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COVID Couples: The Impact of the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic on Intimate Relationships

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COVID COUPLES: THE IMPACT OF THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS
PANDEMIC ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Psychology
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ABSTRACT

Global crises are associated with significant shifts in the relationship functioning of romantic couples. The novel Coronavirus pandemic has caused financial distress which may pose a threat to the wellbeing of romantic couples. Previous studies show economic declines cause damaging strain on relationship functioning, specifically the relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution, and commitment influencing variables. To study the effects of the pandemic on these relationship functioning variables, researchers recruited and divided 228 participants into two groups – individuals in relationships that began before the outbreak of the COVID pandemic (Before January 2020 – pre-COVID; $N= 148$), and individuals in relationships that started after the initial wave of the pandemic (After March 2020 – post-COVID; $N= 80$). Our results show a significant association between economic strain and conflict resolution. This finding suggests that circumstances that induce financial strain – similar to the COVID-related economic declines – may be linked to the deterioration of couples' abilities to solve conflicts. Although there were no significant differences in the relationship functioning variables of individuals in relationships that began prior to the pandemic in comparison to individuals in relationships that began while the pandemic was underway, findings suggest that future analyses may lead to significant results.

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INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) and the resulting pandemic rapidly became a crisis affecting people universally. Calamities have had notable impacts, both positive and negative, on couples, dependent upon the situational factors surrounding the crisis. For example, Stanley and Markman (2020) found that intimate relationships deteriorate under the pressure of external forces associated with catastrophe. Such forces include increased economic challenges, diminished ability to resolve conflict, increased commitment issues and decreases in relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, Cohan and Cole (2002) found that distress induced by wide-spread disasters may incline individuals in intimate relationships to realign their focus and shift priorities toward strengthening the bond of the relationship. By examining the impact of the novel Coronavirus pandemic on intimate relationships, a contribution can be made to the extant research on ramifications experienced by intimate relationships undergoing crises. Similar to the situational factors observed in Cohan and Cole (2002), the environment created by the COVID pandemic may cause individuals to invest more deeply in their intimate relationships. Alternatively, challenges that are COVID-related and that are linked to causes of strain in romantic relationships – economic declines – may create distance between the couple (Vinokur et al., 1996).

On March 13, 2020, the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) was declared a public health emergency in the United States. The severity of the

COVID-19 pandemic was due to the rapid transmission of the disease resulting in high rates of hospitalization and death, as well as other factors (Parker & Pianykh, 2021). In response to the sudden and widespread COVID-19 outbreak, governmental restrictions were established – such as quarantine and social distancing orders, on local, state, and national levels (Masters et al., 2020). In addition to the heightened stress caused by the potential risk of infection and social distancing measures in place to prevent transmission, the COVID-19 pandemic created a dire economic meltdown with unemployment rates skyrocketing to 14.8% – the highest documented rate since the inception of recording unemployment statistics (Falk et al, 2021). Thus, the pandemic created an environment with external forces that previous research has found to have an erosive effect on intimate relationships (Stanley & Markman, 2020).

Economic Strain

Previous studies on economic strain and increased unemployment provide background on the association between economic decline, as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the status of romantic relationships. For instance, Liker and Elder (1983) studied couples in the 1930's and found that economic loss marked significant relationship quality declines. The importance of financial stability and relationship health is of keen interest in the present study, as researchers seek to understand the correlation between relationship functioning and financial stress. Comparably, Vinokur et al. (1996) reported on the link between unemployment and relationship satisfaction experienced by partners. They found that increased financial strain led to increased depression in partners. Further, overall relationship satisfaction

declined as the financial strain increased. Accordingly, the increased financial strain associated with the pandemic could be associated with an increase in depression at the individual level. The increased depression experienced as an individual could note a decrease in satisfaction at the relationship level. Dew and Jackson (2018) found that the level of relationship satisfaction experienced by married couples decreased when undergoing financial stress. As seen in previous studies, relationship satisfaction and financial stress have a strong negative correlation. Given these findings, the potential declines in relationship satisfaction as a result of COVID-related economic declines was examined in the present study.

While past research has primarily shown increased financial stress leads to decline in relationship functioning, there have been contradictory findings such as the Vinokur et al. (1996) results. Studies have shown that economic declines can reduce the frequency of dissolved relationships (Cohen, 2014). However, it is pertinent to consider the context of these cases and their relevance for the present study of the Coronavirus pandemic. Cohen (2014) analyzed the interaction between the recession experienced in United States during 2008 and the US national divorce rates of women. Findings from the survey showed declines in divorce rates starting in 2008, until returning to expected levels. This demonstrates an inverse link between economic decline and relationship stability was established empirically by a decrease in divorce rates during the financial crisis.

The circumstances of the increase in financial strain associated with the pandemic contrast with the 2008 financial crisis. The recession came with advanced

notice and several precursors leading to the climax, followed by a period of stabilization. Conversely, the Coronavirus pandemic broke out suddenly, placing individuals in dire circumstances unexpectedly without advanced notice for preparation (Jomo & Chowdhury, 2020). In a study of communication patterns utilized by couples during times of financial uncertainty, resilience during stress strengthens the bonds of the relationship (Afifi et al., 2018). During an analysis of communication patterns utilized by couples who had experienced the 2008 financial crisis, researchers found that couples who worked together to develop a plan to endure the financial hardship were more likely to adhere to the plan with a strengthened relationship bond as the result (Masarik et al., 2016). However, the circumstances of the COVID pandemic differ from the 2008 Great Recession in that coronavirus-related economic strain was more severe and unexpected (Jomo & Chowdhury, 2020), giving couples no time to plan for the economic strain, thus leaving their relationship vulnerable to break up (Gere et al., 2016). Therefore, we plan to explore how the economic strain experienced during this pandemic impacts relationship functioning variables.

Conflict Resolution

Examination of the causes of conflict between spouses showed patterns in which arguments related to money were more problematic and persistent than issues that were not related to money (Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009) One study found that couples experiencing disagreements related to financials, report that these arguments are of the longest lasting, and most significant causes of conflict (Papp,

2018). Therefore, the far-reaching financial impacts of the novel coronavirus pose a particular threat to the conflict resolution functioning of couples. Daily stressors can have severe ramifications on communication between relationship partners (Bodenmann et al., 2007). These factors make intimate relationships sensitive to external stressors. Specifically, conflict resolution through communication patterns can be impacted by extraneous pressures. This led us to hypothesize that economic strain related to the COVID pandemic will deteriorate couples' conflict resolution abilities.

Commitment

Commitment is defined as the psychological attachment or investment one makes in a relationship (Rusbult, 1983). As seen in previous research, analyzing times of high crisis provides insight into decision-making processes that occur during said crises. This data may predict similar decision-making processes and mindsets common during the COVID crisis. Cohan and Cole (2002) examined the effects of a natural disaster crisis, Hurricane Hugo, on couples living in regions of South Carolina to couples residing in counties that were unaffected by the hurricane, and found significant increases in the rates of marriage, birth and divorce. Thus, the study found that the effects of crises motivate romantic relationship partners to make active decisions regarding their relationships, either to terminate or commit.

Similarly, the environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic may motivate individuals to make more active decisions (i.e investing in or dissolving) regarding their relationships. Einhorn found increased financial strain between couples was

significantly related to a decrease in dedication and commitment, for male relationship partners (2011). We expect to see similar outcomes for the commitment levels of couples impacted by coronavirus-related financial stress. The commitment level of couples has been investigated and shown little variation between dating and married couples, therefore demonstrating that marital status has little, to no, effect on reported commitment levels (Panayiotou, 2005). Therefore, we expect to see commitment impacted by COVID-related economic strain.

Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction is defined as the enjoyment one experiences as a result of their romantic relationship (Rusbult, 1983). Stress is an overarching element that has been experienced throughout the COVID pandemic. In recent years, levels of stress have been steadily increasing (Clay, 2011). However, since the initial outbreak of the coronavirus there has been significant spikes in stress (American Psychological Association, 2020). The present study centers on the exogenous shock attributed to coronavirus-related stress and the impact felt by romantic relationships. Therefore, examination of stressors experienced by individuals in relationships during the pandemic are pertinent to the present study. According to a report by the American Psychological Association (2020) the causes of stress experienced during the pandemic range widely from health concerns to financial security, amongst other sources of stress. While the source of stress varies, the outcomes of chronic stress and their implications on relationship health are of importance in the present study. The impacts of stress on romantic relationships have severe ramifications, as couples who

experience higher levels of stress have been shown to experience lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Karney et al., 2005).

As previously discussed, one potential cause of tension between romantic partners is financial strain. The extant literature attributes financial strain to negative relational behaviors, such as intensified psychological aggression (Falconier, 2005). These negative relational behaviors in turn were correlated with a reduction in relationship satisfaction, especially for females (Falconier, 2005). Following this narrative, couples who experience COVID-related financial stress are likely to experience similar declines in relationship satisfaction.

On a smaller scale, the prolonged state of the COVID pandemic poses a unique set of circumstances which are both critical and protracted. It is important to analyze the minute occurrences of adjustment sparked by the pandemic. Due to these factors, the pandemic is not an acute, singular event, rather it is a sustained, daily stressor, affecting day-to-day life and routines (Cunningham et al., 2021). The chronic stress induced by the pandemic poses a critical threat to relationship health as response to stress varies in partners. Individual response to minor daily events can range from moderate to intense based on individual coping mechanisms (Larsen, Diener & Emmons, 1986). Individuals in relationships experience the combined effects of the COVID pandemic as both an individual and relationship partner, thus mediation of stress is necessary on both an individual and relationship level. Statistical analysis of the impacts of daily stressors on romantic relationships show that daily hassles have strong impacts on relationship functioning (Bodenmann et al.,

2007). Another aspect of daily life that measures relationship quality is the frequency of sexual intimacy. Surveys of couples during the early stages of the pandemic showed that coronavirus-related conflict had impacted sexual intimacy (Luetke et al., 2020). The effects of the pandemic are notably far-reaching, having an impact on a grand scale overall, as well as on a smaller scale, affecting the daily, fundamentals of relationship functioning. This has led us to hypothesize that relationship functioning will be impacted by COVID related economic strain.

Present Study

This study focused on four factors that contribute to the dynamics of romantic relationships: economic strain, conflict resolution, commitment level and relationship satisfaction. In addition, this study researched the relationship between these fundamental relationship variables. The unique circumstances surrounding the COVID crisis in both content and magnitude are unlike previous crises in recent history. Participants were surveyed to assess the impact of economic strain, conflict resolution, commitment and relationship satisfaction on their romantic relationships; we will further explore how these variables differ in each sample (pre-Covid vs. post-Covid couples).

The purpose of this study is to examine the impacts of the novel Coronavirus pandemic on individuals in intimate relationships. As seen in previous research, stressors contribute to the overall functioning of intimate and romantic relationships (Karney et al., 2005; Liker & Elder, 1983). The Coronavirus pandemic has triggered heightened stress universally (American Psychological Association, 2020), which is

experienced both on an individual level and as a partner in a romantic relationship. We exploit the exogenous shock of the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus pandemic (Brigland et al., 2021) by comparing individuals in relationships that formed prior to the initial outbreak (pre-COVID) to individuals in relationships that started after the initial outbreak (post-COVID).

Examination of the association of relationship functioning and economic strain brought on by the Coronavirus pandemic is of distinct interest in the present study. The negative correlations observed in previous studies of couples experiencing financial uncertainty and their ability to mediate conflicts (Papp, 2018) has led us to hypothesize that couples will experience similar outcomes due to coronavirus-related economic strain. Additionally, economic strain has been observed to negatively impact the commitment within intimate relationships (Einhorn, 2011). Backed by this knowledge, we hypothesize that the economic strain and commitment levels couples experience will be negatively correlated. Relationship satisfaction provides insight into individual fulfilment within the confines of the relationship. As demonstrated by Falconier (2005) relationship satisfaction is sensitive to stressors caused by financial pressure. This led us to predict a negative association between economic strain and relationship satisfaction amongst the present study of participants.

After having probed these correlations, we next directed our focus on analyzing the distinctions between individuals who began dating before the Coronavirus outbreak, to individuals who began dating while the pandemic was in full swing. Pre-COVID participants experienced the exogenous shock of the COVID crisis firsthand,

and the sudden and unexpected burdens of pandemic stress on couples has shown significant impacts on relationship trajectory (Eastwick, Finkel & Simpson, 2019). In contrast, participants in the post-COVID group initiated their relationships while the pandemic was in progress, eliminating the shock factor. For that reason, post-COVID participants benefit from the protective factors of new relationship formation (Coccia & Darling, 2016) having entered into romantic relationships with previous exposure to coronavirus-related stressors. As Coccia and Darling (2016) found amongst college students, newly initiated romantic relationships benefit from a level of immunity to external stressors because forming relationships is at the center of their lives. Therefore, although stress created by the COVID pandemic affects the individual participant, initiating romantic relationships is a primary concern.

On the other hand, pre-COVID participants had no warning before the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus, meaning these participants experienced the COVID pandemic while already in a relationship. Thus, they had to endure the coronavirus-related pressures as both an individual and relationship partner. Unexpected calamities have had devastating effects on romantic relationships as demonstrated by previous studies (Lowe, Rhodes & Schoglio, 2012).

Financial pressures experienced by partners in romantic relationships and the functional dynamics of romantic relationships have demonstrated a strong correlation (Dew & Jackson, 2018). Previous studies of economic declines show that the implications for couples often result in additional strain and withdrawal between relationship partners (Vinokur et al., 1996). As the initial shock of economic decline-

related stressors were experienced by the romantic relationships of pre-COVID participants, as opposed to post-COVID participants who benefit from the protective factors of relationship formation (Coccia & Darling, 2016), we hypothesize that higher levels of coronavirus-related economic strain will be experienced by pre-COVID relationship members in comparison to post-COVID relationship partners.

Stressors related to the pandemic are not exclusively related to financial distress. Stressors induced by the COVID pandemic have been wide ranging, affecting nearly all aspects of daily life (American Psychological Association, 2020). Thus, it is the goal of the present study to examine overall relationship functioning whilst living through a global pandemic. Daily stressors can have severe ramifications on communication between relationship partners (Bodenmann et al., 2007). These factors make intimate relationships sensitive to external stressors. Specifically, conflict resolution through communication patterns can be impacted by extraneous pressures.

This study seeks to examine the impact on conflict resolution within romantic relationships experienced as a result of the pandemic. As seen in previous literature, the impacts of stress on communication patterns, such as conflict resolution, can be detrimental for couples (Timmons et al., 2016). This background has led us to hypothesize that conflict resolution abilities of individuals in romantic relationships may suffer, thus conflict resolution would be notably lower in participants in the pre-COVID category that formed before the pandemic in comparison to the post-COVID category.

The investment each partner makes into the relationship contributes to the overall functioning, longevity and wellbeing of the relationship as a unit (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Researchers seek to investigate how levels of commitment held by individuals in romantic relationships have changed due to the COVID pandemic. The level of commitment a relationship partner invests has been observed to be affected by external constraints, such as stress (Rhoades et al., 2010). Due to the climate of crisis the novel Coronavirus pandemic has inflicted upon individuals and couples alike, the resulting stressors are predicted to distress relationship partners thus affecting the commitment levels. Analysis of these results led us to hypothesize that there will be lower levels of commitment for pre-COVID participants in comparison to post-COVID participants.

Relationship satisfaction measures the satisfaction each individual partner in the relationship expresses towards their significant other. As previous studies have observed, the level of relationship satisfaction can be affected by external stressors (Randall & Bodenmann, 2017). Similar stressors as the stressors experienced throughout the COVID pandemic have been studied and had notable effects on the relationship satisfaction level exhibited in couples (Cunningham et al., 2021). We hypothesize that the inceptive and extraneous stressors attributed to the outbreak of the COVID pandemic will present lower levels of relationship satisfaction in participants in the pre-COVID category in comparison to participants in the post-COVID category.

The hypotheses for this study were as follows:

- I. There will be a negative correlation between economic strain and conflict resolution in relationships, such that those participants who report higher levels of economic strain will report lower levels of conflict resolution in their relationships.
- II. There will be a negative correlation between economic strain and commitment in relationships, such that those participants who report higher levels of economic strain will report lower levels of commitment in their relationships.
- III. There will be a negative correlation between economic strain and relationship satisfaction in relationships, such that those participants who report higher levels of economic strain will report lower levels of relationship satisfaction in their relationships.
- IV. There will be higher levels of economic strain in individuals in intimate relationships that began prior to January 2020 in comparison to relationships that began after March 2020.
- V. There will be lower levels of conflict resolution in individuals in intimate relationships that began prior to January 2020 in comparison to relationships that began after March 2020.
- VI. There will be lower levels of commitment in individuals in intimate relationships that began prior to January 2020

in comparison to relationships that began after March 2020.

- VII. There will be lower levels of relationship satisfaction in individuals in intimate relationships that began prior to January 2020 in comparison to relationships that began after March 2020.

METHOD

Participants

We analyzed responses from 228 participants who completed data for the variables of interest. Participants varied in ethnic, social and economic backgrounds; however, all participants were over the age of 18. The final sample included 183 females, 39 males, and 6 non-binary/non-conforming persons. Their ages ranged from 18 to 72 ($M=23.43$, $SD=7.42$). Of the participants, 48.3% identified as White, 20.8% identified as Hispanic, Latino or Spanish Origin, 6.3% as Black or African American, 5.4% as Asian, 0.9% as Middle Eastern or North African, and the remaining 1.6% as Other. Participants were divided into two groups – individuals in relationships that began before the outbreak of the COVID pandemic (Before January 2020 – pre-COVID; $N= 148$), and individuals in relationships that started after the initial wave of the pandemic (After March 2020 – post-COVID; $N= 80$). For the pre-COVID group, the participants' lengths of their relationships were recorded in months ($M= 52.76$; $SD= 60.72$). The post-COVID participants' lengths of relationships were recorded in months ($M= 9.87$; $SD= 8.01$).

Procedure

This study is a non-experimental survey design. Our study was submitted to the IRB Board of the University of Central Florida for approval. Once approval was obtained, we began to administer our survey. Participants were asked to answer each of the items on the questionnaires with full integrity. This survey was administered and accessed through the online website, Qualtrics. Participants were asked a series of

consent-related questions. From there, participants were directed to complete the survey in its entirety. The participants were asked a series of questions related to personal demographics and the length and status of their intimate relationship. Afterwards, participants completed the Family Economic Strain Scale. Following this, participants were asked to complete the entire Couples Conflict Resolution Style Scale, followed by the Revised Commitment Inventory was to be completed in its entirety as follows. The final scale was the Quality of Marriage Index, to be completed entirely. Once all of items on the questionnaires were completed, Qualtrics provided the students with the option to receive extra credit in the course of their choice. This completed the non-experimental survey.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. This measure was administered to collect data on each participant's age, gender, education level and ethnicity.

Relationship Length Questionnaire. This measure was administered to determine the length and status of the romantic relationship of each participant.

Family Economic Strain Scale (FES). FES (Devall & Hilton, 1997) is a 13-item survey asking participants to indicate their current status and feelings. An example of an item is "In general, it is hard for me and my family to live on our present income". This scale used a 5-point Likert scale (0 = does not apply to 5 = applies most of the time). To compute participants' total FES score, responses for each item are added together and total reported scores ranged from 13 to 65. This scale was

used to examine economic strain experienced by family units. The Cronbach alpha (reliability) of the FES is .93.

Couples Conflict Resolution Styles Assessment (CCRS). CCRS (McDowell-Burns, 2016) is a 15-item survey asking participants to indicate their current status and feelings. A sample item is “I avoid hard feelings by keeping disagreements with my partner to myself”. This scale used a 5-point Likert scale (0 = rarely to 5 = always). To compute participants’ total CCRS score, responses for each item are added together and total reported scores ranged from 20 to 71. This scale was used to examine the conflict resolution abilities of partners in relationships. The Cronbach alpha (reliability) of the CCRS is .747.

Revised Commitment Inventory (CI-2). CI-2 (Owen, Stanley, & Markman, 2011) is a 25-item survey asking participants to indicate their current status and feelings. One item from the scale is “The process of ending this relationship would require many difficult steps”. This scale used a 7-point Likert scale (0 = does not apply to 7 = applies most of the time). To compute participants’ total CI-2 score, responses for each item are added together and total reported scores ranged from 37 to 167. This scale was used to examine the commitment level of partners in relationships. The Cronbach alpha (reliability) of the CI-2 is .907.

Quality of Marriage Index (QMI). The QMI (Norton, 2013) is a self-report measure that analyzes marital quality. An adapted version of the QMI was used in order to accommodate our population of both dating and married relationships. The scale is made of 6 positive items that are rated using a 7-point Likert scale for the

first five items, while the last item uses a 10-point Likert scale. One example item is “My relationship with my partner makes me happy”. To compute participants’ total QMI score, responses for each item are added together and total reported scores ranged from 8 to 45. This scale was used examine the overall relationship satisfaction partners experienced in their relationships. The Cronbach alpha (reliability) of the QMI is .958.

RESULTS

Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using IBM's Statistical Software for the Behavioral Sciences, SPSS. Researchers screened the data and deleted participants whose responses were not complete. Of the 317 total responses collected, 89 cases were not included due to those participants not having been, currently or previously, in a relationship, leaving a remainder of 228 responses. A standard criterion alpha was set to $\alpha = .05$ for all analyses.

After the data analysis was completed, a post hoc power analyses were used to determine power achieved. In total there were three bivariate correlations performed at the .05 level. However, none of the three correlations that were tested achieved a power of .80: the correlation between economic strain and conflict resolution (.64), the correlation between economic strain and commitment (.43), and the correlation between economic strain and relationship satisfaction (.10). Therefore, we concluded that most of our correlational analyses were underpowered.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: There will be a negative correlation between economic strain and conflict resolution in relationships, such that those participants who report higher levels of economic strain will report lower levels of conflict resolution in their relationships.

Correlation between the economic strain and conflict resolution of participants was analyzed using results from a Pearson's Bivariate correlation test using scores from the FES and CCRS. Our hypothesis was confirmed, demonstrating a small, significant correlation between economic strain and conflict resolution ($r(226) = .129$, $p = .022$).

Hypothesis 2: There will be a negative correlation between economic strain and commitment in relationships, such that those participants who report higher levels of economic strain will report lower levels of commitment in their relationships

Scores from the FES and CI-2 were entered into a Pearson's Bivariate correlation test to measure the correlation between economic strain and commitment of participants. There was no significant correlation between economic strain and commitment ($r(226) = .094$, $p = .073$).

Hypothesis 3: There will be a negative correlation between economic strain and relationship satisfaction in relationships, such that those participants who report higher levels of economic strain will report lower levels of relationship satisfaction in their relationships.

To study the correlation between the relationship satisfaction and economic strain of participants, we ran a Pearson's Bivariate correlation test using scores from the FES and QMI. No significant correlation was found between economic strain and relationship satisfaction ($r(226) = .026$, $p = .339$).

Thereafter, for the following hypotheses, we shifted their focus to the comparison between the participants categorized in pre-COVID – individuals who

are currently in dating or romantic relationships that started prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 (before January 2020), and post-COVID – individuals who are currently in dating or romantic relationships that started after March 2020. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of participants beginning their relationship pre-COVID (148 participants) or post-COVID (80 participants) on the economic strain, conflict resolution, commitment, and relationship satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4: There will be higher levels of economic strain in individuals in intimate relationships that began prior to January 2020 in comparison to relationships that began after March 2020.

In order to examine the difference in economic strain, as demonstrated by scores produced by the FES, of pre-COVID participants in comparison to post-COVID participants, a multivariate ANOVA test was utilized. Results showed that there were no significant differences between the pre-COVID and post-COVID groups at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1,227) = 2.85, p = .093, \eta_p^2 = .012$].

Hypothesis 5: There will be lower levels of conflict resolution in individuals in intimate relationships that began prior to January 2020 in comparison to relationships that began after March 2020.

A multivariate ANOVA test was used to compare the conflict resolution, as demonstrated by the scores produced by the CCRS, exhibited by pre-COVID participants in comparison to post-COVID participants. The mean conflict resolution score of the post-COVID participants was not significantly higher than that of the pre-COVID participants at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1,227) = 1.15, p = .285, \eta_p^2 = .005$].

Hypothesis 6: There will be lower levels of commitment in individuals in intimate relationships that began prior to January 2020 in comparison to relationships that began after March 2020.

To test this hypothesis, the level of commitment, the scores produced by the CI-2 were entered into a multivariate ANOVA test. We found no significant results in the comparison of pre-COVID participants to post-COVID participants at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1,227) = 2.32$, $p = .129$, $\eta_p^2 = .010$].

Hypothesis 7: There will be lower levels of relationship satisfaction in individuals in intimate relationships that began prior to January 2020 in comparison to relationships that began after March 2020.

A multivariate ANOVA test examined participants' QMI scores and showed no significant differences between the pre-COVID participants and the post-COVID participants at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1,227) = 2.495$, $p = .116$, $\eta_p^2 = .011$].

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to examine the impact of stressors related to the novel Coronavirus pandemic on relationship functioning variables (economic strain, conflict resolution, commitment, and relationship satisfaction). The relationship between economic strain and conflict resolution, commitment, and relationship functioning, respectively, was examined using a series of Pearson's Bivariate correlation analysis. To examine differences between relationships that began before and after the pandemic, the group differences on relationship functioning (economic strain, conflict resolution, commitment, and relationship satisfaction) for those in relationships which started pre-COVID and those post-COVID were entered into a multivariate ANOVA test.

The first hypothesis predicted that economic strain and conflict resolution would be negatively correlated. Significant results supported this hypothesis demonstrating a negative correlation between distress related to financial issues and the conflict resolution abilities demonstrated by romantic partners. This finding suggests that increased strain between relationship partners could be related to decreased problem solving, or conflict resolutions which supports the findings in previous literature (Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009). This could mean that money problems deteriorate couples' ability to resolve conflicts or arguments amicably. However, it is possible that the reverse is true – an inability to resolve conflicts could create an increased strain on financial issues. Although the Pearson's correlation demonstrated a small level of significant results, the correlation was determined to be underpowered by a post hoc

analysis. This suggests that if the sample size were larger, there could be an even higher level of significance for the correlation between economic strain and conflict resolution.

We posed a second hypothesis that economic strain would be negatively correlated to the commitment levels of romantic partners. There was no correlation reported between economic strain and commitment. Similarly, our third hypothesis that stated there would be a negative correlation between economic strain and relationship satisfaction. Results showed that there was no significant association between economic strain and relationship satisfaction. Previous studies showed significant correlation between both economic strain and commitment (Einhorn, 2011), and economic strain and relationship satisfaction (Karney et al., 2005). Although the results did not confirm these hypotheses, correlations may be significant with a larger sample size.

Economic strain was hypothesized to demonstrate higher levels in individuals whose relationship began prior to the initial outbreak of the COVID crisis in comparison to individuals in relationships that began after the outbreak. This hypothesis was not confirmed due to no significant differences of economic strain in the pre-COVID group compared to the post-COVID group. One possible reason there were no significant results may be the inordinate amount of pre-COVID participants, in comparison to the amount of post-COVID participants. There were 148 completed responses of the FES for pre-COVID participants, in comparison to 80 completed responses from the post-COVID group. Results from this study could be explained by the findings of Cohen (2014), which found that economic declines led to an increase in marital stability, suggesting that such declines may not be linked to increased tension between

relationship partners related to economic strain. Therefore, the economic declines related to the COVID pandemic may not have increased economic strain of relationship partners.

The next hypothesis states that individuals who began their relationship prior to the COVID pandemic would experience lower levels of conflict resolution than individuals who began their relationships after the initial start of the pandemic. Results found no significant difference in the levels of conflict resolution in participants who began their relationship after March 2020 compared to participants who began their relationships before January 2020. As discussed regarding the previous hypothesis, disproportionate responses from pre-COVID participants in comparison to post-COVID participants may have impacted the significance of the results. Bodenmann et al. (2007) found that daily stressors can negatively impact the communication patterns of relationship partners. The results from our study could be explained by this finding – despite when couples began their relationships, communication patterns are still impacted by daily stressors. Therefore, similar levels of conflict resolution for pre-COVID and post-COVID participants could be due to daily stressors affecting couples equally.

Commitment in relationship partners was hypothesized to be stronger in participants whose relationship began after March 2020 – after the initial pandemic outbreak compared to participants whose relationship began before January 2020 – before the pandemic. Results found no significant difference in the levels of commitment in individuals who began their relationship prior to the start of the

pandemic compared to individuals who entered romantic relationships while the pandemic was underway. Similar to the above hypotheses, there was a disproportionate number of responses from two groups of participants (pre-COVID and post-COVID). However, if total responses from each group were proportionate, the results may be significant. No significant difference between commitment levels of pre-COVID and post-COVID participants could be explained by the study done by Cohan and Cole (2002), which found that crisis-situations can motivate couples to take active decisions, possibly to commit more deeply. Therefore, similar levels of commitment could be caused by the pandemic motivating couples to further invest into their relationship.

Lastly, researchers hypothesized that individuals in romantic relationships that began prior to the pandemic would experience lower levels of relationship satisfaction in comparison to individuals in relationships that began while the pandemic was underway. Findings show no significant difference in levels of relationship satisfaction in romantic partners whose relationship began after March 2020 compared to partners whose relationship began prior to January 2020. One reason for this finding may be related to the study done by Falconier (2005) which found that relationship satisfaction was affected by stress levels. Stress levels during the pandemic may not have risen to a level that threatened or affected the relationship satisfaction. It is important to note that there were unequal amounts of responses from pre-COVID and post-COVID groups for the QMI, which may have affected the significance of the results, thus indicating that further research may be needed to reconcile these differences.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study provided important romantic relationships insight into the relationship functioning of romantic relationships, the limitations should be discussed within the context of the investigation. One limitation of the study was disproportionate lengths of relationships between the pre-COVID and post-COVID groups. The average length of relationship for the pre-COVID group was four years, however the average length of relationship for the post-COVID group was 10 months. Studies on the length of relationship have shown that longer relationships tend to demonstrate higher levels of commitment, as well as other relationship functioning variables (Totenhagen et al., 2016). Therefore, the length of relationship may have affected the results produced by this study. Replication of this study at a later date could provide additional data from post-COVID individuals who are in longer lengths of relationships.

Another limitation may have been the ratio of gender, ethnicity, age, as well as other demographic characteristics. For example, the majority of our sample consisted of white women between the ages of 18 – 30, which could be related to the study being administered primarily to college students. However, this ratio is not representative of the population as a whole. Thus, if responses were collected from a more diverse sample, and therefore more accurate representation of the population, the results may be significantly different.

Data was collected from individuals who were, at the time of the study being administered, currently in a relationship, as well as individuals who were in relationships that had ended, which presents another limitation. Participants who were in relationships that ended were asked to report on their feelings while they were in said relationship.

This could present a recall limitation, due to the participants reporting on the relationship during a previous time. Additional analyses of responses, both including and excluding responses from participants who were in a relationship that has previously ended, could provide differing results.

Conclusion

The ramifications of the COVID pandemic are unique, as we have not experienced a crisis that has impacted as many factors simultaneously, nor to the severity, as experienced during the COVID pandemic. Previous studies of stressors that are comparable to the coronavirus-related stressors provide insight into the possible effects of external factors on relationship functioning. Specifically, this study aimed to examine the impact that stressors triggered by the COVID crisis have had on the economic strain, conflict resolution, commitment, and relationship satisfaction of intimate relationships. Although there were no significant results suggesting lower levels of relationship functioning (i.e. increased economic strain, decreased conflict resolution) in romantic partners that began their relationships before the pandemic there was a significant correlation between economic strain and conflict resolution. This finding could suggest that circumstances that are attributed to heightened money problems – mass layoffs, skyrocketing unemployment rates, economic declines – negatively impact couples’ ability to resolve conflicts. Alternatively, incivility between relationship partners could cause more stress related to financial issues. Armed with this awareness, romantic partners are better equipped to either develop strategies to

cope and keep the relationship intact or make a more informed decision to dissolve the relationship and move on if deemed to be the most healthful outcome.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board
FWA00000351
IRB00001138, IRB00012110
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

November 1, 2021

Dear Grace White:

On 11/1/2021, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

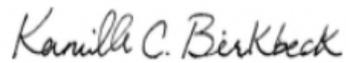
Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	COVID Couples: Investigating the Impact of the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic on Intimate Relationships"
Investigator:	Grace White
IRB ID:	STUDY00003609
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIM Flyer with Arrow.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • IRB White 3609 HRP-254-FORM Explanation of Research VICTORBLOCKER.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • IRB White 3609 HRP-255-FORM - Request for Exemption VICTOR BLOCKERv.2.docx, Category: IRB Protocol; • Questionnaire_Couples Conflict Resolution Style Assessment.docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire; • Questionnaire_Demographic Questions.docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire; • Questionnaire_Family Economic Strain Scale_FESS.docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire; • Questionnaire_QMI.docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire; • Questionnaire_Relationship Questions.docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire; • Questionnaire_The Revised Commitment Inventory.docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire;

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on

submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in are detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kamille C. Birkbeck".

Kamille Birkbeck
Designated Reviewer

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