which are reported in Table 2.

Tab. 2 - Bivariate correlations between perceived positive and negative romantic relationship quality, perception of changes in romantic relationship and higher levels of difficulties/conflicts with the romantic partner due to the experience of lockdown

	Changes in relationship characteristics	Higher difficulties/conflicts with the romantic partner
Satisfaction	-.411**	-.457**
Companionship	-.281**	-.200**
Instrumental Aid	n.s	n.s
Intimacy	n.s	-.178*
Nurturance	n.s	n.s
Affection	-.217**	-.269**
Enhancement of Worth	n.s	-.161*
Reliable Alliance	-.333**	-.406**
Support	-.296**	-.326**
Punishment	n.s	n.s
Conflict	.151*	.255**
Antagonism	.209**	.346**
Negative Interactions	.157*	.291**

** $p < .01$, two tailed; * $p < .05$, two-tailed

Perceptions of changes, difficulties and conflicts with the romantic partner due to lockdown experience

Qualitative data collected through the open questions brought out several aspects of changes in the relationship characteristics and different reasons for higher perception of difficulties/conflicts within the couple associated to lockdown experience. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two researchers started the coding process, organizing the data into meaningful groups. Then, codes were collected into themes. After that, the researchers reviewed the themes by reading them again, mainly checking their coherency and consistency to the coded extracted and the entire data set.

The most common aspect of change reported by the participants was the impossibility to communicate in person with the partner and the consequent adaptation to the use of technological devices as the only way to relate and communicate with the romantic partner due to social distancing.

“This was the first time we spent so much time apart from each other, so some aspects have changed especially in the way of communicating”
(Female)

“The relationship itself hasn’t changed, rather the way we are in contact considering the necessity to maintain social distancing” (Male)

“It is difficult to carry on a relationship only with video calls or messages, it is no longer possible to share moments together” (Female)

Concerning this, a great number of participants reported difficulties in managing the communication with the partner, due to the impossibility to see each other in person. This resulted to be most common reasons for difficulties and conflict with the romantic partner. The majority of emerging adults indeed reported that misunderstandings became more frequent and, at the same time, it became more difficult to solve a problem only resorting to calls or messages.

“It is more difficult to communicate through calls, the lack of the partner is hard and gives rise to misunderstandings” (Female)

“To communicate only through messages or calls is more impersonal and it is more difficult to understand feelings and emotions of the partner” (Male)

“The lack of in-person communication in some cases caused difficulties in understanding each other” (Male)

Another common aspect of change reported by the participants was the lack of physical and sexual intimacy with the romantic partner.

“We have less things to tell each other and the lack of physical intimacy is hard to manage. It is more difficult to get on the same page”
(Male)

“We miss for sure the lack of sexual intimacy and physical contact”
(Male)

“With the distance, it is impossible to have intimacy and sexuality with the partner” (Male)

Participants also perceived a change in the relationship in terms of awareness about its importance and couple solidity. The majority of emerging adults indeed reported that the experience of lockdown, together with the consequent impossibility of seeing to each other, strengthened the relationship, let emerging adults realize the importance of their relationship and, in some cases, also figuring a future living together with their partners.

“I have realized that it is hard not to have my partner ‘physically’ at my side, even for the small things of everyday life to which I did not give too much credit before” (Male)

“The distance let us understand with more clarity our willingness to share everyday life: we have decided to go living together soon” (Female)

“I have better understood the importance of having my partner next to me, and we have started thinking about the idea of living together” (Male)

At the same time, for other emerging adults, the experience of lockdown entailed emotional detachment between the partners, that some participants reported to be due to the fact that each partner dedicated more times to him/herself and his/her personal or work needs.

“We emotionally detached ourselves from each other. We didn’t work hard to maintain our feelings strong and deep” (Female)

“To spend less time together and to have less physical contact let us to be less involved and more focused on personal needs” (Female)

“On my side, I feel to be more detached. I believe that the great amount of work and the distance made the relationship less strong. Also my partner doesn’t show so much attention and care toward me as he used to do” (Female)

This aspect was also reported to be another cause for higher couple conflict. In particular, some emerging adults perceived the partner as less supportive, which made arguments to be more frequent.

“We argue much more because I thought that he would succeed in staying closer to me during hard times. He confirmed his difficulty in understanding how to help me in certain situations instead” (Female)

“Now he is focused on his work, forgetting me. This made us argue more” (Female)

Finally, emerging adults described the lockdown experience as stressful and challenging from an emotional point of view. This, together with the impossibility to see the partner, led the couple to discuss or fight more often.

“...the most negative aspects of both have come out, my impetuosity and his difficulty in handling some situations” (Female)

“Sometimes we argued on trivial reasons, probably this was due to the stressful situation and the impossibility to see each other” (Male)

“Due to distance we are more likely to argue, and my anxiety emerged even more” (Female)

Discussion

The present explorative study represents a first attempt to investigate how the experience of lockdown might have an impact on emerging adult romantic relationships, focusing on those who spent this period living apart from their romantic partners.

First of all, the lockdown was an experience that changed the perception of the importance of the romantic relationship. In particular more than 30% of participants reported that the importance of the relationship has increased, while around 6% realized that their relationships were not so important. It is possible to hypothesize that the impossibility to see the partner in person and, maybe, more time available to think, let emerging adults reflect and become aware of the real importance that the romantic relationship and/or the partner has for them.

The majority of participants (61.4%) also reported that the time of lockdown entailed changes in the relationship's characteristics but also more difficulties and/or, in some cases, higher levels of conflict with the romantic partner (48.5%). Therefore, a great number of participants somehow perceived a change in their relationships that may be ascribable to the lockdown experience.

Participants reported medium levels of Lockdown related negative emotions suggesting that the first months of lockdown did not strongly affect them emotionally. It is possible to hypothesize that, since the questionnaire was administered shortly before the beginning of “phase 2” (May 4, 2020), respondents memories of their emotions during the lockdown were positively influenced by the idea of returning to normality at the end of the pandemic event.

Findings concerning the associations between perception of the romantic relationship quality and Lockdown related negative emotions, showed few correlations. Participants who reported higher levels of Lockdown related negative emotions also reported a higher perception of help provided by the partner but, at the same time, also less sentimental involvement and vice versa. A possible explanation of these associations could be that the stressful experience of lockdown leads a partner to provide concrete help and support to the other, but, the physical distance may lead partners to perceive less emotional involvement. The presence of such few correlations could be due to the fact that participants did not report high level of Lockdown related negative emotions, thus this might not greatly affect the perception of the romantic relationship. Moreover,

it is important to consider that participants are emerging adults reporting a long-lasting romantic relationship. The literature on the theme (e.g. Furman & Wehner, 1994; Brown, 1999) has, indeed, highlighted that during the emerging adulthood relationships are characterized by higher involvement, became progressively more stable and future orientated and partners perceived higher couple solidity and mutual support. Therefore, it could be possible that partners are more able to face and cope with a stressful event preventing this latter to significantly affect the relationship with the romantic partner.

In line with this aspect, the emerging adults perceiving their relationships as more satisfying, solid and supportive and characterized by less conflict and antagonism were those who reported lower perception of changes and conflicts in the relationship during the time of lockdown. Therefore, it seems to emerge that a better perception of the relationship quality helped emerging adults in facing the challenging experience of lockdown, as emerged in previous studies (Balzarini et al., *preprint*; Greenfield & Russell, 2011; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017). It is also possible to hypothesize that the perception of a positive relationship quality may have mitigated the impact of lockdown and the related difficulties on emerging adults. Future studies are warranted to investigate this aspect and test this hypothesis. In line with this interpretation, previous studies have indeed suggested that perceiving the partner as responsive to their needs mitigate and moderate the effect of occurring stressful events, or of external stressor factors (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Selcuk, Zayas & Hazan, 2010), also in relation to COVID-19 pandemic (Balzarini et al., *preprint*).

Qualitative data supported and enriched quantitative results by bringing out the role that the lockdown experience may have played on emerging adult relationships, thus providing a clearer portray. Emerging adults reported changes in the way of communicating with the partner due to social distancing. Managing a “virtual” and/or online communication was described as very challenging by participants. In particular, the most difficult thing was to exclusively use new media to communicate with the partner. Several emerging adults, indeed, reported that the mediated communication made more difficult to understand and express feelings and emotions, increased the frequency of misunderstandings and made more difficult troubles or conflicts resolution. Coherently, problems associate to partner communication were one of the most common reasons for conflict within the couple during the lockdown.

Another common aspect of change was the lack of physical and sexual intimacy with the romantic partner. Some participants indeed reported that they missed the intimacy which, in turn, makes harder to face the

stressful event of the lockdown. Sexual behaviors and intimacy are fundamental elements of romantic relationship in emerging adulthood (Moshier, Chandra, & Jones, 2005), are linked to positive outcomes (Welsh, Haugen, Widman, Darling, & Grello, 2005) and could strongly affect the personal well-being. Research on sexuality at time of COVID-19, in fact, suggested that sexual satisfaction significantly decreased during the quarantine being linked with higher levels of depression (Cocci et al., 2020).

It seems that the experience of lockdown made emerging adults more aware of the importance of communication and intimacy within the romantic relationship, two aspects that literature has demonstrated to be key factors in a romantic relationship (e.g. Authors, 2017; Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Coherently, several emerging adults reported that the experience of lockdown, not only increased the importance of the relationship, but also strengthened the relationship making them aware of the importance of the partner's support. Several participants, indeed, expressed the desire to move in together with their romantic partner in order to share everyday life. These results are similar to those showed in a study (Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2013) investigating long-distance relationships compared to close-proximity relationships. The study showed that people in long-distance relationships reported higher levels of relationship quality in terms of adjustment, love for partner, fun with partner, and conversational quality, as well as higher levels of dedication to their relationships and lower levels of commitment constraint. Therefore, it is possible to hypothesize that missing the partner and staying apart from him/her, may indeed increase levels of dedication between those young adults who were forced to stay separated due to lockdown.

However, for some other emerging adults the experience of lockdown entailed emotional detachment between the partners spoiling couple solidarity and/or romantic relationship quality. In particular, some participants reported troubles due to the perception of a partner as less supportive, responsive or attentive, individual difficulties in managing emotional distress during a conversation with the partner and a general higher frequency of arguments and conflicts within the couple. These results may suggest, on a side, that the experience of lockdown helped some emerging adults to realize some negative aspects of their romantic relationships. On the other side, it could be that some emerging adults are still developing romantic skills and thus they are not able to successfully face such stressful event. Future studies may investigate whether the experience of lockdown brought to a relationship breakup and explore reasons associated to this event.

The present explorative study has the limit of not having investigated gender differences due to an unbalanced sample, where females were more than males. In the future it would be interesting to investigate how males and females may have differently perceived their relationships during the time of lockdown. Moreover the present sample is not representative of the Italian population geographic distribution, thus no comparison among young adults coming from different geographical areas of Italy was possible.

Despite this limit, the results of this explorative study may represent a key point to address future research regarding the psychological consequences of COVID-19 pandemic on emerging adult romantic relationships. In particular, longitudinal studies are needed in order to further investigate and understand how and why the experience of lockdown may entail both short- and long-term consequences on emerging adult romantic relationships.

We strongly believe that this study, despite its explorative nature, may provide interesting clues for educational programs and/or interventions focused on the empowerment of emerging adults' romantic skills such as, effective communication, emotional sharing and conflict negotiation, which, in turn, will help young adults in facing stressful events as a couple.

References

- Balzarini, R. N., Muise, A., Zoppolat, G., Di Bartolomeo, A., Rodrigues, D. L., Alonso-Ferres, M., Slatcher, R. B. (*preprint*). Love in the Time of Covid: Perceived Partner Responsiveness Buffers People from Lower Relationship Quality Associated with Covid-Related Stressors. Retrieved from: <https://psyarxiv.com/e3fh4/>.
- Bodenmann, G. (1997). The influence of stress and coping on close relationships: A two-year longitudinal study. *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, 56, 156-164.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
- Brown, B. B. (1999). You're going out with whom? Peer group influences on adolescent romantic relationships. In W. Furman, B. B. Brown, & C. Feiring (Eds.), *The development of romantic relationships in adolescence*, 291-329. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Casagrande, M., Favieri, F., Tambelli, R., Forte, G. (2020). The enemy who sealed the world: Effects quarantine due to the COVID-19 on sleep quality, anxiety, and psychological distress in the Italian population, *Sleep Medicine*, 75, 12-20. DOI: 10.1016/j.sleep.2020.05.011.

- Cocci, A., Giunti, D., Tonioni, C., Cacciamani, G., Tellini, R., Polloni, G., ... & Cimino, S. (2020). Love at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic: preliminary results of an online survey conducted during the quarantine in Italy, *International journal of impotence research*, 32(5), 556-557. DOI: 10.1038/s41443-020-0305-x.
- Collins, N. L., & Feeney, B. C. (2000). A safe haven: An attachment theory perspective on support seeking and caregiving in intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(6), 1053-1073. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.78.6.1053.
- Conger, R. D., Rueter, M. A., & Elder, G. H. Jr. (1999). Couple resilience to economic pressure, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76(1), 54-71. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.76.1.54.
- Domingue, R., & Mollen, D. (2009). Attachment and conflict communication in adult romantic relationships, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 26(5), 678-696. DOI: 10.1177/0265407509347932.
- Fiorillo, A., & Gorwood, P. (2020). The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and implications for clinical practice, *European Psychiatry*, 63(1). DOI: 10.1192/j.eurpsy.2020.35.
- Forte, G., Favieri, F., Tambelli, R., & Casagrande, M. (2020). The Enemy Which Sealed the World: Effects of COVID-19 Diffusion on the Psychological State of the Italian Population, *Journal of Clinical Medicine*, 9(6), 1802. DOI: 10.3390/jcm9061802.
- Furman, W., Buhrmester, D. (1985). Children's perceptions of the personal relationships in their social networks, *Developmental Psychology*, 21 (6), 1016-1024. DOI: 10.1037/0012-1649.21.6.1016.
- Furman, W., & Wehner, E.A. (1994). Romantic views: Toward a theory of adolescent romantic relationships. In R. Montemayor, G.R. Adams, & G.P. Gullota (Ed.) *Advances in adolescent development: Volume 6, Relationships during adolescence*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Germani, A., Buratta, L., Delvecchio, E., & Mazzeschi, C. (2020). Emerging Adults and COVID-19: The Role of Individualism-Collectivism on Perceived Risks and Psychological Maladjustment, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(10), 3497. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph17103497.
- Greenfield, E. A., & Russell, D. (2011). Identifying living arrangements that heighten risk for loneliness in later life: Evidence from the U.S. national social life, health, and aging project, *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 30(4), 524-534. DOI: 10.1177/0733464810364985.
- Guarnieri, S., & Tani, F. (2011). Uno strumento per lo studio delle reti sociali: adattamento italiano del Network of Relationships Inventory, *Giornale di Psicologia dello Sviluppo*, 98, 7-22.
- Karney, B. R., Story, L. B., & Bradbury, T. N. (2005). Marriages in context: Interactions between chronic and acute stress among newlyweds. In T. A. Revenson, K. Kayser, and G. Bodenmann (Eds.), *Couples coping with stress: Emerging perspectives on dyadic coping*, American Psychological Association: Washington, D.C.

- Kelmer, G., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S., & Markman, H. J. (2013). Relationship quality, commitment, and stability in long-distance relationships, *Family process*, 52(2), 257-270. DOI: 10.1111/j.1545-5300.2012.01418.x.
- Mazza, C., Ricci, E., Biondi, S., Colasanti, M., Ferracuti, S., Napoli, C., & Roma, P. (2020). A nationwide survey of psychological distress among Italian people during the COVID-19 pandemic: Immediate psychological responses and associated factors, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(9), 3165. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph17093165.
- Moccia, L., Janiri, D., Pepe, M., Dattoli, L., Molinaro, M., De Martin, V., ... & Di Nicola, M. (2020). Affective temperament, attachment style, and the psychological impact of the COVID-19 outbreak: an early report on the Italian general population, *Brain, behavior, and immunity*, 87, 75-79. DOI: 10.1016/j.bbi.2020.04.048.
- Mosher, W. D., Chandra, A., & Jones, J. (2005). *Sexual behavior and selected health measures: men and women 15-44 years of age, United States, 2002*, (No. 362), US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics.
- Neff, L. A., & Karney, B. R. (2004). How does context affect intimate relationships? Linking external stress and cognitive processes within marriage, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30(2), 134-148. DOI: 10.1177/0146167203255984.
- Neff, L. A., & Karney, B. R. (2017). Acknowledging the elephant in the room: How stressful environmental contexts shape relationship dynamics, *Current opinion in psychology*, 13, 107-110. DOI: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.05.013.
- Okabe-Miyamoto, K., Folk, D., Lyubomirsky, S., & Dunn, E. W. (2021). Changes in Social Connection During COVID-19 Social Distancing: It's Not (Household) Size That Matters, It's Who You're With. *Plos one*, 16(1), e0245009. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0245009.
- Pagnini, F., Bonanomi, A., Tagliabue, S., Balconi, M., Bertolotti, M., Confalonieri, E., ... & Villani, D. (2020). Knowledge, Concerns, and Behaviors of Individuals During the First Week of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic in Italy. *JAMA Network Open*, 3(7) e2015821-e2015821. DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.15821.
- Pietromonaco, P. R., & Collins, N. L. (2017). Interpersonal mechanisms linking close relationships to health, *American Psychologist*, 72(6), 531-542. DOI: 10.1037/amp0000129.
- Reis, H. T., & Shaver, P. (1988) Intimacy as an interpersonal process. In: Duck SW, (eds). *Handbook of personal relationships*, Chichester, England: Wiley, pp. 367-389.
- Selcuk, E., Zayas, V., & Hazan, C. (2010). Beyond satisfaction: The role of attachment in marital functioning, *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 2(4), 258-279. DOI: 10.1111/j.1756-2589.2010.00061.x.
- Smorti, M., Ponti, L., & Cincidda, C. (2020). Life satisfaction linked to different independence-from-parents conditions in Italian emerging adults, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23(4), 530-544. DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2019.1634250.

- Terraciano, A., McCrae, R. R., & Costa Jr, P. T. (2003). Factorial and construct validity of the Italian Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), *European journal of psychological assessment*, 19(2), 131-141. DOI: 10.1027//1015-5759.19.2.131.
- Tesser, A., & Beach, S. R. (1998). Life events, relationship quality, and depression: An investigation of judgment discontinuity in vivo, *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 74(1), 36-52. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.74.1.36
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: the PANAS scales, *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 54(6), 1063-1070. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.54.6.1063.
- Welsh, D.P., Haugen, P.T., Widman, L., Darling, N., & Grello, C.M. (2005). Kissing is good: A developmental investigation of sexuality in adolescent romantic couples, *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, 2(4), 32-41. DOI: 10.1525/srsp.2005.2.4.32.
- Williamson, H. C., Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (2013). Financial strain and stressful events predict newlyweds' negative communication independent of relationship satisfaction, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 27 (1), 65-75. DOI: 10.1037/a0031104.