

**Australian Media Representations of Sexual and
Intimate Relationships within the Coronavirus pandemic**

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted people's sexual and intimate relationship practices, including via ongoing social distancing measures, snap lockdowns, and travel disruptions as we are experiencing in Australia. The media is a significant contributor to our understanding and production of interactions in everyday life, including sexual and intimate relationship practices. However, little is known about how sexual and intimate relationships are being represented in mass media during the pandemic. In this study, we aimed to examine this within an Australian context using an exploratory qualitative approach. Newspaper articles were collected through keyword searches in Australia and New Zealand Newsstream, and Newsbank databases, from November 2020 (when all initial lockdowns in Australia were lifted) to April 2021. The articles were analysed using thematic analysis, a form of pattern-based analysis, to answer the research question "how are sexual and intimate relationships discussed in the Australian media, during the COVID-19 pandemic". Five themes were generated through analysis: 1. Relationships are work; 2. Relationships are heteronormative; 3. A new normal emerging; 4. Relationships are a risk; and 5. Pandemic impacts on relationships. The findings will provide insight into how media representations of sexual and intimate relationships have been shaped by the pandemic and whether these representations have changed. This will contribute to wider efforts to explore and understand how people are experiencing and negotiating sexual and intimate relationships within the context of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Sexual and Intimate Relationships, Media, Australia

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University, and, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published except where due reference is made. I give permission for the digital version of this thesis to be made available on the web, via the University of Adelaide's digital thesis repository, the Library Search and through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the School to restrict access for a period of time.

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Contribution Statement

In writing this thesis, my supervisors and I collaborated to generate the research question of interest, select the appropriate methodology, and design the study. I conducted the literature search, completed the ethics application with my supervisors' guidance, undertook the search for the data corpus and manually collected the data. My supervisors and I collaborated in selecting the articles to include in the final dataset for analysis, as well as identifying relevant psychological theories. I was responsible for manually coding the dataset, generating the themes, and identifying the relevancy of this research, and, finally, writing of the thesis.

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Australian Media Representations of Sexual and Intimate Relationships within the Coronavirus pandemic

This thesis is concerned with media representations of sexual and intimate relationships, and more specifically with how these media representations can be used to understand these relationships.

1.1 Background

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the novel Coronavirus outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern in January 2020 (WHO, 2020). This new virulent disease, also referred to as COVID-19, has many unpleasant symptoms and, in severe cases, can cause death. By mid-March 2020, the WHO acknowledged that the escalation of COVID-19 cases constituted a global pandemic (Ghebreyesus, 2020).

Health practitioners, government health agencies, and media outlets reacted promptly to the pandemic, suggesting various ways to remain healthy. These suggestions pertained to good hygiene and social distancing (Australian Government Department of Health, 2021), and, when required, self-isolation to avoid any undue contact with non-cohabitating social groups (Australian Government Department of Health, 2021). By the end of March 2020, Australia had closed its borders to non-residents, restrictions were put in place, and local lockdowns implemented. Many were short-term. However, it was not until the end of the second COVID-19 wave, in November 2020, that the first mandated major lockdown was lifted in Victoria, and all of Australia was out of lockdown. To date, there have been almost 230 million confirmed cases globally, with almost 90,000 confirmed cases in Australia (WHO, 2021b).

1.2 Research on COVID-19

There has been extensive research on the health impact of the pandemic, from its effect on gynaecological telephone consultations (Khan et al., 2021) and cancer treatments (Singh et al., 2020; Villain et al., 2021), to its repercussions for patients suffering from chronic illnesses, such as chronic kidney disease (e.g., Trivedi et al., 2020). There has also been research on its impact on mental health (Ahrens et al., 2021; Balasubramanian et al., 2020; Holloway et al., 2021; Sharma & Vaish, 2020); and on the impact of the pandemic on our sexual and reproductive health (Bolarinwa et al., 2021; Lehmillier et al., 2021).

In Australia, much consideration has been given to mental health (Fisher et al., 2020; Holloway et al., 2021; Rossell et al., 2021; Shaban et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020) and psychological well-being (Dodd et al., 2021; Grant et al., 2021). Some studies have focused on how feelings of happiness, loneliness, or isolation were affected by the pandemic (Hamermesh, 2020; Shaban et al., 2020). Moreover, there has also been research on how Australia responded to the crisis (Cook et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020), with concern for our disrupted education system (Pather et al., 2020) and the impact of this on Australian youth (Jones et al., 2020). Finally, research has also focused on how the pandemic has impacted sexual and reproductive health (Bolarinwa et al., 2021; Chow et al., 2021; Coombe et al., 2020; Dacosta et al., 2021).

1.3 Sexual and Intimate Relationships

Sexual relationships are now regarded as an essential dimension of health and well-being (WHO, 2015) in line with the WHO's definitions of sexuality and sexual health. According to the WHO (2015), "sexual health is fundamental to the physical and emotional health and well-being of individuals, couples and families, as well as to the social and economic development of

communities and countries” (p. 4). This statement underscores the importance of sexual health, on par with mental and physical health. The WHO’s current sexual health definition is broad: “Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality” (WHO, 2015, p. 5), meaning that it is not solely about a lack of affliction. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the opportunity to enjoy satisfying and safe sexual experiences, without duress, prejudice, and violence (WHO, 2015).

Sexual and intimate relationships (henceforth: relationships) are integrally related to sexual health. It is therefore salient to understand how we experience them and with whom. According to the National Health and Social Life Survey, a survey of adult sexual behaviour in the United States conducted in the 1990s, relationships are interpersonal connections with one, or several partners, involving “mutually voluntary activity” involving physical intimacy and genital contact and sexual arousal, “even if intercourse or orgasm did not occur” (Laumann et al., 2000, as cited in Michaels & Giami, 1999, p. 416). Excluded from this definition are one-off sexual encounters as they occur outside the context of relationship (Farvid & Braun, 2013).

Within the context of the pandemic, some initial commentary has identified changes in the way sexual relationships are represented and discussed in the media (Döring, 2020). Döring (2020) identified in their overview of media narratives regarding the pandemic and sexualities, that while the articles may have touched on a topical, yet prurient, subject, the primary focus was on risk-management. That is, non-cohabitating sexual partners were advised to maintain social distancing while, perhaps, engaging in technology-mediated sexual encounters (Döring, 2020). Similarly, for those engaged in non-monogamous sexual relationships, people were urged to create a bubble or abstain (Eleuteri & Terzitta, 2021). A social bubble allows a small, clearly

defined, group of people to interact together, as they have agreed to limit social contact with those outside of the bubble.

Furthermore, fear of viral transmission may have influenced normalizing discussions in the media regarding the use of technology-mediated sexual encounters and the use of pornography (Döring, 2020; Eleuteri & Terzitta, 2021). This contrasts with the pre-pandemic context, where topics such as technology-mediated sexual encounters and pornography usage were less discussed in mainstream media and, when they were, they were generally represented as abnormal or ‘lesser’ than face to face encounters (Albury et al., 2020; Döring, 2020).

Sexual health during the pandemic was a focus across the globe (Bolarinwa et al., 2021; Chow, Hocking, Ong, Schmidt, et al., 2020; Fuchs et al., 2020; Ibarra et al., 2020; Panzeri et al., 2020; Pienaar et al., 2021; Riggle et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Domínguez et al., 2021), with some researchers exploring the impact of COVID-19 on relationships specifically (Coombe et al., 2020; Eleuteri & Terzitta, 2021; Ibarra et al., 2020; Panzeri et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Domínguez et al., 2021).

Within Australia, interest was mainly focused on whether restrictions and social distancing would reduce the spread of sexually transmittable illnesses (STIs) (Chow, Hocking, Ong, Phillips, et al., 2020; Dacosta et al., 2021) or the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Chow et al., 2021; Hammoud et al., 2020). One further area of concern regarding sexual relationships was the impact of the pandemic on sexual violence (Payne et al., 2020; Rowse et al., 2021). Indeed, there are concerns that lockdown and restrictions have potentially increased incidents of sexual violence as complainants self-isolate, often with the perpetrator (Leslie & Wilson, 2020).

There is evidence that the pandemic has had significant impacts on people's sexual relationships and practices, particularly for single people. For example, Coombe et al. (2020) found that 69% of Australian singles reported less sexual activity during the first three months of the pandemic compared to 2019. Furthermore, Coombe and colleagues (2020) demonstrate that there have been changes in sexual practices and activities across Australia, such as decreases in dating app usage, in contrast to worldwide reports of increased usage. Dacosta et al. (2021) have demonstrated that condom use among young adults has sharply decreased among single people compared to those in relationships. They acknowledge that this is not due to less face-to-face sexual activity, but perhaps to the fact that young adults tend to feel more impervious to risk in general (Dacosta et al., 2021).

1.4 Media Representations in Everyday Life

The media is a significant contributor to our understanding and production of interactions in everyday life. It is far-reaching and ever present, through mass communications (articles and broadcasts) and the internet (online news and social media). From a social constructionist perspective, human beings are historically, socially, and culturally situated (Burr, 1995). Thus, our knowledge, beliefs and, indeed, realities are similarly situated. Individuals construct and reinforce their realities through everyday interactions, and the narratives and constructions available to them (Lyons, 2000). Media representations of these realities and interactions further contribute to the production and reproduction of these meanings (Lyons, 2000). Indeed, media is a part of the fabric of society (Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2008) and contributes to producing and reinforcing our collective ideas, assumptions and understandings regarding relationships, sex, and health.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that over the last few decades the media's contribution to individuals' knowledge acquisition has increased (Craig, 1992; Lyons, 2000). Increasing numbers of individuals turn to the media for health advice ((Itzhak Yanovitzky & Blitz, 2000); Moseley et al., 2010), as well as relationship advice (Barker et al., 2018; Spalding et al., 2010). According to Frost et al. (1997) the media can at times "exert an agenda-setting function" (p. 842). What is reported in the media may be perceived by the public as important and credible. Moreover, as Cardoso et al. (2021) have demonstrated, social (and media) representations have the potential to exclude or empower certain communities through how these representations frame certain political and social narratives on a particular topic.

Media representations are the manner in which the media discusses issues such as gender, ethnicity, social issues, and events. Indeed, media representations are always situated and partial. Gill and Orgad (2018) state that the media is connected to intimate life in many ways. Our sexual ideas and practices are constructed in part through the media (Albury, 2013; Attwood et al., 2015; Barker et al., 2018; Bond, 2015; Epstein & Ward, 2008), and thus certain types of relationships are included while others are excluded through omission, or even stereotyped. Indeed, while there may be increased representations of non-heteronormative relationships in mainstream media compared to the early 2000s, these still tend to be sanitised to the point of asexuality (Bond, 2015).

Whilst the media is discussing relationships during the pandemic, there is a gap in the literature regarding how these are represented. How we construct our sexual practices affects us in more or less beneficial ways (Burr, 1995). Lyons (2000) states that media representations influence how society views and thinks about these representations. Certainly, according to Lyons (2000), media are "powerful institutions" (p. 350). Media representations can shape our

sense-making of our realities by (re)producing meaning, which in turn can shape what we construe as ‘normal’, and thus what we reject as ‘abnormal’.

With the advent of the internet and social media, the media is embedded in our everyday lives (Gill, 2009, 2012; Lyons, 2000). Even for those individuals who never refer to traditional news outlets, they are still vicariously impacted by media representations within wider society.

1.5 Previous Research on Media Representations of Sexuality and Relationships

Previous research examining representations of sexuality and relationships in the media, pre-pandemic, has found that media is largely heteronormative; it is mainly aimed at cisgender men and women, ignoring other gender identities. Importantly, heteronormativity is about sexual orientation and relationship structure, as well as gender. According to Saraceno and Tambling (2013), heteronormativity is “the idea that the dominant culture of a society views heterosexuality as the ‘normal’ sexual orientation” (p. 2). Indeed, media represents ‘normal’ sex as typically occurring between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman, thus excluding representations of sexuality and gender diverse relationships (Barker et al., 2018; Gill, 2009, 2012).

Furthermore, certain bodies have tended to be sexualized in gendered, raced, and classed ways in media and popular culture, while others not (Barker et al., 2018; Gill, 2012). It is more acceptable to present certain ethnicities and social classes as sexual beings than others. According to Gill (2009), sexualisation is another form of oppression similar to racism, homophobia, and other forms.

Certainly, the American Psychology Association (APA, 2008) deemed the sexualisation of women and girls warranted a task force. Sexualisation can take many forms, and it occurs when individuals are regarded as sex objects rather than individuals, and when an individual’s

value is based on physical attributes (APA, 2008). Within gendered sexualisation, genders are sexualised in various ways, and that sexualisation carries different meanings (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Furthermore, not only are genders sexualised, but also race and social classes. For example, Gill and Orgad (2018) point out discrepancies in racial representations within the #MeToo movement, noting non-heterosexual women and women of colour were mostly ignored in favour of more “respectable” women (p. 1319). Indeed, historically, white heterosexual women have been positioned as sexually pure, while women of colour tend to be represented as ‘Jezebels’ (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016).

Barker et al. (2018) also demonstrate that the bodies used in sex advice tend to lack diversity. These bodies tend to be young, slim, white, with no visible disability, and portrayed in a heteronormative couple (Barker et al., 2018). They argue that images of older or same-sex couples tend to be clothed, while the few images with bodies of people of colour tend to show hypersexuality. These representations encourage and reinforce the notion that certain bodies, relationships, genders are more acceptable than others.

Research has also found that the media generally represents women in a restricted and stereotyped manner, creating unrealistic expectations in terms of physical appearance (Ward & Harrison, 2005), as well as relationship expectations, behaviours, and beliefs (Kulkarni et al., 2019). This is particularly salient since several studies have found that young people also turn to the media for sexual information and education (Bond, 2014, 2015; Epstein & Ward, 2008; Kulkarni et al., 2019).

Furthermore, several studies have found that although there has been an increase in representations of diverse sexual relationships, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ+) identified individuals, the focus remains largely on lesbians and gay men,

minimising exposure for bisexual, trans and queer members (Barker et al., 2018; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Sanz López, 2018; Waggoner, 2018). In their study, Waggoner (2018) condemns the common media practice of validating heteronormativity by using a “bisexual erasure” (p. 1878), and portraying lesbians as women who mostly end up with men. Furthermore, despite increased LGBTQ+ representations, Bond (2015) observed that characters in mainstream media, such as tv shows, are only nominally LGBTQ+, without any depiction indicating characters’ actual sexualities. This can add further challenges in terms of support and isolation, particularly for youth (Russell & Fish, 2016; Wilson & Cariola, 2020). Research has demonstrated that marginalised social groups suffer from more mental disorders than the general population (Fish, 2020; Priebe et al., 2012; Salerno et al., 2020).

1.6 Social Ecological Model, Biopsychosocial Model and Relationships

The social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1978) focus on how human development is influenced by various personal and environmental factors that are continually interacting. Whilst these are distinct models, they are complimentary. Indeed, the social ecological model, an extension of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory, consists of four interconnecting levels: (a) microsystem; (b) mesosystem; (c) exosystem; and (d) macrosystem. Each nested level is interconnected, and these levels affect each other in various ways. Individuals affect their environment, which in turn affects their behaviour and development. The biopsychosocial model focuses on the interconnections between the biological, psychological, and socio-environmental factors and how these affect individuals (Engel, 1978). Indeed, humans do not develop in isolation. Individuals are influenced by biology, psychology, and society. The biopsychosocial model is appropriate to frame qualitative work (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013).

Coleman et al. (2018)'s integrative model takes into account the biopsychosocial and social ecological models, effectively putting these models together and viewing them as operating in unison. Indeed, both have interconnecting factors interacting with each other, which affect individuals' attitudes, actions, and beliefs (Coleman et al., 2018). From this perspective, media representations have the potential to affect individuals by defining and shaping attitudes and beliefs concerning various subjects. Utilising Coleman's integrative biopsychosocial model to analyse media representations, which are part of social factors, enables the identification of how these factors interacting can help or hinder identity and intimacy formation.

Along with a social constructionist framework, this will enable an analysis of media representations of relationships. Within this approach, relationships are positioned in the first nested layer, the microsystem, the individual, while media are positioned in the fourth nested layer the macrosystem, the larger socio-cultural environment.

1.7 The Current Study

This project focuses on how Australian newspapers represented relationships within the COVID-19 pandemic, using an exploratory qualitative approach underpinned by a social constructionist framework (discussed further in Section 2.1). Focusing on media representations of relationships is important, as individuals gain their knowledge through these everyday representations, that normalise certain sexual experiences and practices. Media representations can impact individuals' sexual self-esteem, a key component of sexual health (Rodríguez-Domínguez et al., 2021). Furthermore, some scholars view news media as playing a role in shaping public opinion (Andrews & Caren, 2010).

Since the 1970s, magazines aimed specifically at women have been the focus of studies on media representations (Craig, 1992; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Prusank, 2007;

Saraceno & Tambling, 2013). These studies viewed women's magazines as a source of common beliefs about women, men, and gender relations. Men's magazines have also received considerable attention (Craig, 1992; Krassas et al., 2003; Owen & Campbell, 2017; Spalding et al., 2010; Waling, 2016; Waling et al., 2018). Other types of media have been studied such as music, movies, and tv shows (Bond, 2014; McKee, 2012; Ward, 2003; Wright, 2009). Currently, there are no published studies that examine representations of relationships within online media (i.e., online newspapers) during the pandemic.

Analysing media representations of relationships and their effect on how we view our sexual selves is important as media content provides many messages, models, and examples regarding our sexualities (Epstein & Ward, 2008). These representations and examples affect how we, and the greater political, social, and cultural spheres normalise certain behaviours and notions. Indeed, Coleman et al. (2018) assert that sexual behaviour develops within the nested contexts, as an exchange between the biological, psychological, and social influences. Individuals learn about intimacy and sexuality through family and society.

The pandemic has not only impacted people's physical and mental well-being but also their sexual lives. As the pandemic is ongoing, there is research exploring how it is directly affecting sexual health and relationships; but little research on how relationships are represented within the media during this time, particularly the Australian media. The aim of this study is to examine how the media is framing its narrative on relationships in the time of COVID-19, and how this might shape collective understandings.

Whilst at the start of writing this thesis there were minimal restrictions in Australia, the situation has worsened with mandatory lockdowns presently in place in NSW and Victoria, and snap lockdowns occurring in other states. The research discussed above has provided the basis

for my research question: 'How are sexual and intimate relationships discussed in the Australian media during the COVID-19 pandemic?'

CHAPTER 2: Method

2.1 Design

Social constructionism lends itself very well to the analysis of media representations as its epistemological position argues that there are always multiple perspectives of phenomena. Indeed, the social constructionist perspective rejects the notion that there is one reality. Instead, social constructionism is a theoretical framework centred around the notion that there are multiple ways of understanding and constructing reality. It is concerned with how events, realities, meanings, experiences, and social practices attain 'taken for granted' status (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A social constructionist approach is focused on interactions and social practices that routinely take place between people, and on how people achieve and gain knowledge through those interactions (Burr, 1995).

Finally, social constructionism provides a framework allowing the researcher to explore how some constructions of knowledge sustain some social actions while excluding others. It is, therefore, ideal in helping examine which practices are deemed acceptable and which ones, by their exclusion, are not. Applying a social constructionist lens to data allows the researcher to take a critical view at how we gain knowledge and make sense of our reality. Coherent with social constructionism, an exploratory qualitative analysis was relevant to the current project. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, and is ideal for examining how media representations can affect individuals (Discussed in section 2.3).

2.2 Data and Data Collection

To generate the data corpus, two librarians from the University of Adelaide Library were consulted to assist with the formulation of the logic grid (see Table 1). Initial search terms were

also identified through the research question (i.e., pandemic, COVID-19, and sexual relationships), and through a literature review. Additional search terms were identified through pilot searches and included in the logic grid to enhance searches.

Table 1.

Logic Grid

Search terms		
1	2	3
Covid	Sexual relationships	Non-cohabitating
OR	OR	OR
Covid-19	Sex*	Living together apart
OR	OR	OR
Coronavirus	Intimacy	Couples
OR	OR	
Pandemic	Interpersonal relationships	
OR	OR	
Lockdown	Couples	
OR		
Social distancing		

Search terms were combined in two ways. The first search included all the terms from columns 1 and 2 of the logic grid as a subject heading. The asterisk symbol signifies that the search should be broadened to words that start with the same letters, in this case Sex* could be

sex, or sexual relationships, etc. The second search combined the terms from columns 1, and 2, and 3 together.

Newspaper articles were collected in Australia and New Zealand Newsstream, and Newsbank databases, from November 1, 2020, to April 1, 2021. These dates coincided with the end of the first major mandated lockdown in Victoria, when all of Australia was no longer in lockdown, but still in a pandemic, and the start of my Honours year. Furthermore, this timeframe ensured an adequate volume and range of data were captured, together with the most current features of the narrative around relationships.

Australia and New Zealand Newsstream is an online library “providing access to leading Australian and New Zealand newspapers from the following publishers: Fairfax Australia and Fairfax New Zealand, News Limited, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and AAP Newswire” (Australia and New Zealand Newsstream, 2021).

NewsBank is an information provider with comprehensive resources that consolidate “current and archived information from thousands of newspaper titles, as well as newswires, web editions, blogs, videos, broadcast transcripts, business journals, periodicals, government documents and other publications” (Newsbank, 2021).

These databases allowed me to search multiple sources simultaneously, using key word searches. These searches were limited to Australian content to reflect the range and variety in Australian media’s representations of relationships. Article searches took place on the same day, 27 May 2021. Initial data collection returned a total of 1,128 articles. Initial search results produced a range of content, even when bound by newspapers as a source type and specific search terms. Several types of items irrelevant to my research, such as letters to the editor or announcements, included in my results were immediately discarded. Relevant articles were

initially identified through reading the article titles and immediately discarding the ones focused on crime, the wedding, flower, and travel industries. This resulted in a set of 125 articles once duplicates were excluded. Subsequently, the articles were reviewed (full text), without coding. This was to draw boundaries around the articles relevant to sexual relationships post- (first major) lockdown, thus avoiding being overwhelmed by huge numbers of articles that were irrelevant (Favaro et al., 2017). This resulted a final data set of 40 articles relevant to the research question (as shown in Appendix A).

2.3 Analysis

The aim of this analysis was to explore the current narratives regarding relationships and how they are represented within and through recent news media articles. To achieve this, a thematic analysis was conducted to explore themes and patterns within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a form of pattern-based analysis, which allows the analysis to go beyond the semantic content of the data and discern the latent subtext. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to focus not only on the explicit textual content within the data, but also the implied, latent content. Indeed, this type of analysis goes beyond the words on the page and allows the researcher to focus on the beliefs, implications and constructs posited as shaping the linguistic content within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019).

Within a social constructionist framework, thematic analysis is particularly useful for investigating and understanding how the public conceptualise social constructs. Of particular interest for this project are the patterns (themes) related to the underlying ideas and assumptions regarding relationships present in the conceptualisations and beliefs used to produce arguments that support or challenge dominant perceptions of relationships.

The analysis followed the six phases outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006): *1. Familiarisation with the data corpus, 2. Generation of initial codes, 3. Searching for themes, 4. Reviewing themes, 5. Defining and naming themes and finally, 6. Production of the report.*

Familiarisation is the process of reading the whole data set. This is for the researcher to familiarise themselves with the data set as a whole. During the reading of the articles, which marked the initiation of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), impressions and preliminary analytic concepts and codes were recorded in an audit trail. Articles in the dataset were read several times. The familiarisation step must be completed prior to commencing coding. Coding involves reading each data item, while remaining aware of the overall impression of the whole data set. This enables the researcher to highlight sections of text (also known as units of meaning) that may potentially become themes within the overall semantic content. Per the 6 phases, once familiarisation was achieved through reading the whole data set, features of the data were then coded and collated resulting in the generation of 27 initial codes. Coding was carried out in NVivo 12 Plus.

The generation of themes is a continuation of the active process of thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). Indeed, themes do not ‘emerge’ from the data nor are they ‘discovered’, as if they already existed within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). Rather, themes are shaped and given meaning through the dataset, the researcher’s own assumptions and experiences, as well as the research question. They are not fully formed within the data (Braun et al., 2019).

Themes were identified as “analytic outputs” (Braun et al., 2019, p. 846), patterns of meaning generated once coding was completed, and checked for consistency and coherence. In essence, building on coding. Themes were generated once the researcher was satisfied that

coding was completed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). Five themes and four sub-themes relating to the research aims were generated following coding of the data, presented in Chapter 3.

2.4 Audit Trail and Reflexivity

An audit trail was maintained throughout the project and analysis, including after each article was read, to ensure self-reflexivity and transparency through the research process (Tracy, 2010). Notes included potential themes that were apparent to the researcher in each article, initial reactions, and thoughts from reading the articles and generation of themes during analysis. Self-reflexivity is the practice of the researcher being honest with oneself, the research, and the audience (Tracy, 2010). In essence, self-reflexivity requires the researcher to recognise and acknowledge the assumptions and expectations they bring to the project.

Reflexivity was also practiced throughout the project and recorded in the audit trail as this practice is considered essential within qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Braun et al., 2019; Tracy, 2010). Indeed, within qualitative research, researchers must acknowledge their own expectations and assumptions while conducting the research. This is especially salient as the researcher is active in the analytic process, and thus results and analysis may differ from one researcher to the next due to their own preconceived notions and personal values. Therefore, an audit trail and reflexivity are required practices to ensure sincerity and trustworthiness (Tracy, 2010).

It is possible that my individual views and preconceptions may have influenced my work in this project. Although I remained aware of this, the research itself impacted my understanding and expectations specifically in terms of media representations. Indeed, throughout the data collection and analysis, I developed a far more critical view regarding what I read in the

newspaper, searching for latent themes and meanings, as opposed to just taking articles, comments, or findings at face value.

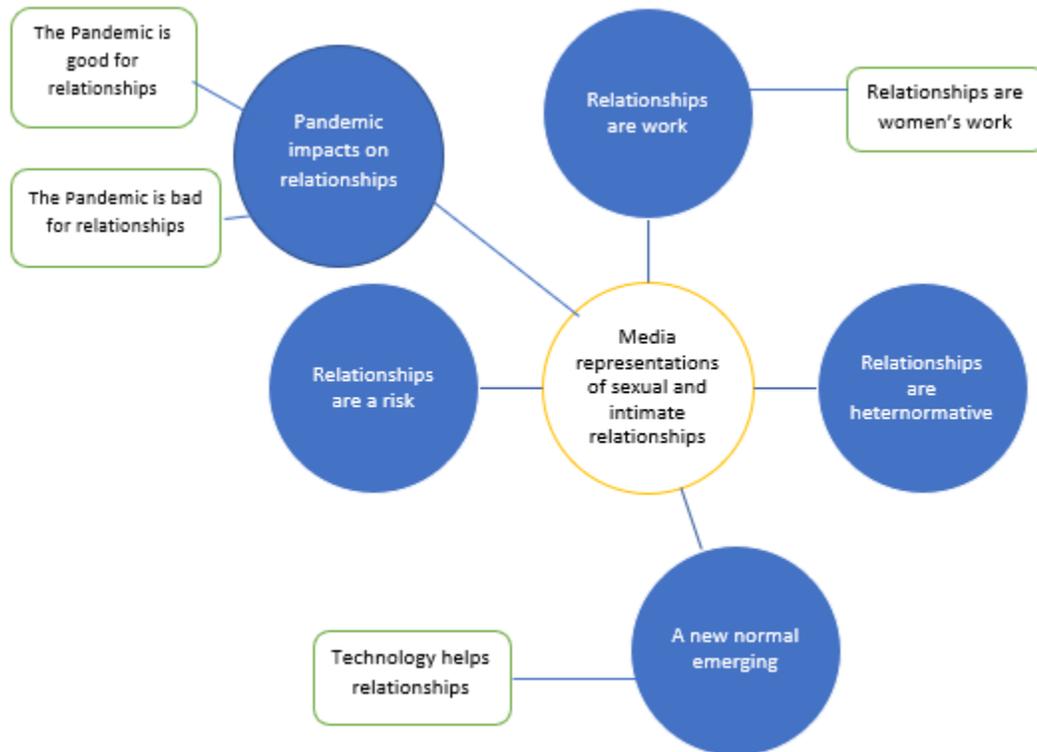
2.5 Ethical Considerations

Low Risk Ethics approval was granted by the University of Adelaide School of Psychology HREC Sub-committee: 21/26. Management and analysis of data were informed by the ethical guidelines for internet-mediated research developed by the British Psychological Society ([BPS, 2013](#)). Those guidelines include: (a) “Respect for the Autonomy, Privacy and Dignity of Individuals and Communities, (b) scientific integrity, (c) social responsibility and (d) maximising benefits and minimising harm” (BPS, 2013, p. 5).

CHAPTER 3: Results

3.1 Overview

This study aimed to explore the current Australian media representations around relationships within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five main themes and four sub-themes (as shown in Figure 1) were generated: *1. Relationships are work*, containing one subtheme: *1.a. Relationships equal women's work*; *2. Relationships are heteronormative*; *3. A new normal emerging*, with one subtheme: *3.a. Technology helps relationships*; *4. Relationships are a risk*; and *5. Pandemic impacts on relationships*, containing two subthemes: *5.a. the Pandemic is good for relationships* and *5.b. the Pandemic is bad for relationships*. These themes represent some of the 'taken for granted' assumptions that construct and reinforce certain understandings of relationships, and as such exclude other aspects and practices. Extracts are provided to illustrate the analysis: Words added to improve readability are contained within square parentheses [], and sections of speech removed for concision are indicated by [...].

Figure 1.*Thematic Map*

3.2 Relationships are Work

Relationships were represented within the data as work, further exacerbated by the pandemic. Indeed, the narrative around relationships within the pandemic portrayed them as requiring nearly as much effort, if not sometimes more, than full-time employment. Most aspects in our lives require some effort, but the data suggested that not only are relationships effortful at the best of times, but that the pandemic had amplified the workload.

“The COVID-19 pandemic added a new dimension to the daily challenges faced by couples living together, and for most it was uncharted territory.” (Source 31)

This effort required many different types of ‘input’ for relationships to thrive. There was an emphasis on the need to communicate within relationships. The data indicated that couples needed to communicate more, particularly during the pandemic, as it added additional pressure. The below extract illustrates that, within the pandemic, communication is key to keeping relationships on track.

“Money specialists say the key to preventing a complete relationship breakdown is communication.” (Source 15)

Communicating with a partner was not the only requirement. The data suggested that showing appreciation was another ‘input’ for relationships to thrive. Certainly, relationships require communicating appreciation to ensure they remain healthy and do not break down.

“Purnell-Webb [...] reminds long-term couples not to overlook what was once second nature. “Make an effort to give appreciation often, it’s the small things like this that create trust, security and saying things like ‘thank you’ when the lawn is mowed, or the car door was opened.” (Source 23)

Additionally, the data suggested that relationships not only involve but require a sense of connection, which must be worked on and enhanced whenever possible.

“Clinical psychologist Jo Lamble believes that in addition to the hours spent baking sourdough and watching every TV show on the internet together, being forced to work from home was also a factor. “There wasn’t the chance to escape into the world,” Lamble tells Body+Soul. “For many, this gave them the opportunity to get reacquainted and connect on a deeper level.” (Source 22)

Much of the data suggested that relationships require external validation. A relationship is not considered such unless the couple has had it validated by external factors, from proclaiming or performing your love on social media to having friends and family vouch for your relationship to the Government

“For my applications we provided photos, videos, call logs and got our friends and family to write letters on our behalf and yet we were still denied.” (Source 1)

Finally, relationships were represented within the data as requiring external support from friends, family, and health practitioners to ensure their success. Specifically, during the pandemic with lockdowns and home-schooling, there seemed to be an additional need for external support to help relationships remain healthy. This is illustrated in the extract below.

“We don’t really have parents or grandparents who help with the kids so we are constantly being parents and that can be tiring and take away a bit of that initial love, lust and fun in a relationship,” she says.” (Source 31)

Related to the theme of relationships requiring work, successful relationships were understood as being achieved through teamwork. This required many units of input from the overall theme of relationships are work. Couples must ensure to show each other appreciation and make a concerted effort to communicate, whether that be their appreciation or feelings. Additionally, couples remaining connected, through shared activities or the screen, was another priority. Moreover, a significant part of engaging in teamwork was couples willing to ask for or accept external support from family, friends, or a health professional, especially during the pandemic.

“We were living at my dad's house to save up for the cost of quarantine in New Zealand which was going to cost us \$3000 each," Miss Jackson said.” (Source 1)

3.2.1 Relationships are Women's Work

Within this subtheme, two codes referred to the onus of the relationship's success resting on the woman: relationships equal sex and reproduction, and traditional and gendered relationship ideals. In terms of sex & reproduction, the data suggested that the onus of reproduction was solely the woman's responsibility. The narrative suggests that women are not reproducing enough. Indeed, commentary regarding the advent of the birth control pill in 1961 resulting in women having less children emphasised this with expressions such as “driving down”.

“The long-term trend is that since the advent of the pill in 1961, women have been having children later in life and fewer of them. This social shift is expected to continue driving

down fertility rates even after COVID-19 which, like the GFC, the Spanish flu and the Great Depression, is an upheaval likely to cause many people to put their baby plans on hold.” (Source 12)

Furthermore, data items relating to pregnancy primarily focused on heterosexual relationships. Indeed, children were exclusively discussed in heterosexual relationships only. Within that context women were the primary focus in the relationship. Through partner exclusion, media representations not only reinforced the notions of gender differences, but also that children are an expected part of heteronormative relationships and are women’s work. Supporting this narrative, the bulk of domestic work was positioned as being primarily women’s work. For example, whereas men were expected to show their appreciation, women were positioned as taking care of their male partners and the children.

“From her cooking dinner to her staying up late to look after our babies, I try to show how much I appreciate her.” (Source 31)

The theme relationships are work illustrates one of the narratives expressed within the media regarding relationships. Indeed, within the context of the pandemic, much has been disrupted, and it is clear from reading these articles, that the narrative identified in this data set suggested the pandemic has affected more than just health and the economy, perhaps affecting women more so than men.

3.3 Relationships are Heteronormative

Most representations of relationships within the dataset were heteronormative. That is to say that when referring to relationships the articles mainly referred to relationships involving a (presumably) cisgender man and woman, excluding the diverse range of relationships in Australia. Indeed, throughout the data there were many instances in which relationships were characterised as occurring relatively exclusively between a man and a woman.

“Aimee, 40, and her husband Dave, 43, of Elizabeth Bay in the City of Sydney council area welcomed their first child Mary four months ago.” (Source 5)

Furthermore, many articles within the data demonstrated that despite living in the second decade of the 21st century traditional and gendered relationship ideals remain pervasive within Australia. The below extract illustrates how, even within the context of a pandemic with its additional distress, in terms of domestic work, women are still expected to carry most of the burden.

“[Channel] Nine’s Sylvia, 34, is also going to have her hands full this year, announcing she and husband Peter are expecting their second child.” (Source 4)

Much of the data bemoaned the decline of marriage as a sign of the times and a loss of an institution, with long-term relationships, cohabitation and marriage further demonstrating the heteronormative narrative used in representing relationships within the media. The insistence with which declining marriage figures were being discussed demonstrated an almost overzealous

attitude. Terms such as “continuing to decline” conveyed a sense of urgency, as if diminishing marriage rates represent serious consequences, and the situation should be rectified. Semantic content often referred to “plummeting” rates (source 25).

“Even before the pandemic, which has seen a collapse in marriages, just 113,815 couples walked down the aisle or stood in a park with a civil celebrant in 2019, a fall of 4.5 per cent.” (Source #24)

However, although the data suggested that marriage was still the goal, unmarried cohabitation was accepted as a distant second.

“Flinders University psychology professor Damien Riggs said the decline could be due to people increasingly feeling there is little to be gained, emotionally or financially, by getting married. He said there was also less stigma now around non-married couples.” (Source 16)

The use of ‘less stigma’ indicated that the two lifestyle choices are not viewed or even constructed the same. Nevertheless, there was a grudging acceptance of cohabitation being more acceptable than it used to be.

In contrast to concern regarding falling marriage rates, there were a few articles discussing how the pandemic was ‘fast tracking’ relationships, with people jumping into cohabitation and marriage quickly.

Moreover, the theme of relationships are heteronormative was further elaborated upon within the data, with ‘input’ from tradition and gendered relationship ideals, as embodied within the below extract.

“Alvine said she has always admired her husband's work ethic and commitment, working hard to provide for the family [...]. While Len said he has always been more than satisfied with his wife's cooking abilities.” (Source 23)

Further traditional views were reproduced and maintained through the data suggesting that relationships are only in pairs, thus excluding the myriad relationships that do not fit into the tidy paradigm of relationships involving solely two people within the dominant narrative.

“Throughout COVID-19’s peak last year, Brisbane couple Danielle and Adam faced their fair share of challenges.” (Source 31)

Finally, the overall assumption within this theme is that relationships are presented as the appropriate context in which sex occurs, and sex is a requirement for a relationship to be considered ‘real’ as well as ‘successful’ and ‘healthy’.

“There was more good news in October when Jesinta revealed she and husband Buddy are unexpectedly expecting again.” (Source 4)

The above extract further illustrates how a pregnancy is always considered good news within a relationship, as that is where a pregnancy should take place, within a ‘healthy’, ‘successful’ relationship

It is worth noting that the data suggested that the function or goal of (hetero) relationships is reproduction. Indeed, this assumption that relationships are primarily focused on reproduction was consistently reproduced throughout the dataset. Indeed, people in relationships were assumed to engage in frequent sexual activity during the lockdown, as if there were no other issues to contend with during a pandemic, or that the primary goal of intimate relationships was reproduction.

Terms such as ‘baby wastelands’ convey images of a dystopian world where people in relationships are refusing to comply and reproduce. This representation demonstrates to every relationship not willing (or unable) to have children that they are shirking their responsibilities and failing the country. With its comment relating to the newlywed sister being “close behind”, the below extract is another example of this expectation.

“Eugenie, 30, posted a cute picture of baby slippers on Instagram. Here’s hoping newlywed sister Beatrice is close behind.” (Source 4)

Moreover, to facilitate sex and reproduction, some articles focused on the use of technology to improve communication with one’s partner or “spice things up”, presumably to encourage couples to have more sex and thus more babies. Suggesting that people need ‘toys’ to spice up their life belabours the aforementioned assumption by inferring that either relationships are not doing it ‘right’ or not ‘enough’.

Conversely, a focus on risk of transmission with sexual activity illustrates the narrative constructed around relationships involving plenty of sex, but also that relationships are a risk, particularly if they are not part of the dominant narrative. In essence, while sexual activity is expected, indeed encouraged, within relationships, the dominant narrative within the media remains heteronormative. This creates a dichotomy between the view that sex is accepted within relationships, but only as far as they are heteronormative. Within the context of the pandemic this has translated to not only viewing sexual activity as a risk of STIs, but also of COVID-19.

“What we do know for sure is that COVID-19 is transmitted via respiratory droplets (saliva, snot ... basically anything that sprays out of your mouth or nose). “And having sex without sharing respiratory droplets is pretty hard (and probably not that much fun!).”

(Source 14)

3.4 A New Normal Emerging

In contrast to relationships are heteronormative, there were enough exceptions within the data set to warrant the theme a new normal emerging. Indeed, while this theme does sit in tension with relationships are heteronormative, it is also a theme in its own right. The data suggested increased representation of unique and diverse human views and expressions of relationships within the pandemic. However, this representation was not exhaustive, only including same-sex relationships, and older heterosexual relationships.

“While there are fewer marriages overall, more people in their '60s and '70s are tying the knot for the first time. The number of people aged between 50 and 54 marrying for the

first time has climbed by 276 per cent since 1999. Among those in their '60s, the rate has jumped five-fold.” (Source 34)

Moreover, within the context of the pandemic, technology is mentioned within the data set as a tool to help relationships.

3.4.1 Technology Helps Relationships

Within a new normal emerging, technology is viewed as something that helps relationships. Indeed, technology usage is increasing in our everyday lives. Within the pandemic, technology use has been encouraged for a myriad of reasons; from staying connected with partners and social groups while in self-isolation, to how it can ‘spice up’ a relationship.

The data suggests that within the pandemic relationships require technology to reconnect or stay in touch and remain connected.

“With separation rates spiking and many couples bickering more in the wake of COVID-19, turning to an app as a means to navigate smaller issues before they become problems can be a pragmatic solution and one perhaps less daunting than therapy.” (Source 36)

3.5 Relationships are a Risk

Within the context of the pandemic relationships were presented as a risk. Indeed, the data indicated that within heteronormative relationships the advent of the coronavirus has brought with it countless biological risks, not least the risk of transmission. Surprisingly, although relationships may be represented as carrying a biological risk, it is important to note that within the data, the risk of COVID-19 transmission was never assumed within cohabiting

partners, unless one was ill. However, for non-cohabiting couples, the risk of transmission was considered unsafe, and thus physical contact was shown in a more limited light.

This type of narrative (re)produced in the media conveyed a feeling of the world going through a ‘social recession’, while promoting the idea that face-to-face interactions are less desired than before the pandemic. Whilst this may be true and pertinent, this narrative also reinforces how people will conduct themselves within a relationship during the pandemic.

However, when media representations referred to non-heteronormative relationships, the spotlight was on STIs.

“The number of new HIV cases in NSW plummeted last year by more than 30 per cent due to COVID-19 restrictions that triggered a quasi-moratorium on casual sex.” (Source 28)

Risk of transmission was not the only risk. For some, restrictions translated into relationships breaking down, sometimes with devastating consequences, transforming relationships into a physical risk. Certainly, the data suggested that the impact of the pandemic exacerbated cases of domestic violence. Indeed, pressure, uncertainty, isolation can be a potent and volatile cocktail, particularly in domestic isolation where family conflicts, and other latent issues can erupt.

“Like a pressure-cooker seconds away from blowing its lid, the situation became untenable for 35 per cent of committed couples, who reveal that they experienced

tension, anger, verbal aggression and/or physical violence between themselves and their partner.” (Source 22)

3.6 Pandemic Impacts on Relationships

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted relationships. The analysis generated indicated that some of the consequences of this impact have been positive for relationships, while other consequences have been negative. The data suggested that all relationships require to be ‘healthy’ and ‘successful’ are a few uninterrupted weeks in lockdown with your partner to strengthen the relationship. However, the data also indicated that the impact has been mainly negative in terms of relationships, with increases in boredom and isolation while having to work from home, and (in some cases) home-school too.

3.6.1 The pandemic is Good for Relationships

Despite over a year of lockdowns, social distancing, uncertainty, and restrictions, the data set indicated that the pandemic has benefited relationships. Indeed, the articles suggested that many people had enjoyed all that time locked up together with time saved on the commute spent on (re)connecting and bonding.

“40 per cent of couples who were surveyed said spending all that time together had strengthened their relationship” (Source 17)

Indeed, the time spent in lockdown even proved a barrier to affairs, giving some couples a newfound appreciation for each other.

“Couples have confessed that the pandemic lockdowns stopped them from cheating on their partners.” (Source 17)

Whilst for some people the pandemic fast tracked their relationships, sometimes in a positive way, such as taking that next step, other times in a negative way, such as ending a relationship that had run its course. Indeed, there has been a comparison to wartime feelings of fragility and life being short. Therefore, people tend to jump into things faster, or seek comfort in the familiar.

“Sian Jones from Bondi’s Bert Jewellery agreed that living in lockdown had forced couples to accelerate the development of their relationships. “I had a couple of customers who had only just met at the very beginning of COVID, and this fast-tracked their relationship, as they ended up moving in together much quicker than they usually would have, which resulted in proposals less than six months later.” (Source 8)

Finally, the data suggested that for some couples all the time spent together in lockdown not only allowed for more time spent together but potentially more time to have sex & (perhaps) reproduce.

“The number of new arrivals is expected to peak in January and February but remain high throughout the first half of the year after many couples decided that during a pandemic lockdown was a good time to start a family.” (Source 6)

Similarly, the below extract illustrates that relationships require physical unification, promoting the assumption that all relationships require geographical proximity to be considered a relationship. Whilst this may not be the case for all relationships, the representations suggest that the pandemic has certainly been a boon for some couples, as they were able to avoid costly expenses to renew visas to remain together.

“Up to 4000 partners of Australian citizens will no longer be forced to make a return trip out of the country to receive their visa after a public campaign from couples and the opposition to overhaul the rules amid the COVID-19 pandemic.” (Source 7)

3.6.2 The Pandemic is Bad for Relationships

Whilst the pandemic may have strengthened some relationships, the data suggested that it has caused many issues for others. For some relationships extended physical proximity can be damaging. Indeed, cases of domestic violence increased during lockdowns as some relationships already under stress were exacerbated with the pressure and strain of being locked-up 24-hours a day. Many were trapped in bad situations, unable to leave because of restrictions.

“If you're already feeling strain in a relationship ... being forced together 24/7 along with financial pressures or whatever might be happening at the time, there's no doubt that would have an impact on relationships," chief executive and co-founder Angela Harbinson said.” (Source 20)

Furthermore, many couples within the data complained of the monotony of being in lockdown, suggesting that boredom is bad for relationships. Although the data suggested that lockdown helped some couples reconnect and thus avoid cheating on their partner, for others the boredom was what incited them to pursue an affair.

“A combination of heightened stress and uncertainty colliding with feelings of boredom and stagnation has led to people seeking to break the monotony by embarking on an illicit affair. According to dating site Ashley Madison, which caters to married people seeking to cheat, more than 17,000 people signed up worldwide every day during lockdown.”

(Source 40)

Restrictions further meant that couples were kept separate from each other for fear of transmission which sometimes resulted in long separations due to border closures, or an illness keeping one person in hospital while the other remained at home isolated.

CHAPTER 4: Discussion

4.1 Overview

This thesis aimed to explore how relationships are represented within the Australian mainstream media, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, after the first mandated lockdown ended in Victoria (in November 2020), and all of Australia was no longer in lockdown. Five main themes, and four sub-themes, relating to the implicit ideas and assumptions around relationships were generated.

Consistent with previous research (Farvid & Braun, 2013; Gill, 2009), relationships were represented as requiring a lot of work and effort. Within this theme, ‘work’ was often emphasised as ‘women’s work’ (Barker et al., 2018). Indeed, there has been a lot of discussion and research that the pandemic has had a lot of impact on women (Fisher et al., 2020; Johnston et al., 2020; Rossell et al., 2021). Certainly, between home-schooling and working from home, there is evidence of disproportionate impact on women. These findings suggest that women are still firmly placed as domestic caretakers. This representation only serves to promote a one-sided view of relationships, and gender inequality. This is consistent with Barker et al. (2018) who found that the onus for making a relationship successful rested firmly on women’s shoulders, while representations absolved men completely.

Furthermore, the findings suggested that heteronormativity is still pervasive in the Australian press, in line with previous research (Barker et al., 2018; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013; Gill, 2009). Despite the recent legislation endorsing same-sex marriage (Australian Attorney General Department, 2017), there were few representations in the media of same-sex relationships. Whilst these partnerships were referred to in passing, they were only employed to illustrate that even with same-sex unions, marriage rates were still declining. The only other

instance in which same-sex relationships were mentioned regarded STIs rates falling during the pandemic. This is problematic for a variety of reasons. In the first instance, when referring to same-sex unions, it implies that they are only viewed as something that should ‘bolster’ numbers of an institution that has been viewed as patriarchal (Farvid & Braun, 2013), and very much a driving force behind heteronormativity (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013). Second, representing same sex relationships as a risk can only engender stereotypes about the people who engage in such activities, perpetuating prejudice, fear, and confusion (Coleman et al., 2018). Indeed, the integrative biopsychosocial model posits that the interaction between an individual’s genetics, own beliefs, family norms and social norms can create identity and intimacy well-being or disorder. With discordant messages from society, particularly during a pandemic when mental health is suffering, by excluding certain sexual paradigms media representations may cause further distress. Marginalised groups have been found to have higher rates of mental disorder (Priebe et al., 2012). Fisher et al. (2020) found that in the first few months of the pandemic in Australia, rates of clinical depression, general anxiety, and other disorders were higher than in previous years’ reports. Additionally, both instances further reproduce heteronormativity as the ‘norm’.

Finally, consistent with previous findings, heteronormative relationships were positioned as being where sexual activity is expected to occur (Gill, 2009). Indeed, Gill (2009) demonstrated that while women’s magazines may encourage female sexual entrepreneurship, this notion is only accepted in terms of pleasing their men. Furthermore, these representations of the ‘norm’, that reproduction is the primary goal of intimate relationships excludes couples who cannot have children, perpetuating mental distress for those struggling to conceive.

Furthermore, while diverse relationships were represented within the data, they were underrepresented compared to heteronormative relationships, in line with previous literature (Barker et al., 2018; Bond, 2015; McInroy & Craig, 2017). Only same-sex couples were included, ignoring all other members of the LGBTQ+ community (Bond, 2015). Further diversity was provided through older couples getting married, the diversity being that that they were getting married for the first time, in their fifties.

Consistent with previous findings (Eleuteri & Terzitta, 2021; Giarni, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2016), technology featured as a new normal. Indeed, within the pandemic, the data set indicated that technology has been viewed as helping relationships through remaining connected, reconnecting or pursuing sexual activity.

Domestic violence was mentioned within the data as being exacerbated by the pandemic, consistent with previous findings (Döring, 2020; Leslie & Wilson, 2020). Indeed, Döring (2020) also identified global media narratives that domestic violence would increase due to domestic isolation. While research has demonstrated that there are high instances of domestic violence worldwide (Boserup et al., 2020; Leslie & Wilson, 2020) and the media has reported on this topic somewhat, it was startling to note that within the data collected it was infrequently raised. Whilst the data set did refer to domestic violence, there were few articles that raised this issue. This could potentially be due to the time frame the data was collected. Indeed, as during the collection period Australia had come out of its first mandated lockdown and thus the strain may have eased. Or this could be due to the articles presenting as assault rather than domestic violence, and as such they would have been discarded.

From an integrative biopsychosocial perspective, these representations within these findings affect humans on a macro level initially. And as individuals internalise these

representations, the impact can be personal. As Hall and du Gay (1996) stated in their research, identities are constructed through these narratives. Humans do not live in their own personal bubble, where nothing affects us, and we affect nothing. Indeed, the levels in the integrative biopsychosocial model are all interconnected and affect each other in various ways (Coleman et al., 2018). Therefore, these representations could impact on individuals' identity and intimacy formation, which in turn impact on their sexual self-esteem (Rodríguez-Domínguez et al., 2021). Coleman and colleagues (2018) state that representations which are discordant to our innate beliefs can impact on our thoughts, actions and affect, resulting in impaired intimacy. Furthermore, from a social constructionist perspective, our knowledge is sustained through social processes. Indeed, representations are socially and historically bound, in line with our knowledge and meaning-making.

4.2 Strengths

Despite extensive research on relationships, and media representations, the current literature on media representations of relationships during the pandemic is limited, particularly when focused exclusively on Australia. The findings of this study were consistent with previous research that theorised heteronormative dominance.

Newspaper articles are a good source of data as they are easy to access and search (Rooke & Amos, 2014), and are a snapshot of what is occurring, accepted, and encouraged within society. Media coverage has been shown to have direct impact not only on legislation but on society's attitudes towards a wide range of social issues (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Blatchford, 2020). Therefore, collecting and analysing online news content is particularly pressing given the direct impact the pandemic has had globally.

Furthermore, this project used a pluralistic approach, analysing the data through a social constructionist perspective with an integrative biopsychosocial model. This approach was consistent with high quality qualitative analysis (Tracy, 2010), social constructionism (Burr, 1995) and health psychology which takes a holistic approach. Indeed, by drawing from different theories, the hope was to produce a richer, more nuanced, analysis.

4.3 Limitations and Further Research

Although research on newspaper representation of relationships is a strength, other forms of mass media were excluded. Indeed, the focus in this study was firmly on newspapers as there is limited time in an Honours year, and the research question was certainly in the news.

Furthermore, media representations mediate individuals' lived experiences (Lyons, 2000).

Additionally, newspapers are a useful proxy for reporting in other media as they often set the agenda for other formats (Rooke & Amos, 2014). Thus, collecting and analysing online media content is particularly pressing given the direct impact news coverage has been shown to have not only on government policy but on the community's attitudes towards a wide range of social issues (Blatchford, 2020). Future research could include other media to see if these findings generalise.

Furthermore, while the research was limited to Australia, the findings were consistent with previous global research. Therefore, the results could be generalised to wider populations.

Finally, what might also be considered a limitation is that the data was sourced through two different databases. Considering that different databases have differing archiving and search processes (Lyons, 2000), there is some potential that the data set was not an exhaustive sample. However, from a social constructionist perspective this is not a limitation as social constructionism posits that there is no accurate, objective reality, and that we construct said

reality through events and experiences. Furthermore, these findings were consistent with previous literature regarding media representations of sexual relationships (Barker et al., 2018; Ibarra et al., 2020).

4.4 Implications

Relationships are diverse and varied. According to Coleman et al. (2018), individual behaviour is influenced by, and influences, multilevel factors. Thus, the issue with sexual and intimate relations being represented one way more commonly than others is there is the very strong possibility of marginalising whole groups of people. This marginalisation can foster a biopsychosocial interaction that can affect sexual and non-sexual identity formation (Coleman et al., 2018). Broader representations are required as adults are not the only ones trying to navigate and experience relationships within the pandemic. Indeed, tweens and adolescents as well turn to the media to supplement their knowledge (Arnett, 1995; Bond, 2014, 2015).

Adolescence and young adulthood are a time of identity exploration and building (Arnett, 1995, 2007). Indeed, youths experience many challenges in their adolescence (Wilson & Cariola, 2020). These challenges include mental health issues and, in some cases, suicide (Wilson & Cariola, 2020). These challenges are further exacerbated for youths who identify as LGBTQI+ members (Russell & Fish, 2016). It is difficult enough navigating these formative years without having that compounded by feelings of exclusion or shame because the representations (re)produced reject the essence of us (Arnett, 1995). There is a large body of existing research demonstrating how media representations of sex and sexual relationships contribute to shaping people's understandings and experiences within their everyday lives (Albury, 2013; Arnett, 1995; Barker et al., 2018). And from a social constructionist perspective this can lead to power

struggles. The dominant narrative being the one most (re)produced, while ‘others’ struggle to conceptualise their very subjective reality.

Moreover, positioning women as the primary caretaker in relationships perpetuates gender inequality and unrealistic expectation of relationships (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Johnston et al., 2020). The expectation here is that women are meant to ensure the survival of the relationship, while men simply thrive in the environment created (Barker et al., 2018). Furthermore, perpetuating the fact that women are subservient to men can only reinforce the dominant patriarchal discourse, creating a world where women’s rights and expectations are slowly being moulded to fit the dominant narrative. This could potentially subversively remove more freedoms from women, while granting more to men.

Excluded from much of the narrative were non-normative relationships, which is sex that is within the paradigm of alternative sexual relationships, such as friends with benefits and polyamorous relationships. Indeed, while people who practice polyamory may have one or several life-partners, polyamorists are not considered the “norm”. These forms of sexual practices have been constrained within the COVID-19 measures and ignored in the media. Indeed, Döring (2020) considered whether the COVID-19 pandemic will foster new stigmatisation of non-heteronormative relationships, which is a valid point. The few instances when non-normative relationships were mentioned were not particularly flattering. One of the themes generated in this project was relationships are a risk. Within the context of the pandemic that would make sense, but non-normative relationships were only referred to in terms of transmission of STIs. This narrative upholds heteronormativity and fosters marginalisation (Ferfolja, 2007; Hayman et al., 2013).

Indeed, representations not only provide inclusion, but also a sense of belonging (Bond, 2015). Indeed, Chmielewski et al. (2017) have stated problematic representations of sexuality are situated within the media. Indeed, these findings have the potential of (re)producing and maintaining stereotypes, and heteronormativity while shaming those who do not conform to the dominant narrative (Chmielewski et al., 2017).

The non-inclusivity of media representations has wider implications. For example, the manner in which we perceive certain health threats is in direct relation with how they are represented within mass media (Lyons, 2000). A salient example is the politicisation of COVID-19 in the United States, with democrats typically supporting measures and republicans opposed to these recommendations, viewing them as civil rights violations and a conspiracy theory. This situation was further exacerbated by the American mass media, which promoted these differences, further dividing a country already on the brink. Therefore, in addition to contributing to people's knowledge, these representations also have the potential to spur people to action (Andrews & Caren, 2010).

4.5 Conclusion

Media representations contribute to our meaning-making and understanding of reality. The findings in this study further contribute to how individuals navigate and experience sexual relationships within the context of the pandemic. Indeed, in this time of uncertainty and additional stress to our mental health, broader representations of relationships are required to not only promote understanding and inclusion, but also identity and intimacy formation, and avoid marginalisation. Indeed, Gill (2012) notes that racist representations in the media garner public outcry. These representations are condemned. The same courtesy should be extended to all representations that stereotype or misrepresent any group.

This study set out to analyse media narrative around relationships during the pandemic. The findings were consistent with most previous research within this area, with few representations of diverse relationships and a strong heteronormativity focus, perpetuating male dominance. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that women were most impacted by the pandemic, within relationships.

Interestingly, in line with the current commentary on the pandemic's effect on relationships, there were more representations of technology-mediated sexual activities. Within the context of the pandemic these practices are being normalised as health measures.

This study contributed to filling a gap in the literature by focusing on Australian media representations of relationships during the pandemic. During the data collection period, Australia was not as heavily impacted by the pandemic as the rest of the world. It will be worthwhile to see if these narratives evolve as the pandemic continues.

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Appendix 1: Data Set

Table 1

Data sources with identifying numbers and citations

Source	Citation	Databank
1	<p>Price, K. (2021, February 27). Apart by border closures. <i>Standard, The</i> (Warrnambool, Australia): https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/180E70315416B340.</p>	NewsBank
2	<p>Apart for milestone. (2021, April 12). <i>The Courier – Mail</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/apart-milestone/docview/2510969050/se-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand

Source	Citation	Databank
3	<p>Apart for wedding milestone. (2021, April 12). <i>The Courier</i> – <i>Mail</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/apart-wedding-milestone/docview/2510960916/se-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand
4	<p>Parnell, K. (2021, January 3). BABY, IT’S A BUSY 2021. <i>Sunday Telegraph, The</i> <i>(Sydney, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17FC46C530308858.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
5	<p>Wright and Rachel Clun, S. (2020, December 10). Baby, it's gone: Fertility falls to record low levels. <i>Sydney Morning Herald, The (Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17F43CA937F75CB0.</p>	NewsBank
6	<p>Smith, M. (2020, December 16). Ballarat hospitals prepare for post-pandemic baby boom. <i>Courier, The (Ballarat, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17F661FC363B58B8.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
7	<p>Galloway Foreign affairs correspondent, A. (2020, November 30). Changes to visa rules allow partners to stay. <i>Age, The (Melbourne, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17F0F28BAB492570.</p>	NewsBank
8	<p>Couples leap in and put a ring on it. (2021, January 18). <i>The Daily Telegraph</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/couples-leap-put-ring-on/docview/2478359722/session?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand

Source	Citation	Databank
9	<p>Cunningham and Aisha Dow, M. (2021, January 17). COVID sparks baby bump. <i>Sunday Age, The</i> (Melbourne, Australia): https://infoweb-newsbank- com.proxy.library.adelaide.ed u.au/apps/news/document- view?p=AWNB&docref=new s/1800C20CF0A0D658.</p>	NewsBank
10	<p>Gannon meg.gannon@news.com.au, m. (2021, February 22). EIGHT THINGS TO DO IN THE CITY FOR DATE NIGHT. <i>Chronicle, The</i> (Toowoomba, Queensland): https://infoweb-newsbank- com.proxy.library.adelaide.ed u.au/apps/news/document- view?p=AWNB&docref=new s/180CC1164D0D27F0.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
11	<p>Family lawyers 'busier than ever'. (2020, November 07). <i>The Age</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/family-lawyers-busier-than-ever/docview/2457929445/seo-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand
12	<p>Fertile ground for falling birth rate. (2021, January 05). <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/fertile-ground-falling-birth-rate/docview/2474802338/seo-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand

Source	Citation	Databank
13	<p>Allison, C. (2020, November 19). Free counselling available for newly separated couples. <i>Shepparton News (Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17ED508CF8447EC8.</p>	NewsBank
14	<p>PRIEST, E. (2021, January 9). Govt says sex with mask safer. <i>NT News (Darwin, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17FE412F3A2CF1C0.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
15	<p>Keane, A. (2020, November 11). How to combat COVID's money stress on relationships. <i>Herald Sun</i> (Online): http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/how-combat-covid-s-money-stress-on-relationships/docview/2461593240/se-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand
16	<p>BAKER, R. (2020, November 29). I don't! Fewer couples walking down the aisle. <i>Sunday Mail (Adelaide, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17F0CC1589A540E8.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
17	<p>IT'S NOT LOVE, ACTUALLY. (2021, February 13). <i>Daily Telegraph, The (Sydney, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb- newsbank- com.proxy.library.adelaide.ed u.au/apps/news/document- view?p=AWNB&docref=new s/1809CA1956648370.</p>	NewsBank
18	<p>Kids' parents will most likely have met online. (2021, January 29). <i>Advocate</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.e du.au/login?url=https://www- proquest- com.proxy.library.adelaide.ed u.au/newspapers/kids- parents-will-most-likely- have-met- online/docview/2481935443/ se-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand

Source	Citation	Databank
19	<p>Lockdown and engaged: Proposals thriving during COVID pandemic. (2021, January 17). <i>The Daily Telegraph (Online)</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/lockdown-engaged-proposals-thriving-during-covid/docview/2478410913/se-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand
20	<p>Mills Legal affairs reporter, T. (2021, January 18). Lockdowns put strain on relationships. <i>Age, The (Melbourne, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/18011733765EA3E0.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
21	<p>Beaini, A. (2021, January 18). LOVE IN THE AGE OF PLAGUE. <i>Cairns Post, The</i> <i>(Australia)</i>: https://infoweb- newsbank- com.proxy.library.adelaide.ed u.au/apps/news/document- view?p=AWNB&docref=new s/1801387C057B59D0.</p>	NewsBank
22	<p>LOVE IN THE TIME OF COVID. (2021, February 14). <i>Sunday Telegraph</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.e du.au/login?url=https://www- proquest- com.proxy.library.adelaide.ed u.au/newspapers/love-time- covid/docview/2489028836/s e-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand

Source	Citation	Databank
23	<p>MILLAR, R. (2021, January 3). LOVE TO LOVE: Sweet couple stories to warm your heart. <i>NewsMail (Bundaberg, Queensland)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17FCBCA82FFE1E18.</p>	NewsBank
24	<p>Marriage and divorce decline, near record lows: Pre-covid figures. (2020, November 29). <i>Sun Herald</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/marriage-divorce-decline-near-record-lows/docview/2464839901/se-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand

Source	Citation	Databank
25	<p>Marriages plummet as more say 'I don't', even before virus. (2020, November 29). <i>Sunday Age</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/marriages-plummet-as-more-say-i-dont-even-before/docview/2464839581/se-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand
26	<p>Wright and Rachel Clun, S. (2020, December 10). Nation's fertility rate hits record low. <i>Age, The (Melbourne, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17F43CA8E9A69518.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
27	<p>NO LOVE LOST. (2021, February 13). <i>The Daily Telegraph</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/no-love-lost/docview/2489098997/section2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand
28	<p>Aubusson Health editor, K. (2021, March 29). Pandemic avoidance of casual sex lowers new cases of HIV - Exclusive. <i>Sydney Morning Herald, The (Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/181988EB676845A8.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
29	<p>BERVANAKIS, M. (2021, April 9). Post-COVID divorce crisis. <i>Advertiser, The (Adelaide, Australia)</i>: Access World News: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/181BEDF5C90D8CF8.</p>	NewsBank
30	<p>Bervanakis, M. (2021, April 9). Post-Covid family crisis. <i>Cairns Post, The (Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/181BEDF3D0A9A000.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
31	<p>Repairing couples is a labour of love. (2021, March 14). <i>The Courier – Mail</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/repairing-couples-is-labour-love/docview/2501175038/se-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand
32	<p>FLANAGAN, S. (2021, April 12). Sadly apart for 75th anniversary. <i>Townsville Bulletin (Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/181CEC048089B200.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
33	<p>SICK AND SEXLESS. (2021, February 11). <i>Courier Mail, The (Brisbane, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/180921B548781B28.</p>	NewsBank
34	<p>Story of sick and the sexless. (2021, February 11). <i>Herald Sun (Melbourne, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/180921B279ED1A00.</p>	NewsBank
35	<p>VLACH, A. (2020, December 22). THE LOVE BUG. <i>Advertiser, The (Adelaide, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17F852DCD91762B8.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
36	<p>The secret to appily ever after. (2021, March 04). <i>The Age</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/secret-appily-ever-after/docview/2495346718/secret-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand
37	<p>Ward, D. (2021, February 18). Valentine's Day 2021 helps us appreciate the ones we love. <i>Tenterfield Star (Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/180B78CEC3DD5970.</p>	NewsBank

Source	Citation	Databank
38	<p>Virus hits below belt. (2021, January 21). <i>NT News (Darwin, Australia)</i>: https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/180235A818783C88.</p>	NewsBank
39	<p>Clark, G. (2021, February 11). What to do this Valentine's day in Sydney. <i>The Daily Telegraph (Online)</i>: http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/what-do-this-valentine-s-day-sydney/docview/2488475590/se-2?accountid=8203</p>	Australia & New Zealand

Source	Citation	Databank
40	Why are so many people suddenly cheating with an ex? (2020, November 22). <i>Sunday Telegraph</i> : http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/newspapers/why-are-so-many-people-suddenly-cheating-with-ex/docview/2462703306/se-2?accountid=8203	Australia & New Zealand
