

























*“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.

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