

https://dspace.org/

Relationship impacts of the COVID19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions on young women and men in Durban and Soweto South Africa

K Closson; Campion Zharima; M Kuchena; Janan Dietrich; A Raj ...

TAYLOR AND FRANCIS LTD
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/43015
IBSS

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/



Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Culture, Health & Sexuality

An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/tchs20

Relationship impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions on young women and men in Durban and Soweto, South Africa

Kalysha Closson, Campion Zharima, T. Michelle Kuchena, Janan J. Dietrich, Gina Ogilvie, Anita Raj, Mags Beksinska & Angela Kaida

To cite this article: Kalysha Closson, Campion Zharima, T. Michelle Kuchena, Janan J. Dietrich, Gina Ogilvie, Anita Raj, Mags Beksinska & Angela Kaida (2024) Relationship impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions on young women and men in Durban and Soweto, South Africa, Culture, Health & Sexuality, 26:6, 734-746, DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2023.2243300

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2023.2243300

Published online: 16 Aug 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 160

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=tchs20

CULTURE, HEALTH & SEXUALITY
2024, VOL. 26, NO. 6, 734–746
https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2023.2243300

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Relationship impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions on young women and men in Durban and Soweto, South Africa

Kalysha Closson[a,b], Campion Zharima[c], T. Michelle Kuchena[c], Janan J. Dietrich[c], Gina Ogilvie[a], Anita Raj[d,e], Mags Beksinska[f] and Angela Kaida[b]

[a]School of Population and Public Health, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada; [b]Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada; [c]Perinatal HIV Research Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; [d]Center on Gender Equity and Health, University of CA, San Diego, CA, US; [e]Newcomb Institute, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, US; [f]Maternal, Adolescent and Child Health Research Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, Durban, South Africa

ABSTRACT

To deepen our understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on intimate and/or sexual relationships, we conducted a qualitative study among 26 South African women and men aged 21–30 years in Durban and Soweto between September 2020 and March 2021. Overall, 13 women and 12 men who had been in an intimate and/or sexual relationship since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on their relationships with their current or most recent primary partners. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The three most common impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on relationships were on (i) communication and connection; (ii) strained relationships; and (iii) job and economic loss. Both women and men discussed how COVID-19-related lockdowns provided opportunities to foster better communication, connection and support to one another. However, too little or too much time together strained relationships. Finally, income loss among young men meant that some young women became the primary income earner, changing relationship power dynamics. Findings highlight the importance of young people's relationships and the need for action to support young people in building positive relationships in challenging times.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 27 March 2023
Accepted 28 July 2023

KEYWORDS
COVID-19; intimate relationships; sexual relationships; South Africa; gender

Background

In response to the spread of SARS-CoV-2, South Africa implemented level 5 restrictions between 27 March 2020 and 30 April 2020 (Wadvalla 2020, Smith 2020). These restrictions (the highest lockdown level) entailed complete confinement to one's place of residence, except for the purpose of transporting goods and exceptional circumstances such as attending a funeral. Public and private transit were restricted to certain times of day, with limits on transport, and the sale and purchase of alcohol banned. During

CONTACT Kalysha Closson Kvenditt@sfu.ca
© 2023 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

level 5, restrictions were often strictly and violently enforced by the police (Langa and Leopeng 2020). These unprecedented public health restrictions affected social interaction and mobility, and had a profound impact on adolescents and young adults aged 15–24, who comprise 16% of the South African population and growing (Statistics South Africa 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic had multiple interacting impacts on the lives of young people in South Africa (Coetzee et al. 2022). These affected youth's families (Donga et al. 2021), poverty levels, mental health (Duby et al. 2022) and health service utilisation (van Staden, Laurenzi, and Toska 2022).

Emerging global evidence has highlighted how COVID-19 and the related public health restrictions contributed to a dramatic rise in gender-based violence and relationship conflict globally (Roesch et al. 2020; Boserup, McKenney, and Elkbuli 2020; Thiel et al. 2022; McNeil et al. 2023; Vora et al. 2020). Stressors such as those related to the multi-level impacts of COVID-19 and the pandemic response (e.g. job loss, disruptions to education, social isolation, illness, and grief), can negatively affect relationship satisfaction (Estlein and Lavee 2022). Conflicts associated with COVID-19-related stressors were exacerbated by lockdown measures for couples who suddenly experienced a significant increase in time spent together (Estlein, Gewirtz-Meydan, and Opuda 2022). On the other hand, lockdown measures and uncertainty about the pandemic may have provided an opportunity for couples to reconnect and focus on their relationships (Hendrick and Hendrick 2020). Much COVID-19 and relationship research has involved cohabitating couples in the Global North, with less attention given to the impact of COVID-19 on relationships between young people in the Global South (Luetke et al. 2020; Mazza et al. 2020; Pieh et al. 2020; Roesch et al. 2020; Eder et al. 2021). Among studies focusing on youth in the Global South, the majority focus only on young women, with nearly a quarter of study participants experienced worsening in their relationship and increased economic dependence on partners during COVID-19 (Karp et al. 2021).

Adolescence and young adulthood are critical periods for relationship development (Collins, Welsh, and Furman 2009). Positive experiences early in intimate and/or sexual[1] relationships set the stage for future health and functioning within these relationships (Seiffge-Krenke 2003). Moreover, high quality, intimate and/or sexual relationships are important for establishing and maintaining emotional security and support during times of uncertainty (Monk and Ogolsky 2019). Daily life changes and stressors caused by the pandemic and the early lockdown period affected youth coping mechanisms and in turn may have affected youth relationship quality (Dewa et al. 2021). More research is needed to identify factors that supported and increased the quality of relationships among youth during lockdown periods and into the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (Estlein, Gewirtz-Meydan, and Opuda 2022). This research offers an early glimpse into potential future issues of violence, control, and sexual and reproductive health outcomes, while exploring how lockdown measures positively affected aspects of young people's relationship, providing valuable insights for supporting healthy relationships, overall mental health and wellbeing during pandemics.

Against this background, the aim of this study was to explore the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on young women and men's relationships during the early days of the pandemic's lockdowns in South Africa. The results from this study may be used to better understand how to support healthy relationships between young adults in times of pandemic stressors or other crises.

Methods

Study design and setting

The original AYAZAZI study (Closson et al. 2019; Kaida et al. 2018), on which this one builds, was a youth engaged cohort study centred on youth sexual and reproductive health. Work began in November 2014 and the study enrolled 425 young people aged 16–24 from Durban and Soweto of HIV-negative or unknown HIV serostatus. Data for the current study were collected as part of a qualitative follow-up study with young people from the original AYAZAZI cohort to better understand power dynamics in young people's sexual relationships (Closson et al. 2022).

Qualitative follow-up interviews were conducted in Durban between October 2019 and December 2020 and in Soweto between December 2020 and April 2021 at a time when the seriousness of the COVID-19 epidemic was becoming clear, with both contexts facing strict lockdowns within the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This included closely monitored restrictions on movement and military presence (Heinecken 2020). Both provinces have large youth populations aged 18–34 (>35% of the population in 2018), and extremely high youth unemployment rates (Statistics South Africa 2019, 2021a, 2021b).

As the follow-up qualitative data collection was underway when the COVID-19 pandemic began, our team was required to resubmit the study protocol for ethics review in order to change the interview modality from in person to telephonically. We took the opportunity to add questions to the interview guide related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sexual and/or intimate relationships at this time. Interviews incorporating questions related to COVID-19 commenced in September 2020, after the initial level 5 lockdown period had eased.

This study and COVID-19-related amendments were approved by the harmonised research ethics boards of Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia (H19-00762) as well as by the University of the Witwatersrand (Ref 140707).

Participants and sampling

A combination of purposive and random sampling was used to recontact previous AYAZAZI study participants. After the original sampling did not yield sufficient participants (e.g. many mobile numbers were disconnected or not answered when called) we worked through the remaining participant list in a random order. Recruitment efforts were made to attempt to capture a diversity of participants based on age, age-partner difference, and previous experiences of intimate partner violence. Additional details of the sampling and recruitment are provided (Closson et al. 2022). In total, 38 youth aged 21–30 years of age (median age = 24) were recruited from Durban ($n = 18$, 47.4%) and Soweto ($n = 20$, 52.6%).

Data collection

Semi-structured interview guides were developed and piloted by the research team, with additional questions about COVID-19 impacts added. Initially, questions were

framed about the initial lockdown but were then expanded to include questions that were more inclusive of the indirect impacts of the pandemic concerning employment, financial worries, etc. Adult (in Durban) and young adult (in Soweto) multi-lingual (isiZulu, English, seSotho, tshiVenda) interviewers conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each respondent.

Interviewers were trained in qualitative methods used in the study, as well as in ethical research practices. To enhance participant comfort and openness in talking about their relationships, interviewers were matched to the gender of the respondent. All interviews were conducted telephonically and ranged from 20 to 90 min in length, taking place at a time and place according to the participants' preference. To maintain confidentiality and reduce potential biases, interviewers ensured participants were in private locations, allowing them to end the call at any moment. After each interview, participants' well-being was checked, and resources or support from a social worker on the study team were offered if needed.

Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language, digitally audio-recorded, and then verbatim translated and transcribed in full into English by study staff at Maternal, Adolescent and Child Health Research Unt (MRU) in Durban and an external consultant at the Perinatal HIV Research Unit (PHRU) in Soweto. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. Oral informed consent was obtained before each interview, and participants received 120ZAR (~$8USD) as an honorarium for their time and expertise.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the data related to gender differences in intimate and/or sexual relationship impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Transcripts were read and re-read to achieve immersion and data familiarisation (Braun and Clarke 2006). All transcripts were uploaded and analysed in NVivo R1. Transcripts were coded by the lead author, with some independently double coded or co-coded by youth researchers. Weekly coding team meetings addressed discrepancies, developed themes, and analysed data. For this analysis, 25/38 interviews (13 young women and 12 young men) who were in relationships during the initial COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa were analysed. Eleven interviews conducted before the pandemic and two with participants who had not been in a relationship since the start of the pandemic were excluded. Results were shared with the Adolescent Community Advisory Boards (ACAB) at the MRU and PHRU for insights and dissemination support, given their strong community connections.

Findings

Of the 25 young women and men in our analysis, 15 were aged 20–24 years old, 17 resided in Soweto at the time of interview, 14 had been in their primary relationship for two or more years, and 15 were in relationships with a similarly aged partner (within 5 years) to themselves. Only two participants reported living with their partners, and one was in a same-sex relationship. Compared to young men interviewed, young women were generally older, from Soweto, and in a relationship with a partner ≥5 years older. Below, we examine the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on

youth intimate and/or sexual relationships. The three most common impacts were on communication and connection; strain within relationships; and job and economic loss – affecting young women and young men differently.

The lockdown fostered communication and connection

Both women and men discussed how COVID-19-related lockdowns had provided opportunities to foster communication and support for one another. Participants discussed how communication improved as additional effort was put into talking, mostly virtually, with their partner and providing support during the especially stressful early lockdown period. Young women expressed how they felt the lockdown provided an opportunity for them and their partner to work on communication. As Lesedi[2], a young woman aged 25–30 from Soweto explained, 'Before the lockdown, there was lack in communication […] After that, we found a way to sit and talk'. This same sentiment was echoed by Nkosi a young man aged 20–24 from Durban who, despite not being able to see his partner for several months at the start of the pandemic, felt she was an important source of support, which helped to mediate some of the stress experienced during the early pandemic period. He stated:

> We were communicating and gave each other confident that things will be okay, like [the] lockdown will finish and [we will] go back to our normal life. So, yaah we were giving each other that support.—Nkosi

While some participants said their relationship had grown during the early lockdown period and helped them to cope with the stressors of the pandemic, others expressed how the initial lockdown did not affect their relationship much. This was often because they already had strong communication skills and so continued to prioritise communication even if they were not able to see each other. For example, Dlamini a young man aged 20–24 from Soweto stated:

> Eh .. lockdown hasn't affected my relationship because everything we do…, the most important key in a relationship is communication. […] So we need to talk every day, call, text, video call, ja and then when the regulations of lockdown were relaxed, we started seeing each other, having fun, things like that.—Dlamini

These quotes show how young men's strong connections to their partners acted as a buffer during the challenging early stages of the pandemic. While many participants described using virtual communication strategies to stay connected while apart, others who spent the lockdown period together or who were able to see each other because they lived in the same neighbourhood expressed how this had been a time of positive growth in their relationship. For example, Themba, a young woman aged 25–30 from Durban stated:

> So, I think it made our relationship stronger because we spent a lot of time together every day.—Themba

The lockdown strained relationships

While the lockdown period had been a source of positive strength for some, other participants discussed how spending the lockdown period together had been a

challenge that caused conflict within the relationship. This was often the case for young men and women who had not previously lived together but decided to stay with one another during the level 5 lockdown period. As stated by Nia, a young woman aged 25–30 from Soweto:

> There is a lot that I've learned … ehh … about him as a person and boyfriend that I need, you know, ehm actually, I was working from [home] and also he was working from home, ja, there were some disagreements here and there about our space and all of that I think I love my own space, you know as much as like, I said I enjoyed [spending time with her partner] but I enjoy my space, a lot, ja.—Nia

Lockdown restrictions and the desire to see each other put stress on relationships, leading to tensions and conflict as partners navigated the challenges of spending time together during the pandemic. One young woman Amahle aged 20–24 from Soweto stated:

> Hey… very bad hey, because uhm, I., I…, I was going to the shops the other time and then the police caught me because I was in the car without a permit, but my friends, they were like four of us and you recall at a time when there should be three people maximum, so we went to the police station, you know after that I was kinda sceptical about going out. And he, he [the participants partner] was angry about that saying, actually you are just making an excuse with this thing that you were once arrested, yeah like I'd, I'd go out scared, shaking. Tell me that he misses me, forcing me. Because according to him that was an excuse that I was once arrested. For him, that's small stuff.—Amahle

The conflict that occurred during the pandemic were a source of hopelessness for some young people. For example, Amara, a young woman aged 20–24 from Durban described how the lockdown impacted her relationship to the point at which she was not sure if it would last. Throughout this interview, multiple challenges with consistent conflict and jealousy were identified as being present before and during the pandemic. When asked if she thought that her relationship will return to normal, she responded:

> Ay, I have tried, but I have lost hope. No,I do not think things will ever go back to normal.—Amara

Clearly, for some young people, the pandemic added to the stress already present within a relationship. For others who did not speak of pre-pandemic struggles, the lockdown period raised new concerns. For some of the young men in the study, relationship stressors were exacerbated by limited mobility, preventing them from seeing their partners for long periods of time, which caused sexual tension. For example, Sbusiso, a young man aged 20–24 from Durban, stated:

> To tell you the honest truth, eey, it was hard on me [not seeing his partner] because sometimes I even ask myself if I am still reliable to be man enough because, like a man needs to be [participant claps hands] consistent, because you can't miss a month if you are a man without sex you see.—Sbusiso

Job and economic loss impacted relationship dynamics

The final theme developed out of the conversations with young people centred on how job loss and employment stress affected relationship dynamics during the early

pandemic period. Benefits included improved communication about financial decision making but more negatively, the epidemic impacted young men's ability to provide for their partners. Beyond this, shifts in gendered provider roles improved gratitude and connection between the members of some couples who worked together to overcome financial challenges during the pandemic.

One young woman, Makena aged 25–30 from Soweto, spoke of the challenges she and her partner encountered when his salary was reduced because of COVID-19 but how despite some conflict and stress, the relationship stayed strong because they had been saving and how the pandemic had taught her and her partner the importance of investing.

> Like we used to do things like we didn't care financially ehm how we do things but it taught us that the savings, it's very important, saving and ehm and preparing, always preparing for the worst, making sure that our things like they are all in order, the decisions we are making, ja.—Makena

Clearly, the pandemic provided opportunities for some couples to discuss financial decision-making and to learn how to overcome financial hardships.

Job and economic loss were not the only factors impacting on young people's relationships. Essential workers also spoke of the challenges of working on the front lines during the early stages of the pandemic and the stress these created for relationships. Ndlovu, a young man aged 20–24 from Soweto who was working in the warehouse of a large grocery retailer, described how because of his job he could not get to see his partner:

> Yes, she was missing me, and you know when a person misses you, she ends up getting angry, those type of things. […] When you call her, you keeping having arguments because of you are missing each other. […] Ja, that's what I noticed, that during lockdown, we were fighting quite often—Ndlovu

Among young men with limited financial resources and employment, the lack of disposable income during the COVID-19 lockdown resulted in gender role strain, as some struggled to provide gifts for their partners, exemplified by Tebello, a young man aged 25–30 from Soweto whose work contract had ended during the initial lockdown period.

> I can say somewhere somehow because I won't be able to do maybe some of the things that means maybe I have to maybe surprise her or give her gift maybe on her birthday.—Tebello

Regardless of whether they were working or not, tensions navigating employment and relationships during the pandemic proved especially challenging for young men. The financial loss that was most often described by young men shifted economic power within young women and men's relationships, albeit to varying degrees.

In contrast, Omphile, a young woman aged 20–24 from Soweto, described how the pandemic had made her relationship stronger because she became the primary bread winner at a time when she was also pregnant. After her partner returned to work, she noticed a change in his behaviour.

> So now that, I see him I think because he went back to work and I am not working, he appreciates me more because should I need anything eh he offers to buy it or he comes from work with that thing.—Omphile

While a few young people said the pandemic had no or little impact on their relationships, for the majority it was evident that there were many challenges to be faced. Yet, in the face of these stressors, young people such as Nkosi, Themba, and Omphile relied on one another for support in ways that allowed them to cope.

Discussion

Our study revealed varying impacts on young people's intimate and/or sexual relationships, with commonly discussed effects centring around communication, strained relationships, and job loss. Despite added stressors, participants viewed the early lockdown as a positive time in their relationships, emphasising their supportiveness. This is in line with a growing body of research that has highlighted the positive impacts of the initial COVID-19 pandemic period on relationships (Jones et al. 2021). Thus, our findings offer support to efforts, including programming and messaging aimed at supporting positive relationship dynamics, improving relationship satisfaction, and promoting individual wellbeing during future pandemics and other hardships.

The inability to see one's partner was common among all participants, including participants working as essential workers who feared passing COVID to their partners, as well as youth facing public health restrictions, mobility issues, or parental monitoring.

Participants discussed ways of coping during times when they were unable to see one another. For example, young women often discussed how the lockdown period provided opportunities for them and their partner to strengthen their communication, especially in level 5 lockdown when they could not see each other. This finding is in line with those from a study of Kenyan young women which found that young women who interacted less often with their partner because of COVID were likely to experience improvements in relationships (Karp et al. 2021).

Virtual connection and closeness were commonly discussed. This is not surprising given the rise in global virtual sexual intimacy among young people in non-cohabitating relationships during the pandemic (Maes and Vandenbosch 2022). Research also highlights how couples adjusted to the stressful routines imposed by COVID by having conversations with their partners and focusing more on good quality time (whether time spent connecting in person or virtually) (Günther-Bel et al. 2020). These results counter the pervasive and important discussions that have centred on the negative impacts that the pandemic had on relationships, including elevated rates of conflict, relationship dissolution and violence (Luetke et al. 2020; Mahlangu et al. 2022). Moreover, the findings highlight the important contribution that intimate and/or sexual relationships make to positive coping and growth for young people during and after challenging times (Zhen and Zhou 2022; Beames et al. 2021).

For some young men, limited time spent with their partners left them feeling sexually frustrated. These results differ from much of the available literature on shifts in sexual intimacy focusing on adult couples which tend to reveal decreased sexual activity as the result of spending too much time together (Cito et al. 2021; Li et al. 2020; Omar et al. 2021). Prior research has highlighted how lack of time spent together can undermine investment and commitment to a relationship (Agnew et al. 1998). The tensions discussed by young men in our study may have affected their relationship commitment and may have implications for perpetration of violence, infidelity, and increased risk of acquiring and passing STIs to one's partner. Thus, in the aftermath of the pandemic, efforts are needed to support young people in rebuilding relationships in healthy ways.

As we continue to support young people in the Global South through this and other ongoing pandemics and public health emergencies, efforts that allow youth to develop healthy relationship dynamics are required. In this study, many young people described how virtual connection with their partner during early lockdown was an important source of psychological support. Future actions to foster these connections (e.g. access to data, online resources) should be considered as part of pandemic responses. While evidence remains limited, some efforts to enhance and expand virtual interventions that support connection and mental well-being among youth globally have already begun (Srivastava and Ghosh 2023; Hawke et al. 2021).

Finally, financial changes and daily adjustments caused by the pandemic were highlighted by many participants. Similar to other studies, participants in this study talked about how job loss and changes in working conditions altered gender roles (Adisa, Aiyenitaju, and Adekoya 2021). These dialogues highlighted important shifts in relationships where women stepped into breadwinning roles within their relationships. These changes in gender relationships have been shown to cause tensions and increased experiences of violence in relationships in South African settings, as some men may feel a strain in their societal role as provider (Closson et al. 2020). However, our data revealed that shifts in the provider role in young people's relationships may have been a source of strength and growth for some couples. These findings have important implications for efforts to promote healthy relationship dynamics in times of economic hardship. Moreover, given the high levels of economic and job insecurity that were especially highlighted by young men, ongoing and future efforts are needed to support economic recovery and provide work for young men living in Durban and Soweto, South Africa.

Limitations

Young people in this study were previous participants of a cohort study that had ended several years prior to the commencement of this study. As such this study was limited by challenges in re-contacting participants.

While data was collected across different time periods, our study focused on the early stages of COVID-19 among youth in two South African settings which had strict lockdown measures. Future research might explore the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on young people's relationships in these and other settings. Importantly,

the initial interviews were conducted five or more months after the initial lockdown period was over, which may have introduced recall bias regarding the impact of that period on young people's relationships. Finally, we did not collect details on participants' current living conditions or socio-economic status which limits our ability to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic may have differentially impacted relationships across these factors.

Future research is needed to explore the role of household dynamics and access to technologies on relationship impacts during future and ongoing pandemics. Finally, while efforts were made to ensure that participants were alone and in a private location during their telephonic interview, some participants' responses may have been biased by having partners or family members close by at the time of the interview.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic and early lockdown restrictions impacted the relationship dynamics of young adults in two cities in South Africa. The findings highlight how young people's relationships were a source of emotional, social and economic support during times of stress and uncertainty. For some young women, added economic power shifted gender power dynamics so as to be more equitable than pre-pandemic times. For young men, while the lockdown period was met with sexual tension, intimate and/or sexual relationships provided an important psychological and emotional buffer during difficult times. As young people continue to cope with the longer term impacts of the pandemic, efforts are needed to support youth in building and maintaining positive and healthy relationships with important implications for sexual health and overall wellbeing later in life.

Notes

1. We use the term intimate and/or sexual relationship throughout when we talk about young people's relationships that involve closeness and connection with a single partner or multiple partners that goes beyond sexual intimacy.
2. All participant names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Acknowledgements

We extend heartfelt gratitude to the young people who generously shared their stories with the research team. The authors express their appreciation to members of the Perinatal HIV Research Unit (PHRU) and the Maternal Adolescent and Child Health Research Unit (MRU)'s Adolescent Community Advisory Board (ACAB) for valuable feedback on the study's findings. Special thanks go to staff at the MRU and PHRU for their support in facilitating data collection and the logistics of this study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was made possible by an International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Doctoral Research Award and funding from the University of British Columbia's Public Scholars initiative. KC was also supported by a Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Vanier Canadian Doctoral Scholarship during data collection and is now supported by a CIHR Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship. The work reported herein for JJD was made possible through funding from the South African Medical Research Council's Postdoctoral Programme from funding received from the National Treasury as well as a CIPHER Leaders of Tomorrow grant from the International AIDS Society. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the IDRC or its Board of Governors.

References

Adisa, T. A., O. Aiyenitaju, and O. D. Adekoya. 2021. "The Work–Family Balance of British Working Women During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Work-Applied Management* 13 (2): 241–260. doi:10.1108/JWAM-07-2020-0036

Agnew, C. R., P. A. M. Van Lange, C. E. Rusbult, and C. A. Langston. 1998. "Cognitive Interdependence: Commitment and the Mental Representation of Close Relationships." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74 (4): 939–954. doi:10.1037//0022-3514.74.4.939

Beames, J. R., S. H. Li, J. M. Newby, K. Maston, H. Christensen, and A. Werner-Seidler. 2021. "The Upside: Coping and Psychological Resilience in Australian Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 15 (1): 77. doi:10.1186/s13034-021-00432-z

Boserup, B., M. McKenney, and A. Elkbuli. 2020. "Alarming Trends in US Domestic Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *The American Journal of Emergency Medicine* 38 (12): 2753–2755. doi:10.1016/j.ajem.2020.04.077

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cito, G., E. Micelli, A. Cocci, G. Polloni, G. I. Russo, M. E. Coccia, T. Simoncini, M. Carini, A. Minervini, and A. Natali. 2021. "The Impact of the COVID-19 Quarantine on Sexual Life in Italy." *Urology* 147: 37–42. doi:10.1016/j.urology.2020.06.101

Closson, K., J. J. Dietrich, M. Beksinska, A. Gibbs, S. Hornschuh, T. Smith, J. Smit, G. Gray, T. Ndung'u, M. Brockman, et al. 2019. "Measuring Sexual Relationship Power Equity Among Young Women and Young Men South Africa: Implications for Gender-Transformative Programming." *PloS One* 14 (9): e0221554. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0221554

Closson, K., A. Hatcher, Y. Sikweyiya, L. Washington, S. Mkhwanazi, R. Jewkes, K. Dunkle, and A. Gibbs. 2020. "Gender Role Conflict and Sexual Health and Relationship Practices Amongst Young Men Living in Urban Informal Settlements in South Africa." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 22 (1): 31–47. doi:10.1080/13691058.2019.1568578

Closson, K., C. Zharima, M. Kuchena, J. J. Dietrich, A. Gadermann, G. Ogilvie, M. Beksinska, and A. Kaida. 2022. "'I Feel Like it is Asking if He is a Stalker… But I also Feel Like it is Asking if he cares': Exploring South African Youth's Perceptions of the Sexual Relationship Power Scale." *BMC Public Health* 22 (1): 1368. doi:10.21203/rs.3.rs-1041143/v1

Coetzee, B. J., H. Gericke, S. Human, P. Stallard, and M. Loades. 2022. "How Young people Experienced COVID-19 Disease Containment Measures in the Western Cape, South Africa: A Qualitative Study Including the Perspectives of Young People, Their Parents, Teachers and School Counsellors." *Psychology and Psychotherapy* 95 (2): 383–401. doi:10.1111/papt.12374

Collins, W. A., D. P. Welsh, and W. Furman. 2009. "Adolescent Romantic Relationships." *Annual Review of Psychology* 60 (1): 631–652. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163459

Dewa, L. H., C. Crandell, E. Choong, J. Jaques, A. Bottle, C. Kilkenny, A. Lawrence-Jones, M. Di Simplicio, D. Nicholls, and P. Aylin. 2021. "CCopeY: A Mixed-Methods Coproduced Study on the Mental Health Status and Coping Strategies of Young People During COVID-19 UK Lockdown." *The Journal of Adolescent Health* 68 (4): 666–675. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.01.009

Donga, G. T., N. V. Roman, B. O. Adebiyi, B. Omukunyi, and R. Chinyakata. 2021. "Lessons Learnt during COVID-19 Lockdown: A Qualitative Study of South African Families." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18 (23): 12552. doi:10.3390/ijerph182312552

Duby, Z., B. Bunce, C. Fowler, K. Bergh, K. Jonas, J. J. Dietrich, D. Govindasamy, C. Kuo, and C. Mathews. 2022. "Intersections Between COVID-19 and Socio-Economic Mental Health Stressors in the Lives of South African Adolescent Girls and Young Women." *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 16 (1): 23. doi:10.1186/S13034-022-00457-Y

Eder, S. J., A. A. Nicholson, M. M. Stefanczyk, M. Pieniak, J. Martinez-Molina, O. Pesout, J. Binter, P. Smela, F. Scharnowski, and D. Steyrl. 2021. "Securing Your Relationship: Quality of Intimate Relationships During the COVID-19 Pandemic Can Be Predicted by Attachment Style." *Frontiers in Psychology* 12: 647956. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2021.647956

Estlein, R., and Y. Lavee. 2022. "Effect of Daily Stress on Desire for Physical Proximity and Emotional Closeness." *Journal of Family Issues* 43 (4): 1039–1067. doi:10.1177/0192513X211007528

Estlein, R., A. Gewirtz-Meydan, and E. Opuda. 2022. "Love in the Time of COVID-19: A Systematic Mapping Review of Empirical Research on Romantic Relationships One Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Family Process* 61 (3): 1208–1228. doi:10.1111/famp.12775

Günther-Bel, C., A. Vilaregut, E. Carratala, S. Torras-Garat, and C. Pérez-Testor. 2020. "A Mixed-Method Study of Individual, Couple, and Parental Functioning During the State-regulated COVID-19 Lockdown in Spain." *Family Process* 59 (3): 1060–1079. doi:10.1111/famp.12585

Hawke, L. D., N. Y. Sheikhan, K. MacCon, and J. Henderson. 2021. "Going Virtual: Youth Attitudes Toward and Experiences of Virtual Mental Health and Substance Use Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *BMC Health Services Research* 21 (1): 340. doi:10.1186/s12913-021-06321-7

Heinecken, L. 2020. "COVID-19: South Africa's Neglected Military Faces 'Mission Impossible'." *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/covid-19-south-africas-neglected-military-faces-mission-impossible-133250.

Hendrick, S. S., and C. Hendrick. 2020. "Romantic Love in the Age of COVID-19." *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 25 (6–7): 540–543. doi:10.1080/15325024.2020.1763557

Jones, H. E., D. B. Yoon, J. A. Theiss, J. T. Austin, and L. E. Lee. 2021. "Assessing the Effects of COVID-19 on Romantic Relationships and the Coping Strategies Partners Use to Manage the Stress of a Pandemic." *Journal of Family Communication* 21 (3): 152–166. doi:10.1080/15267431.2021.1927040.

Kaida, A., J. J. Dietrich, F. Laher, M. Beksinska, M. Jaggernath, M. Bardsley, P. Smith, L. Cotton, P. Chitneni, K. Closson, et al. 2018. "A High Burden of Asymptomatic Genital Tract Infections Undermines the Syndromic Management Approach Among Adolescents and Young Adults in South Africa: Implications for HIV Prevention Efforts." *BMC Infectious Diseases* 18 (1): 499. doi:10.1186/s12879-018-3380-6

Karp, C., C. Moreau, G. Sheehy, S. Anjur-Dietrich, F. Mbushi, E. Muluve, D. Mwanga, M. Nzioki, J. Pinchoff, and K. Austrian. 2021. "Youth Relationships in the Era of COVID-19: A Mixed-Methods Study Among Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Kenya." *The Journal of Adolescent Health* 69 (5): 754–761. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.07.017

Langa, M., and B. B. Leopeng. 2020. "COVID-19: Violent Policing of Black Men During Lockdown Regulations in South Africa." *African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention* 18 (2): 116–126.

Li, G., D. Tang, B. Song, C. Wang, S. Qunshan, C. Xu, H. Geng, H. Wu, X. He, and Y. Cao. 2020. "Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Partner Relationships and Sexual and Reproductive Health: Cross-Sectional, Online Survey Study." *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22 (8): e20961. doi:10.2196/20961

Luetke, M., D. Hensel, D. Herbenick, and M. Rosenberg. 2020. "Romantic Relationship Conflict Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and Changes in Intimate and Sexual Behaviors in a Nationally Representative Sample of American Adults." *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 46 (8): 747–762. doi:10.1080/0092623X.2020.1810185

Maes, C., and L. Vandenbosch. 2022. "Physically Distant, Virtually Close: Adolescents' Sexting Behaviors During a Strict Lockdown Period of the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Computers in Human Behavior* 126: 107033. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2021.107033

Mahlangu, P., A. Gibbs, N. Shai, M. Machisa, N. Nunze, and Y. Sikweyiya. 2022. "Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown and Link to Women and Children's Experiences of Violence in the Home in South Africa." *BMC Public Health* 22 (1): 1029. doi:10.1186/s12889-022-13422-3

Mazza, M., G. Marano, C. Lai, L. Janiri, and G. Sani. 2020. "Danger in Danger: Interpersonal Violence During COVID-19 Quarantine." *Psychiatry Research* 289: 113046. doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113046

McNeil, A., L. Hicks, B. Yalcinoz-Ucan, and D. T. Browne. 2023. "Prevalence & Correlates of Intimate Partner Violence During COVID-19: A Rapid Review." *Journal of Family Violence* 38 (2): 241–261. doi:10.1007/s10896-022-00386-6

Monk, J. K., and B. G. Ogolsky. 2019. "Contextual Relational Uncertainty Model: Understanding Ambiguity in a Changing Sociopolitical Context of Marriage." *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 11 (2): 243–261. doi:10.1111/jftr.12325

Omar, S. S., W. Dawood, N. Eid, D. Eldeeb, A. Munir, and W. Arafat. 2021. "Psychological and Sexual Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Egypt: Are Women Suffering More?" *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 9 (1): 100295. doi:10.1016/j.esxm.2020.100295

Pieh, C., O. Rourke, T. S. Budimir, and T. Probst. 2020. "Relationship Quality and Mental Health During COVID-19 Lockdown." *PloS One* 15 (9): e0238906. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0238906

Roesch, E., A. Amin, J. Gupta, and C. Garcia-Moreno. 2020. "Violence Against Women During Covid-19 Pandemic Restrictions." *BMJ (Clinical Research ed.)* 369: M 1712. doi:10.1136/bmj.m1712

Seiffge-Krenke, I. 2003. "Testing Theories of Romantic Development from Adolescence to Young Adulthood: Evidence of a Developmental Sequence." *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 27 (6): 519–531. doi:10.1080/01650250344000145

Smith, E. 2020. "South Africa Deploys Police and Army to Enforce 3-Week Coronavirus Lockdown." *CNBC*, March 24. https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/24/south-africa-deploys-police-and-army-for-3-week-coronavirus-lockdown.html.

Srivastava, M., and A. Ghosh. 2023. "Online Gratitude Interventions During COVID- 19 Pandemic on Youth: Randomized Trial." *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work* 20 (2): 272–298. doi:10.1080/26408066.2022.2157691

Statistics South Africa. 2019. *Mid-Year Population Estimates*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

Statistics South Africa. 2021a. *General Household Survey 2019*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

Statistics South Africa. 2021b. *Quarterly Labour Force Survey Quarter 1: 2021, Statistical Release*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

Statistics South Africa. 2022. *Mid-Year Population Estimates*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

Thiel, F., V. C. S. Buechl, F. Rehberg, A. Mojahed, J. K. Daniels, J. Schellong, and S. Garthus-Niegel. 2022. "Changes in Prevalence and Severity of Domestic Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13: 874183. doi:10.3389/fpsyt.2022.874183

van Staden, Q., C. A. Laurenzi, and E. Toska. 2022. "Two Years After Lockdown: Reviewing the Effects of COVID-19 on Health Services and Support for Adolescents Living with HIV in South Africa." *Journal of the International AIDS Society* 25 (4): e25904. doi:10.1002/jia2.25904

Vora, M., B. C. Malathesh, S. Das, and S. S. Chatterjee. 2020. "COVID-19 and Domestic Violence Against Women." *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 53: 102227. doi:10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102227

Wadvalla, B. A. 2020. "Covid-19: Decisive Action is the Hallmark of South Africa's Early Success Against Coronavirus." *BMJ (Clinical Research ed.)* 369: M1623. doi:10.1136/bmj.m1623

Zhen, R., and X. Zhou. 2022. "Latent Patterns of Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms, Depression, and Posttraumatic Growth Among Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 35 (1): 197–209. doi:10.1002/jts.22720