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PANDEMIC CANNOT BEAT US: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCES OF COUPLES WHO HAD TO STAY APART DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Pandemi Bizi Yenemez: Covid-19 Pandemisi Sebebiyle Ayrı Kalan Çiftlerin Deneyimlerinin Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analizi

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... **iii**
TABLE OF CONTENTS ..... **v**
Lists of Tables ..... **viii**
ABSTRACT ..... **ix**
ÖZET ..... **x**
INTRODUCTION **1**
CHAPTER 1 ..... **3**
LITERATURE REVIEW **3**
1.1. COVID-19 AS A COLLECTIVE TRAUMA **3**
1.2. PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC **4**
1.2.1. Contamination Fear **4**
1.2.2. Confinement and Social Isolation: Stay at home orders **5**
1.2.3. Uncertainty **6**
1.3. SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE TO COVID-19 ..... **7**
1.3.1. Couples during Covid-19 ..... **9**
1.3.1.1. Young Couples Who Are Bound To Be Apart In Covid-19 ..... **12**
1.3.1.2. Separation from the Partner **13**
1.3.1.3. Loss Due To Physical Distance **15**
1.3.1.4. Relational Turbulence Theory **17**
1.4. RESILIENCE AND COPING STRATEGIES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 ..... **18**
1.5. PRESENT STUDY **22**
CHAPTER 2 ..... **24**
METHOD **24**
2.1. PARTICIPANTS **24**
2.2. DATA COLLECTION **29**
2.3. DATA ANALYSIS **30**
2.4. TRUSTWORTHINESS **31**
2.5. THE PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR **32**

CHAPTER 3 ..... **33**
RESULTS **33**
3.1. LOSS OF SHARED ENVIRONMENT **34**
3.1.1. The Magic of Touch **34**
3.1.1.1. Touch as Safety **34**
3.1.1.2. Touch as Joy and Energy **37**
3.1.2. Not Being Able To Be Embedded With the Outside World as a Couple **38**
3.1.3. Awareness of Personal Space **41**
3.1.4. Understanding the Value of Togetherness **43**
3.2. ADAPTATION TO NEW CONCEPTS **45**
3.2.1. Restrictiveness of Being in Family Home **46**
3.2.2. Restrictiveness of the Screen **48**
3.2.3. Difficulty in Arguing Online **50**
3.2.4. Normalizing the Lack of Sexuality **52**
3.3. COPING STRATEGIES FOR ADAPTATION TO THE NEW CONCEPTS **55**
3.3.1. Coping Together **55**
3.3.1.1. Knowing Each Other Well **56**
3.3.1.2. Trust In Relationship: Knowing He/She Is Always There **57**
3.3.2. Communicating Emotions/ Struggles **58**
3.3.3. Balancing Each Other **60**
3.3.4. Video Calls Rather Than Texting **62**
3.4. IN THE END… **63**
3.4.1. Fire in the Snow **64**
3.4.2. Alienation **65**
3.4.3. Getting Closer **67**
CHAPTER 4 ..... **70**
DISCUSSION **70**
4.1. LOSS OF SHARED ENVIRONMENT **70**
4.2. ADAPTATION TO THE NEW CONCEPTS **75**

4.3. COPING STRATEGIES FOR ADAPTATION FOR THE NEW CONCEPTS 79
4.4. IN THE END… 82
4.5. CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS 85
4.6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SUGGESTIONS 87
REFERENCES 90
APPENDICES 111
APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHICS AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS 111
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM 113

Lists of Tables

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants…..……25
Table 2. Summary of Themes…….33

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about many challenges. Due to the restrictions, some geographically close relationship couples had to be physically apart without knowing the duration of restrictions. Some couples had to live their romantic relationships as a long distance relationship. In this study, it was aimed to investigate the experiences of couples who had to stay apart. In Turkey, there is also little research about long distance relationships. Another aim was to contribute the literature about couple relationships. To be able to deeply examine the experiences of couples who had to stay apart due to the pandemic restrictions, a qualitative approach was used. Semi-stractured interviewes were conducted with six heterosexual couples who had to stay apart due to pandemic restrictions and could not meet more than once in a month. After the interviews were done, all interviews were transcribed, analyzed with interpretative phenomenological analysis and four super-ordinate themes emerged: loss of shared environment, adaptation to the new concepts, coping strategies for adaptation to new concepts and in the end. The outcomes showed that despite challenges of separation, adaptation processes and the first reunion after a long separation were difficult to get through; the couples were feeling closer after being able to coping together and seeing the strength of their relationships. The results were discussed in the light of the literature based on long distance relationships, coping strategies for couples in the context of a collective trauma and systemic perspective. Clinical implications and future suggestions were presented.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, physically separation, long distance relationship, coping strategies, closeness of the relationship

ÖZET

Covid-19 pandemisi birçok zorluğu da beraberinde getirdi. Kısıtlamalar nedeniyle, coğrafi olarak yakın bazı çiftler, süresini bilmeden fiziksel olarak ayrı kalmışlardır. Bazı çiftler romantik ilişkilerini uzak mesafe ilişkisi gibi yaşamak zorunda kalmışlardır. Bu nedenle bu çalışmada, ayrı kalmak zorunda kalan çiftlerin deneyimlerinin araştırılması amaçlanmıştır. Türkiye'de de uzak mesafeli ilişkiler konusunda çok az araştırma olduğu için çift ilişkileri ile ilgili alan yazına katkı sağlamak bir diğer amaçtır. Pandemi kısıtlamaları nedeniyle ayrı kalmak zorunda kalan çiftlerin deneyimlerini derinlemesine inceleyebilmek için nitel bir yaklaşım kullanılmıştır. Bu çalışmada pandemi kısıtlamaları nedeniyle ayrı kalmak zorunda kalan ve ayda bir defadan fazla görüşemeyen altı heteroseksüel çift ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Görüşmeler yapıldıktan sonra, tüm görüşmeler yazıya dökülmüş, yorumlayıcı fenomenolojik analiz ile analiz edilmiş ve dört ana tema ortaya çıkmıştır: paylaşılan çevrenin kaybı, yeni kavramlara uyum, yeni kavramlara uyum sağlamak için başa çıkma stratejileri ve sonunda. Sonuçlar, ayrılığın, uyum süreçlerinin ve ilk buluşma anının zorluklarına rağmen, çiftlerin birlikte baş edebildikten ve ilişkilerinin gücünü gördükten sonra birbirlerine karşı daha yakın hissettiklerini göstermiştir. Sonuçlar, uzun mesafeli ilişkiler, kolektif travma bağlamında çiftler için baş etme stratejileri ve sistemik bir bakış açısına dayalı literatür ışığında tartışılmıştır. Klinik uygulamaya yönelik önerilerle birlikte ve gelecek araştırmalar için de öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Covid-19 pandemisi, fiziksel ayrılık, uzak mesafe ilişkileri, baş etme stratejileri, ilişki yakınlığı

INTRODUCTION

A global crisis started on December 31, 2019 after reporting a disease caused by a coronavirus in Wuhan, China. COVID-19 virus is a type of virus in the betacoronavirus (beta-coronavirus) family, including SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV emerged and quickly affected the whole world in a short time, and the situation has been declared as a "pandemic" on March, 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). While the first official case in Turkey was recorded on March 11, 2020, the number of measures taken after this date has been increased. According to Turkish Health Ministry (2020)'s announcement, in order to prevent the spread of the disease, education was suspended at schools and universities on March, 16, 2020. Afterwards, all kinds of activities that performed in open and closed public areas have been cancelled or postponed on March 20, 2020. As of March 21, 2020, all restaurants and such places were closed and allowed only to give a take away service. On the same date, barbershops, beauty salons/centers, hairdressers etc. were closed. Due to decrease human travelling and related disease transmission, road and air travels are not allowed without permission. As of March 28, 2020, intercity buses for our 30 metropolitan cities (as of April 3, 2020, Zonguldak province was included) have been restricted.

Starting on April 11, 2020, curfews and quarantine measures are implemented on weekends for the same provinces, with the exception for certain sectors (Demirbilek et al., 2020). Weekend ban was started on April, 11, 2020, until June, 1, 2020 with beginning of the summer. After this rule bending, the bans were reinstated on November, 20, 2020. Finally, with increased vaccination, all banes were lifted on July, 1, 2021 (Turkish Health Ministry, 2021).

This epidemic has created a widespread existential crisis globally that deeply has an effect on the social and economic order, shakes the confidence to the institutions, queries values, and caused uncertainty and fear in societies (referans) The fact that the cause of its emergence is not known exactly, the virus cannot be seen with the naked eye, and individuals from all segments of society are at risk has turned the epidemic into a collective trauma. All of the expected

psychological reactions after trauma were observed step by step during the epidemic period. Along with the uncertainty experienced, feelings such as fear, unhappiness, hopelessness and helplessness experienced due to the anxiety of catching a disease have also become epidemic (Wu et al., 2009; Sim et al., 2010).

With the restrictions, some couples had to stay apart in these anxious and uncertain times which may induce stress and fear. For romantic relationships, increasing levels of stress was found to be a significant challenge (Stanley & Markman, 2020). The general purpose of this study is to understand the couple relationships if they were challenging with the physical distancing besides the stress of pandemic itself. In order to examine the "fresh" long distance relationships in the context of Covid-19 pandemic, six couples were recruited. Between the age of 21-30 people were recruited for the study in order to understand the effects of Covid-19 on young adult dating couples' relationship. While wondering the effects of the pandemic on long distance couples, another aim was to understand how they dealt with the pandemic. In order to clearly understand the experiences of couples; previous work in the light of collective trauma, systemic perspective to Covid-19, couples during Covid-19 and resilience of the couples will be examined.

CHAPTER 1
LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. COVID-19 AS A COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

Beginning from early 2020, there have been many articles about the serious mental health outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic—a collective trauma, determined as an epidemiological and psychological crisis (American Psychological Association, 2020).

According to Kira et al., (2021), Covid-19 pandemic with its ongoing traumatic effects can be discussed as a type III truma. Covid-19 may be the first life incidence that the entire world gets through into it. It is obvious that a pandemic is a traumatic event, since it presents a threat for people's and their relatives' lives (Muldoon, 2020, p.72). COVID-19 is traumatic for many reasons including fear of infection and death (Porcelli, 2020), economic difficulties, and traumatic stressors associated with the isolation, negatively changed routines, and family and social life (Usher et al., 2020).

Isolation and stay-at-home orders can lead to lasting psychological impact (Brooks et al., 2020) since self isolation requirements during Covid-19 may lead to separation of people from their meaningful environment (Galea et al., 2020) that would be a source of social support (Prezza & Pacilli, 2002). It is evident that quarantine intensifies people's distress and amplifies the traumatic effects of an epidemic (Muldoon, 2020, p. 72). For instance, according to a study conducted on hospital employees in Beijing after SARS pandemic, it was found that the most important predictor of PTS symptoms was being quarantined (Bai et al., 2004). Moreover, having been quarantined in H1N1 outbreak was also found to have an increasing effect on PTS symptoms (Tooher et al., 2013). Furthermore, duration of quarantine was found to be significant for PTSD symptoms in SARS pandemic such that people quarantined for more than 10 days were more likely to suffer from PTSD symptoms than those quarantined for shorter time periods (Hawryluck et al., 2004). While the traumatic effects of the pandemic have been obvious,

however, there is an ongoing debate that discuss if all are in the boat collectively (normalizing the effects of pandemic) or not. Some group of people is facing more risk such as childhood trauma survivors, adults living with ongoing violence and abuse (Taggart et al., 2021). Moreover Blundell et al. (2020) claimed that people who cannot work remotely such as healthcare workers, carriers, shopping market workers, drivers and most importantly those who have no savings and no social security, those who work on a daily wage basis, those who are dismissed during this process, those who work in the service sector that are completely shut down, those who are already unemployed and those who are on unpaid leave, have been pushed into an even bigger nightmare, apart from the fear of the disease (Kocabaş, 2020).

1.2. PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

"Wash your hands frequently for at least twenty seconds", "Keep your distance from people for your health", "Stay at home", "Wear masks in public". These words are the announcements that we hear and see almost everywhere: On televisions, on social media, on the billboards, in the mechanical voice of public transportations. Although these precautions held by governments in order to stop the spread of the disease, it is obvious that people have been negatively affected globally from these daily life changes.

1.2.1. Contamination Fear

First of all, fear of contamination negatively affected mental health in terms of increased depressive and anxious symptoms, decreasing cognitive performance and worsening sleep quality (Brooks et al., 2020; Ornell et al., 2020). Contamination fear is related with washing and cleaning behaviors in order to decline the risk of getting caught the disease (Rachman, 2004). According to the study about fear of contamination during Covid-19 pandemic, Knowles and Olatunji (2021) indicated that in late February/March 2020, obsessive-compulsive

washing and cleaning behaviors increased compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the greater threat of Covid-19 than the flu, higher levels of anxiety and safety behaviors were reported in Covid-19, which is consistent with anxiety reported in response to H1N1 influenza (Wheaton et al., 2012) higher than for Ebola, which never reached pandemic status in the United States (Blakey et al., 2015). Moreover, contamination fear is associated with the fear of infecting significant others. According to a study conducted with 667 participants from Turkey by Özşahin and Arıbaş (2020), almost all participants gave voice to their fear about infecting family members.

Furthermore, communication of disease to family and relatives during the pandemic period (Cai et al., 2020), and the perception of risk of catching the disease cause fear in people (Pappas et al., 2009); the fear experienced in this process increases the anxiety and stress levels in healthy individuals and intensifies the existing psychiatric symptoms (Shigemura et al., 2020).

1.2.2. Confinement and Social Isolation: Stay at Home Orders

Examining the psychological impacts of other pandemics, during SARS quarantined people reported depression and anxiety from moderate to severe (Cheng et al., 2004), and during H1N1 influenza, quarantined adults and children showed PTSD symptoms (Sprang & Silman, 2013). Moreover, Pan et al. (2005) claimed that alienation and feeling isolated are widespread for quarantined students during the time of home confinement.

Due to home confinement during Covid-19, many people were forced to stay at home and run their work from home except the ones working in indispensible jobs. Many studies have been conducted about psychological impacts of home confinement and social isolation so far. According to Zhang et al. (2020), home confinement brought about decreasing physical activity which is directly associated with negative emotions. Brooks et al. (2020) published a review about quarantine early in pandemic. According to this review, home

confinement, loss of physical and social interactions, loss of routines were found to be reasons for boredom, frustration and feeling isolated which were linked to the increased stress. According a cross-sectional study conducted by Shah et al. (2020), 51% of participants demonstrated traits of anxiety, 57% showed signs of stress, and 59% showed evidence of depression. In a qualitative study from Turkey, students participating in the research stated that they mostly experienced the feelings of fear, anxiety, and uneasiness related to the COVID-19 epidemic (Asıcı & Günlü, 2020). Furthermore, stay at home orders may bring about losing one's social environment. Decreased contact with social environment may lead to loneliness and feelings of isolation (American Psychological Association, 2020; Miller, 2020). Even though, stay at home measures were linked to loneliness and isolation, the perception of pandemic's adverse impacts on daily routines was found to be positively related to increased social support and decreased loneliness (Tull et al., 2020). Moreover, Courtet et al. (2020) suggested that this global shared experience may have a positive impact on closeness and social cohesion.

1.2.3. Uncertainty

Uncertainty that is, defined as a situation that cannot be clearly grounded or categorized due to insufficient clues can have negative effects on human psychology (Budner, 1962 & Sarıçam et al., 2014). Many studies suggest that uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with mental health problems such as anxiety, stress, and depression (Shah et al., 2020; Cullen et al., 2020; Rettie & Daniels, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about high degree of uncertainty globally; even though the rates of infection have been varied, whole world is in agreement that this pandemic is unmatched (Rettie & Daniels, 2020). Early in pandemic, there was lack of information about the virus so that perception of uncertainty might be quite high (Elsharkawy & Abdelaziz, 2021). However, there is no paper available, according to the researcher knowledge, which compares the uncertainty levels changing in terms of time. In

Covid-19 context, uncertainty is still on the stage due to the fact that professionals cannot foresee when the restrictions or measures against the disease will be unbeaten the pandemic and when the life will turn back to the "normal" (Bakioğlu et al., 2020).

Examining the uncertainty during pandemic, the concept of intolerance of uncertainty has been mostly used in literature. "Intolerance of uncertainty" (IU) is a psychological concept that remarkably seen as a most significant factor for generalized anxiety disorder (Rettie & Daniels, 2020). According to Buhr and Dugas (2002) intolerance of uncertainty is defined as one's negative reactions to uncertain situations. A study looking at IU within the H1N1 pandemic in Canada claimed that greater IU was associated with higher levels of H1N1-specific anxiety in participants (Taha et al., 2014). In Covid-19 context, amplified intolerance of uncertainty seems to have a negative effect on positivity levels and associated with fear (Satici et al. 2020). According to a study conducted with college students from Turkey by Duman (2020), that fear of the COVID-19 pandemic and intolerance to uncertainty were found to be moderate. The mean scores of fear did not demonstrate a significant difference in terms of the gender variable. However, Bakioğlu et al. (2020) found that fear of COVID-19 is significantly higher in women in their study with 960 adult individuals. Moreover, having greater knowledge about the pandemic was found to be negatively associated with fear and uncertainty that is, younger participants and freshman were showed low knowledge scores and greater levels of fear and uncertainty (Elsharkawy & Abdelaziz, 2021).

1.3. SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE TO COVID-19

After explaining the global psychological effects of Covid-19, a systemic perspective is essential to understand the pandemic's impacts at societal levels and family/individual levels. It is important to define pandemic as an unpredictable life event which can be considered as a horizontal stressor which McGoldrick and Carter (2003) suggested. They claimed that when vertical

stressors (family patterns, myths, secrets i.e. transgenarational stressors) converged with the horizontal stressors (developmental life events), the stress level of the system intensifies, and then this may affect the coping mechanisms to adapt the new challenges. At societal level, people may be affected from pandemic in terms of economic difficulties, employment issues and healthcare system overloading; thus these issues may have an effect on families who should consider their whole family needs (Rolland, 2020). The new normal emerges uncertainty; fear, anxiety and hopelessness so on and so forth as mentioned above (Walsh, 2020).

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) may give a coherent perspective to the system dynamics in the face of a crisis. According to the theory, the individual is at the center of an environmental system consisting of different layers. These layers are defined as "microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem". Bronfenbrenner (2005) stated that the causes and consequences of ecological differentiation (war, terrorist incidents, economic situation, natural disasters, etc.) affect all developmental processes of individuals. Pandemic can be considered as an ecological differentiation which has diverse impacts from chronosystem level to the individual level by impacting all middle systems which are dyads and families, extended families, communities, health and economical systems of cultures.

Moreover, while Covid-19 has been considered as a collective trauma, Figley (1989, p. 5)'s family trauma model may serve to conceptualize the effects of the global trauma to the family systems. According to his definition, traumatized families are families who faced a stressor that causes to emerge unwanted destructive notions in their daily life. He also claimed that when a member of family faced a stressor, the whole family system may be affected by that stressor. It may show us that the impacts of trauma may extend from individual to the family and vice versa. All systems are interconnected and interdependent to each other (Amorin-Woods et al., 2020). Amorin-Woods et al. (2020) made the explanation of the systemic lens:

The pandemic illustrates the reality that society remains at its essence 'collectivist.' We are all in this together, as a collective humanity. It is evident humans are inter-dependent on one another. There is an inescapable inter-connectedness and relationship between systems, within the body, between one another; humanity cannot separate from the environment (p. 129).

1.3.1. Couples During Covid-19

During these uncertain and anxious days due to communal disruption of pandemic, people senses the world as an unsafe place, intensifying the levels of stress and anxiety which is a huge challenge for relationships (Stanley & Markman, 2020). In other words, maintaining a well-functioning romantic relationship is very challenging during these hard times. According to the relationship literature, external stressors such as economic difficulties, hardships in jobs, and disasters can have a negative effect on the quality and stability of intimate relationships (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Looking at how the global disaster, Covid-19 pandemic has affected the couples, it will be beneficial to mention about vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Pietromonaco and Overall (2021) adapted a framework from this model and claimed that external stressors due to Covid-19 is prone to amplify damaging dyadic processes such as hostility, withdrawal, less responsive support which threaten the quality of couples' relationships. They asserted that the couples' contextual vulnerabilities such as social class, minority status, life stage and personal vulnerabilities such harmful dyadic processes as mentioned above determine the couple relationship quality during Covid-19. Moreover, numbers of stressors people encounter during this process also vary. Besides these reasons, the uncertain thoughts such as how this disaster will last or how its effects will induce stress which may reduce the quality of relationships. When the stress experienced acute and short term, couples can use their resources to cope with the stress; however, long term and chronic stress may lead to reduce the couples' resources such that they may find themselves depleted (Karney et al., 2005).

For example, during SARS outbreak, there is evidence the level of stress and divorce rates increased (Lee et al., 2007) whereas consequences of other natural disasters (e.g., tornados, floods, hurricanes) generally shows no long-term effects on divorce rates (Deryugina et al., 2014). However, divorce rates decreased immediately after the terrorist attack of 9/11, and came back to baseline levels in a period of time (Cohan et al., 2009). In 9/11 incident, about 3000 deaths were announced and uncertainty about the future attacks and mortality had come place. When the danger is so near to thread the one's existence, people's first need is security and soothing from their significant other (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Covid-19 pandemic just like terrorist attacks have caused many deaths, created an uncertain environment and fear of mortality. Thus, Covid-19 may strengthen or harm the quality of relationships depending on their contextual and individual vulnerabilities and adaptive dyadic processes (e.g. responsive support, warmth, negativity, withdrawal, shared positive activities) (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021)

Correlatively, according to a study conducted across 57 countries, it was found that people, who felt much lonely, more experienced financial difficulties and stress due to Covid-19 reported less relationship satisfaction, less commitment and greater difficulties in their intimate relationships (Balzarini et al., 2020). On the contrary, the first representative population-based study from Germany claimed that intimate partner relationship quality in the first five weeks of pandemic did not significantly changed in lockdown and suggested that there was no difference between pre-lockdown and lockdown measures in couples' quarreling, communication and tenderness (Sachser et al., 2021). Similarly, most couples who participated in a study by Lewandowski (2020) reported that they felt no difference in their relationships due to Covid-19. They were in conflict as typical as pre-lockdown even though their routines had changed. Ones who thought there was a change in their relationships reported that their relationship had gotten better over three times than had gotten worse. This may be a sign of that some couples are dealing with conflict better, and believing their togetherness in the future (Stanley & Markman, 2020)

Comparing married, cohabitating and non-cohabitating couples during pandemic, Soares et al., (2021) suggested that not being in a relationship was a great risk factor in terms of mental health problems during Covid-19. According to the previous research, having an intimate relationship was found to be a buffer towards negative impacts on psychological health during hard times (Brock & Lawrence, 2008; Dooley et al., 2018).

Moreover, being married or cohabitating couples reported better psychological health during stay-at-home orders than non-cohabitating ones (Stanton et al., 2020). Furthermore, Rodríguez-Rey et al. (2020) suggested that a couple having an intimate relationship but not cohabitating with their partners was in a greater risk in terms of anxiety, stress and depression. They also suggested that not cohabitating partners in the context of Covid-19 could be resemble to long-distance relationship partners which was associated with more stress according to previous research (Du Bois et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Rey et al., 2020). On the other hand, in a study from Turkey, Artan et al. (2021) found that married couples showed significantly higher relationship dissatisfaction levels than non-cohabitating couples.

Examining one of the most important features of relationships, sexual behavior (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), it is evident that sexuality has an effect on people's well-being (Heiman et al., 2011). According to a study conducted with married and co-habiting couples from Turkey during pandemic, the frequency of sexual intercourse and sexual satisfaction levels were found to be declined in both sexes compare to pre-pandemic times (Karagöz et al., 2020). Similarly, a study conducted in China at the time of COVID-19 reported that overall sexual satisfaction and frequency of sexual intercourse decreased (Li et al, 2020). On the contrary, decrease in sexual intercourse was not found in a study from Italy during pandemic (Micelli et al., 2020).

1.3.1.1. Young Couples Who Are Bound to Be Apart in Covid-19

Varying psychological effects of Covid-19 has been investigating, relationship qualities of couples who were married or cohabitating has been discussing; however, according to my knowledge, there is no article available specifically about young couples who are apart and returned to family home during Covid-19. This section tries to give a comprehensive conceptualization from literature about dating couples in Covid-19, forced separation from partner, returning family home due to pandemic, loss of the lover's touch and shared environment, and its impact on well-being, and finally coping strategies of couples.

Examining about dating couples during Covid-19 pandemic, as mentioned above, stay-at-home orders and home confinement for people in an intimate relationship but not cohabitating found themselves in a long-distance relationship (Rodríguez-Rey et al., 2020) which associated with greater relational and individual stress as some studies claimed (Du Bois et., 2016). Besides, Le & Agnew (2001) suggested that couples in long distance relationships (LDR) was experiencing more difficulties on meeting their relation and individual needs than couples in geographically close relationships. They claimed that physical availability of the partner was the core of meeting relational needs such as intimacy, commitment, trust and satisfaction. Moreover, geographical distance between couples may limit their communication, reduce their interdependence and intensify uncertainty about their future relationships (Stafford, 2010). On the other hand, there is evidence that LDR couples found more devotion and more motivation to maintain their relationships with finding new adaptive behaviors (Kelmer et al., 2013; Jiang & Hancock, 2013). According to Stafford and Merolla (2007) claimed that the most challenging situation for LDR couples was their lack of face-to-face conversations. However, Jiang and Hancock (2013) admitted this argument but they found that LDR couples used more media channels, more phone calls, more instant messaging and lengthier face-to-face encounters than geographically closed relationships. These adaptive behaviors and coping

strategies to maintain relationship will be examined in "Coping Strategies" section.

While non-cohabitating couples in Covid-19 were being counted as long-distance relationships, Covid-19 is a very new challenge for these couples. They might experience immediate separation from their partner for an unexpected time period. Some young partners were forced to return family home; some of them were alone for a long time period. Examining forced separation of couples in literature, couples are forced to live apart by circumstances such as employment, academic considerations, financial issues, and national regulations either temporarily or long term (Levin, 2004; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009; Roseneil, 2006, Stoilova et al., 2014). However, while Covid-19 is a new incidence for the world, the forced separation for the couples due to pandemic has not been discussed specifically yet. About a time, couples might not predict when they unify again. Is it a long-term separation or temporal separation? When will we see each other again if strict restrictions such as ban of intercity travels continue? It may create uncertainty for the couples which have been discussed to associate with greater stress and anxiety (Karney et al., 2005). Correlatively with uncertainty, according to results of the study by Stoilova, et al., (2014) if participants' living apart situation was a new experience for them, they felt more restraint and they experienced separation more likely a risk for their relationships. Also, they had harder time to accept the separation than living apart couples for long periods of time.

1.3.1.2. Separation from the Partner

After the first suspension of education on March, 11, 2020 for three weeks in Turkey, many students went back to their families' home for a three weeks holiday. Some of them had to leave their lovers behind. It seemed to be a temporary separation for three weeks; however, spread of pandemic led to travel bans, and uncertainty for couples came in view. There is evidence that geographical separation led to increased couples' uncertainty about relationships'

futures (Stafford, 2010). In Covid-19 context, there have been many stressful issues besides the relationship future. For example, risk of contamination of loved ones was found to be the strongest predictor of fear of virus (Mertens et al., 2020). While being in an intimate relationship but not cohabitating was a threat for higher anxiety, stress and depression (Rodriguez et al., 2020), fear of health of loved ones may amplify stress, depression, anxiety and also intolerance of uncertainty (Mertens et al., 2020; Bekiroğlu, et al., 2020).

According to Aristotle, claimed in his Politics (Lord, 2003), human creatures are innately "social animals". The heart of human identity is interpersonal relationships, mainly one's attachment figures, which gives us a safe haven and secure base, such as parents, children, and romantic partners (Bowlby, 1988; Schimmenti et al., 2020). Physically separation from the romantic partner may threaten our sense of security besides the world has not been a secure place anymore (Shaver et al., 2019). Regular contact with our attachment figures' importance for affect regulation is significant in literature (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999). Constant physical proximity to attachment figures was found to be linked regulatory effects and physical separation from them may be disturbing (Hofer, 1984; Shaver et al., 2019). According to Vormbrock (1993) found that especially long-term separations were related to behavioral and psychological dysfunctioning in terms of increased anxiety, disturbance of sleep quality, anger, depression.

Looking into the difference between the individuals who are left behind and who left the town, even though they experience the similar loss in terms of day-to-day physical closeness, the left behind partner will more likely feel abandonment and loneliness than the partner who left the town as attachment theory would claim. However, the one who left the town may also have some challenges such as being in a different environment with different people, sleeping in a different bed and experiencing different daily routines (Diamond et al., 2008).

Separation from partner may have some costs such as losing the partner's touch. In a study, participants who physically meet each other less than once a month and lived under 250 miles apart stated that they more likely feel out of

touch and they feel themselves as a single one, not in a stable relationship (Holt & Stone, 1988; Magnuson & Norem, 1999).

1.3.1.3. Loss Due to Physical Distance

Whenever a research is done about the loss, the mourning process is always mentioned. According to Walsh (2020), “There is no love-or life-without loss. We are all mourners now, trying to guide one another as we navigate our way forward and strive to make a better world out of tragedy” (p.13). However, there is a question emerged before the mourning process: What are we mourning for? What did we lose during Covid-19 pandemic?

Major disasters have terrible effects with loss of lives and extensive disruptions (Walsh, 2007). However, Covid-19 is unique with its persistence over years and ongoing losses in each and every minute even in today in contrast to short-term disasters such as hurricanes, terror attacks with flowing effects over time (Walsh, 2020). Walsh (2020) mentioned about multiple losses during pandemic such as tragic deaths, risks for loss of loved ones, loss of physical contact, loss of hopes and dreams and sense of normalcy. We all mourn for in a sense of something but many of us experienced isolation and mourn for loss of physical contact. According to Yap et al. (2021), grief begins with separation of loved one even before the actual death.

Loss of physical touch is one of the costs of social distance (Chen et al., 2020). Touch, our fifth sense, arouses us like no other sense is able to (Montagu, 1971; Field, 2001). Touch may be of vital importance from the one’s beginning of the life to the ending; for example, the fetus experiences touch in the mother’s uterus and when born, continues to experience touch by cuddling and breastfeeding (Lagercrantz & Changeux, 2009), and then need this tactile stimulation for emotional comfort, being regulated, and showing affection throughout life (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017). Paterson (2007; p.2) explained the importance of touch in his book:

So, touch, like vision, articulates an equally rich, complex world, a world of movement and exploration, of non-verbal social communication. It is a carnal world, with its pleasures of feeling and being felt, of tasting and touching the textures of flesh and of food. And equally it is a profound world of philosophical verification, of the communication of presence and empathy with others, of the co-implication of body, flesh and world (Paterson, 2007; p.2).

Examining the importance of touch in an intimate relationship, there is evidence that affectionate touch was found to be associated positively with positive mood and negatively associated with negative mood (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017). Moreover, Field (2010) suggested that romantic partners who more likely touch each other might be associated with less fighting, more intimacy and long-term relationships. Additionally, being received responsive touch is found to be significant for improvements in psychological well-being (Debrot et al., 2013).

Interestingly, Cohen et al. (2015) suggested that more frequent of affectionate touch to individuals with a common cold was found to be aid for being severely infected and they further asserted that affectionate touch was associated with reducing interpersonal conflicts; therefore, they concluded that additional touch receipt can save individuals from getting cold.

After mentioning about the cure effect of affectionate touch on risk of infection, we have been warned not to touch each other for reducing the risk of Covid-19 for almost two years. While people experience limited contact and interactions with the world due to pandemic restrictions, Sigley (2020) claimed that people's emotional states get worse and the social part of self deteriorates due to the inability to make an impression onto world; thus, feeling alienation came into view. During these hard times, touch known as an important regulator for emotional times (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017), is forbidden. Therefore, feeling alienation amplifies (Sigley, 2020).

Many people have started to live their lives at their houses completely. People have to find new environments and learn to live in Zoom meetings, Google meetings, Skype, Face-time so on and so forth. Unsurprisingly, Statistics in US by Statista (2021) showed that internet usage rates of individuals have increased

compared to the pre-pandemic period. Besides the positive effects of compensation effect of online platforms (Wiyono et al., 2021), living behind the scene does not help to fill the "touch absence" but leads two-dimensionality and has a negative impact on authenticity (Sigley, 2020).

Due to pandemic restrictions, in addition to "absence of touch"; unable to be in the shared space anymore, which people interact with their loved ones synchronically, may be an issue for couples. Screen has become people's new shared environment (Sigley, 2020). Even though there has been no article available-according to the researcher knowledge- for loss of shared space for couples in Covid-19, according to a a study conducted with students and teachers after closure of universities in Canada (VanLeeuwen et al., 2021), participants mentioned about their loss of shared space- their university- and its results such as feelings like never-ending repetitiveness.

1.3.1.4. Relational Turbulence Theory

After mentioning about many challenges and exposing to changes for non-cohabitating young couples due to pandemic and since Covid-19 itself has been a huge transition and led people to experience unstable times (Goodboy et al., 2021), it is important to mention about Relational Turbulence Theory in which Solomon et al. (2016) explained, "a transition in an interpersonal relationship is a period of discontinuity between times of relative stability, during which individuals adapt to changing roles, identities, and circumstances" (p. 510).

Knobloch and Theiss (2010) defined relational turbulence as amplified emotional reactivity and claimed that the most significant reasons for relational turbulence were relational uncertainty and partner interference. Partners who experience high relational uncertainty about the definition and nature of the relationship use less relationship maintenance strategies (Dainton & Aylor, 2001), and partners experience less turbulence in the situation of high facilitation and low interference (Goodboy et al., 2021). According to Knobloch andTheiss (2010), times of transitions are one of the predictors of relational turbulence. Ellis and

Ledbetter (2015) mentioned about long-distance couples' increased relational turbulence due to the transition of reunion and separation continually. In the context of Covid-19, dating couples, who were geographically separated due to the restrictions, Goodboy et al. (2021) claimed that both partner facilitation and interference decreased, thus, the buffering effect of partner facilitation lost its influence and could not be realized even though partner interference diminished, and additionally, they found that interdependence between partners decreased due to the external stressors during Covid-19 (Balzarini et al., 2020). While times of pandemic have remained uncertain, the partner facilitation and interference in terms of interdependence processes have lost its ability to explain relational turbulence (Goodboy et al., 2021).

1.4. RESILIENCE AND COPING STRATEGIES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

According to Walsh (2020), resilience is defined as "the capacity to overcome adversity" (p. 7). With Covid-19 pandemic, we globally have been through in this adversity which is the first time that we experience such extended and pervasive disruptions (Polizzi et al., 2020). It should be hard to conceptualize what is going on without any experiences bearing a resemblance to Covid-19 before (Walsh, 2020). Kira et al. (2021) claimed that Covid-19 pandemic run upside down the traditional coping strategies which involve need for social support (Halbesleben, 2006). Social isolation, the sign of Covid-19, may cause separation of people from their meaningful environment (Galea et al., 2020; Bowen, 2021). Due to this apartness, maintaining resilience may be strained (Polizzi et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic "started tearing at the fabric of our most basic methods of coping and calls for new ways of adapting to and thinking about the crisis" (Horesh & Brown, 2020, p. 332). Examining the current literature about coping strategies to adapt the new normal Fraenkel and Cho (2020) offered taxonomy to strengthen coping and resilience; these are "Reaching Up, Down, In and Around" (p.2). (Up): In brief, they suggested that people should

re-examine and reflect their higher values to realize their expectations from life and their relationships, and to seek a broader meaning to create a space for new alternatives; (Down): As a broader version of "Up", they suggested that pandemic may be a chance to reattach with the live environment which is the core of the survival; basically they recommended people to see the nature as a source for coping; (In): They suggested families and couples engage in their lives more deeply and people should see this as an opportunity to enhance communication and grow as a relational unit; and finally, (Around): they suggested that people need to nurture their environment more than ever and expand the capacity to see people not just one-dimensional but more complex; as systemic beings.

Looking into the couples' coping strategies examined in literature, Nuru and Bruess (2021) suggested wefulness practices, such purposive communications in which couples could create a shared insight about their external realities, for married or cohabitating couples to deal with challenges of pandemic in their qualitative based study. They found four suprathemes which were "cultivating relational consciousness, negotiating wefulness amidst challenge, accepting life on life's terms, and inviting challenge as opportunity for growth (p. 2847). They overall suggested that people, going through in these stressful times, should have remembered blessings, utilized little moments with each other and increased relational awareness (Nuru & Bruess, 2021). Similar to Nuru and Bruess (2021), Stanley and Markman (2020) suggested three keys for couples to protect their relationships in the times of Covid-19, these were "make it safe to connect, do your part and decide, don't slide" (p. 938). They also suggested that couples should cope with the challenges together; they can use a strategy that both agreed upon such as time-out by saying such a statement: "I will come back and we talk upon this issue (don't slide)". Coming back and talk it later is a decision, according to Stanley and Markman (2020), and prevent them from a greater conflict. Moreover, they also recommend couples to be more responsive towards their partners' needs and create a safe space for emotion connection (Stanley & Markman, 2020). Balzarini et al. (2020) conducted a study about perceived partner responsiveness' buffering function in the face of Covid-19 related

stressors. They found that having a responsive partner, who understand, validate and care for their partners, had a significant buffering effect from external stressors' aversive effects and low relationship quality (Balzarini et al., 2020). According to a Turkish study by Genç et al. (2021), regardless of the couple status (married, co-habitating or dating), using dyadic coping strategies (e.g. couples' cooperative efforts for communication, emotional support, and encountering the difficulties together) defined by Bodenmann (2005), was found to be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction.

Spending quality time with each other is one of the most important key factors for couples (Treter et al., 2021; Stanley & Markman, 2020; Hudson, Lucas & Donnellan, 2020). Treter et al. (2020) suggested couples to preserve meaningful and positive time together in the face of difficult times due to Covid-19. They also recommend couples and couple therapists to differentiate between genuine effort to connect (preparing meals together, going for a walk and sharing the daily experiences) and automatic togetherness (sitting together but on phones, automatically going for shopping etc.). Moreover, protection of together time from negativity is also necessary (Treter et al., 2021). Like Stanley and Markman (2020), Treter and his colleagues (2021) suggested "Time-Out" to create a space for relaxation when negativity increased. Even though dyadic coping is important for diminishing the aversive effects, setting boundaries and one's alone quality times also matters (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2022). According to the studies conducted during Covid-19, some participants reported that reduced time spending has a negative effect on connection but some reported that lack of personal space and too much togetherness had a negative effect on autonomy (Evans et al., 2020; Günther-Belet al., 2020). Feeney and Fitzgerald (2022) suggested balancing these tensions by reframing autonomy as an opportunity for re-examined the importance of self-space and connection as an opportunity for doing novel and enjoyable things.

While spending quality time together, connection, wefulness are vital for couples, couples bound to be apart in the times of Covid-19 may have difficulties to cope with these stressful times without the physical presence for their partners

(Balzarini et al., 2020; Rodriguez-Rey et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2020). As literature suggests, non-cohabitating couples during Covid-19 can be seen as long-distance couples (Rodríguez-Rey et al., 2020).

Looking to the coping strategies of long-distance relationship in literature, making plans may be an important strategy for those experiencing long-distance relationship during these uncertain times (Sahlstein, 2006). According to a couple interview data by Sahlstein (2006), participants reported that they would like to make plans for different things to make best use of time together and construct certainty for their relationships. However, Sahlstein (2006) suggested that over planning may be destructive and cause more uncertainty for couples if they cannot accomplish their plans so the author recommended couples to reflect on their plans and recognize the good parts of uncertainty.

Furthermore, couples in long distance relationship often use "idealization" –having optimistic views about relationship's future, keeping less disagreement in mind and perceived the partner with fully positive terms-as a behavioral adaptation to reduce increased uncertainty (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Also, couples in long distance relationships more likely self-disclose and idealize their partner's self disclosures to maintain and amplify their intimacy, and decrease the effects of restricted communication (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Daydreaming has been also suggested as a coping strategy for maintaining these relationships (Holt & Stone, 1988).

During Covid-19, the importance of technological devices is undeniable. Online platforms are our new environment to contact (Sigley, 2020). Merolla (2010) mentioned about the importance of interacting via communication media for people who experience the transitions from being geographically proximal to distant. Also, Merolla (2012) found that communication during apart was linked to greater relationship quality. According to research conducted by Janning et al. (2017), video chatting was found to be the more frequent usage rather than text-messaging, phone calls and chatting on digital platforms for couples while they were apart. Hampton et al., (2017) explained it with media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) in which video calls may offer a rich environment for interaction

and synchronous presence which may ease to maintain relationship intimacy (Kolozsvari, 2015). Also, Skype using among couples was found to be only variable positively associated with relational outcomes for couples in long distance relationship (Janning et al., 2017).

Literature has also indicated that asking more personal focusing questions and self disclosing more deeply were found to be easier in computer-mediated interactions than face-to face (Boyle & O'Sullivan, 2016). The importance of self disclosure to maintain the relationship quality is evident (Jiang & Hancock, 2013), thus using modern communication tools may help enhancing relationship quality during hard times (Kafaee & Kohut, 2021).

1.5. PRESENT STUDY

As the Covid-19 pandemic spreads all over the world, there have been an increasing number of articles on Covid-19 and its psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, and trauma (Fraenkel & Cho, 2020; Song et al., 2021). Also, the number of couple interaction studies has been increasing, especially on married couples (Günther-Bel et al., 2020; Goodwin et al., 2020).

The most basic strategy to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak is to physically separate and isolate people (CDC, 2020). Being physically separated from the partner may lead to lack of affectionate touch. This term, affectionate touch, which may ease the development of high quality and intimate relations in terms of close relationship, is a key factor to reduce daily stress and stress reactivity (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017).

In this regard, physical absence of the partner in this process may be a problem for the ones who have to stay at different cities and who could not have a chance to see each other as often as it was. As to the researcher's knowledge, there is no such study both in the world and in Turkey that specifically investigates the experiences of young couples who have to stay apart during the Covid-19 pandemic qualitatively.

While we all have been through it, it is inevitable to be curious about the effects of being physically apart and people's experiences of this collective trauma. Therefore, in order to understand the unique experiences of couples who have to stay apart, qualitative research is used. In this regard, collective trauma, loss and mourning, long distance relationships literatures were used to formulate interview questions. In this regard, three research questions were determined: (a) How do couples experience the Covid-19 Pandemic when they are physically apart? (b) How has their relationship been impacted from being apart? (c) How do they cope with this separation as they go through this collective trauma? Based on the results of the interviews, beneficial examinations related to clinical implications are aim to be produced.

CHAPTER 2
METHOD

2.1. PARTICIPANTS

Participation in the study was based on volunteering. Participants between the age of 21 and 30 who define themselves as heterosexual were recruited in order to keep the data homogenous, as suggested for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.The reason to recruit between the age of 21 and 30 is that according to Roisman et al. (2005), age of 20-21 was suggested the starter of young adulthood and moreover, according to a factor analysis by Seiffge-Krenke (2003), bonded romantic love emerged as a romantic outcome at age 21. Therefore, it was determined to choose participants from age 21 to 30 which was the last year of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Other recruitment criteria are that (1) the couples should be together at least one year prior to the study, (2) they should have stayed in different cities due to the pandemic, (3) the frequency of their face-to-face meeting should be once a month at the most. The reason to recruit couples who are together at least one year prior to the study is based on previous research which examined dyadic coping (Kayser, 2006; Rusu et al., 2020) in terms of relational stability. The reason recruiting participants who were together at least one year prior to the study is that according to Standford and Merolla (2007), long distance relationship definition is where partners cannot see each other every day if they so desired. Thinking about the pandemic restrictions, since the weekly meetings were not possible, at most once a month criterion was determined. The partners joined together into the interview. 7 couples attended the study; however, one couple was excluded due to the fact that they had already been apart due to their academic purposes before the pandemic.

Table 1.

Characteristics of the Participants

Id	Age	Reason for Separation	Relation Duration	First Physical Separation Duration	Frequency of Reunion during Covid-19	Before Pandemic
F1	22		2 years	March-June (3 months)	Never-once a week-once a month	at least once a week
M1	22	Returned to Family Home				
F2	25	Returned to Family Home	2 years	March-September (6 months)	Never-cohabiting-never	at least three times a week
M2	24					
F3	25	Returned to Family Home	4 years	March-June (3 months)	Never-five weekend meeting from June to December	at least three times a week
M3	25					
F4	23	Returned to Family Home	3.5 years	March-June (3 months)	Never-cohabiting	at least all weekends
M4	27					
F5	22	Returned to Family Home	1 year and 8 months	March-June (3 months)	Never-cohabiting-never	at least three times a week
M5	21					
F6	27	Returned to Family Home	3 years and 2 months	March-June (3 months)	Never-almost everyday	almost everyday
M6	29					

Couple 1

The female partner of the couple (F1) is 22 years old and she is studying clinical psychology. She was already living with her parents in the family home before the pandemic so her accommodation did not change due to the pandemic. She claimed that she was the "anxious partner of the couple" and her partner was known as "easily adaptable" to all conditions.

The male partner of the couple (M1) is also 22 years old and he is an undergraduate student of Politics. He was living in student housing near his

university and he returned to family home when all schools were suspended on March, 13, 2020 as he thought it was a holiday for three weeks.

They have been together for two years while the interview was done. Before the pandemic, their dating routines were at least once a week. They could not meet from March to June, until intercity restrictions were released. After they reunified, they came back to the "routines like before pandemic". However, male partner returned to the family home 4 months later and their routines dropped into once a month. At interview time, male partner had returned to Istanbul and had met each other after a month of separation. They connected to the Zoom link from different houses but from the same cities.

Couple 2

The female partner of the couple (F2) is 25 years old and she is an undergraduate student of psychology and sociology who was about to graduate at the time of the interview. She was living in the university dormitory before the pandemic and she returned to the family home after all schools were suspended. She said that she could not predict that she stayed such a long time at the family home and had gone there unpreparedly. Moreover, she claimed that she was the "rationalist partner of the couple" and her partner was the "emotionalist one". He also validated this claim.

The male partner of the couple (M2) is 24 years old and he is an English teacher. However, he did not do his job and he engaged in entrepreneurship. He was staying at student housing during the pandemic, however, he was alone after his homemate returned to the family home also. He went to the family home once after restrictions were released.

The couple 2 had been together for two years at the time of the interview. They stayed apart from March to September. The female partner of the couple went to the summer house so their first reunion happened in early September. They had cohabitated from September to the last days of October, then they separated again until our interview-December 15. Before pandemic, their meeting

routine was at least three times a week and they were staying together when they met.

Couple 3

The female partner of the couple (F3) is 25 years old and she is working as a lawyer. She was living at her own house alone before the pandemic and she had returned to the family home before restrictions just started. She started to work with her father after she returned to the family home. She described herself as the "anxious one of the couple" and her partner as the "most unmoved and relaxed person in the world".

The male partner of the couple (M3) is also 25 years old and he is an intern doctor. However, when all schools were suspended, his internship was also suspended and could not work. He was already living with his family so his accommodation status did not change. He also had a health worker card, so he claimed that he did not have to change his life except that his partner was away from him.

The couple had been together for four years at the time of the interview and they were about to marry soon. They did not see each other from March to June. They said that they will see each other 5 short reunions (at most 2 days) in 8 months. Their meeting routine before the pandemic was at least 3 times a week and they stayed together mostly.

Couple 4

The female partner of the couple (F4) is 23 years old. She is an undergraduate student of chemistry teaching. She was living in a school dormitory before the pandemic. She returned to the family home when schools were suspended, and she could not even go to the market due to her mother's asthma. She defined herself as dependable to her social life and her boyfriend so she had very difficult times during the quarantine times.

The male partner of the couple (M4) is 27 years old. He is working as a corporate worker. He was already living at the family house. His working routine changed into the remote. He defined himself as “flat” and “relaxed”. He claimed that he had not been affected by restrictions and he spent his time more effectively than his partner by doing sports.

The couple had been together for three and a half years. They could not see each other for three months from March to June. Their meeting routine was that they had spent at least all weekends together and their social environment was the same. When they reunified, they did not separate again and started to cohabitate due to his parents being in summer house.

Couple 5

The female partner of the couple (F5) is 22 years old. She is a senior undergraduate student of psychology. She was living in a dormitory before the pandemic and she returned to the family home when universities were suspended. She defined herself as “the anxious one” of the couple and she defined her partner as “more relaxed and adaptable” than her. Also, she thought that she was the “introvert” one and “her partner was so much “extravert”. She also stated that she did not expect to stay apart for such a long time and go to the family home unpreparedly.

The male partner of the couple (M5) is 21 years old. He is an undergraduate student of psychology and philosophy. He is living in student housing with his housemate. He could go to the family home whenever he wanted because he and his parents are living in the same city.

The couple had been together for twenty months at the time of the interview. They could not meet from March to June. After the first reunion, they had cohabitated until July, then they seperated for one month. After that they reunited again in August and cohabitated until September. They were apart when we interviewed for one and a half months. Their dating routine before pandemic

was at least three times a week and they always stayed together whenever they met.

Couple 6

The female partner of the couple (F6) is 27 years old. She is working as a psychological counselor. She was living in her own house with her sister before the pandemic. She returned to the family home for a holiday on March 15, 2020 without knowing it would be three months. She defined herself as "the relaxed and adaptable" one whereas she defined her partner as "too much anxious".

The male partner of the couple (M6) is 29 years old. He is working as a pharmacist. He was living with his parents before the pandemic; however, being a healthy worker during the pandemic caused him to quarantine himself when he returned home and he and his family separated room by room.

The couple had been together for three years and two months at the time of the interview and they were about to marry. They stayed separate for three months from March to June. After they reunited, they did not separate again because the female partner started to work on the field, and they returned to their old routines. Their old routines were seeing each other almost everyday.

2.2. DATA COLLECTION

Following the Istanbul Bilgi University Ethics Committee's approval, convenience and snowball sampling strategies were used to recruit participants. Participation in the study was based on volunteering. The partners are interviewed together. Couple interview is a data collection method that can be used to investigate the aspects that may have an impact on the relationship. Couple interview is a method that makes it possible for the researcher to recognize each individual's interpretation of experience in their relationship, how each individual interprets the interpretation of another partner in the relationship, and how they both interpret their relationship. IPA is the best tool for couple interviews because

of the fact that it enables the researcher to understand the experiences more deeply and investigate the non-verbal cues that guide the researcher to explore more (Mahvandu-Mudzusi, 2018). Participants who fulfill the inclusion criteria will be interviewed by the PI via an online platform Zoom. Following the Ethics Committee's approval, an announcement about the study was made. The couples who want to join the study send an email to PI then consent forms were sent to both of the partners separately. After getting the informed consent (See Appendix B for the Informed Consent Form), participants were asked to answer the mail which included the consent forms: "I read, I understand and I approve". After getting the consent forms, a zoom link was sent to both partners. Due to the fact that the couples were aimed to be interviewed together, they were admitted to the Zoom platform when both of them come to the waiting room of Zoom. An oral assent was taken from both partners, and then semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The primary investigator (PI) took video records to see non-verbal cues that guide the researcher to explore more during all interviews. Demographic questions and interview questions were developed and were followed during the interviews to understand the participants' experiences related to the goals of the present research. The interview questions which include demographic questions are presented in Appendix A. Demographic questions were asked in the interview, answers were written by PI after the interview and kept in an encrypted file in the researcher's password-protected computer. The researcher kept field notes; work with a triangulated investigator who is Yudum Söylemez, the advisor of the PI. The video records were kept in an external hard drive which only the PI and her advisor can reach. Interviews were lasted between 45-80 minutes. The data is reachable only by the PI and her advisor.

2.3. DATA ANALYSIS

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA: Smith & Osborn, 2003) was used to understand the unique experiences of young couple participants who experienced being physically apart during Covid-19 pandemic. All six interviews were video-taped and then transcribed by the researcher. The transcriptions of the

interviews and the field notes was read and re-read at the beginning of coding with paying attention to reflections that were taken by the primary investigator after each interview. MAXQDA Software program was used to code each interview and to emerge the themes. Firstly, notes were written by using the memo function of the software program for all transcripts then, the codes were emerged from each segment and the taken notes. After that, most common codes were listed in terms of frequency. Most frequent codes emerged the themes. Finally, four main themes and 15 subthemes were emerged, which will be seen in the results section.

2.4. TRUSTWORTHINESS

For the purpose of reinforcing the trustworthiness of this study, several methods were used. After the first interview, the first transcript was done and it was sent to the advisor. The advisor gave some suggestions to hold a better interview. During the interviews and coding process, field notes were taken to reflect the primary investigator's own views, perspective, and observations (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Also, linguistic, contextual and descriptive comments were done while reading and re-reading the transcripts. After starting to code the first transcript, a meeting was done with the advisor and she coded some part of the first interview and making some interpretations. Based on the interpretations, some codes were changed and more clear codes were emerged. The advisor followed the whole process. After the coding process finished, the narratives of the study were discussed with the advisor and probable themes were emerged. To be able to more clear flow of the narratives, the order of the themes was changed and some of them were united. To increase the trustworthiness of the analysis, member checking was conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2013). After writing the results section, the themes were sent to the couples with their narratives and ask them if the themes captured their experiences or not. Five couples turned back and they stated that the themes were a good

indicator and valid for that period of time. They did not give any change suggestions.

2.5. THE PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR

As the primary investigator of this thesis, I am a 27-year-old woman who is a master student in Bilgi University Clinical Psychology Couple and Family Therapy Track MA programme. It was a hard decision to pick a thesis subject while Covid-19 has already started. That was the time which included so much uncertainty, fear and loneliness. It was harder to pick a subject about Covid-19 as a collective trauma while we all have to get through this disaster. I wonder, are we really on this together? What about people who cannot be together with anybody? What about people who are forced to be separated from their loved ones when they especially need them. I, as a primary investigator of this thesis, went through the separation process due to my sister who is my also housemate should return to family home for a support. Moreover, starting from the first couple months of the internship as a couple and family therapist, I realized that I was very interested to work with dyads. When there is an actual room for doing sessions, I realized I did not understand how the time flied while working with couples. I think it was about the emerged energy and liveliness of the dynamics of the couples and the enactments of experiental exercises. However, when Covid-19 came and the screen created a boundary, the experiental exercises were challenged due to the lack of a live shared space. With married couples, the adaptation process was easier because they cohabitated and their house would be their environment. However, I realized that the work with dating couples who had to stay apart and could not meet due to the restrictions, was very challenging because there were three windows of the Zoom, which was hard to control. In the stressful times, I could not have a chance to do exercises like touching or eye-to-eye regulation strategies. It was hard for me to regulate both partners from the behind of the screen. After that, I decided to work on long-distance couples which I am mostly interested and mostly challenged.

CHAPTER 3
RESULTS

To be able to deeply understand the unique experiences of couples who were bound to be apart in Covid-19 pandemic, six couple interviews were done and four super-ordinate themes emerged. To be more specific, each theme was also divided into sub-themes. According to the current study, these super-ordinate themes are: “Loss of Shared Environment”, “Adaptation to New Concepts, “Coping Strategies for the Adaptation to new Concepts” and “In the End”. The sub-themes under each theme are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Summary of Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Loss of Shared Environment	The Magic of Touch Not Being Able to be Embedded with the Physical World as a Couple Awareness of Personal Space Understanding the Value of Togetherness
Adaptation to New Concepts	Restrictiveness of Being in the Family Home Restrictiveness of the Screen Difficulty in Arguing Online Normalizing the Lack of Sexuality
Coping Strategies for Adaptation to New Concepts	Coping Together Balancing Each Other Communication of Emotions and Struggles Video Calls instead of Texting
In the End	Fire in the Snow Alienation Getting Closer

3.1. LOSS OF SHARED ENVIRONMENT

People worldwide have been experiencing feelings of loss but maybe the loss of the couple-shared environment is one of the most crucial ones. Within loss of shared environment, physical availability of the partners, the affectionate touch, their routines, enjoyable activities, and their flow of life have been restricted with quarantine. Partners have been trying to crowd their flow of life between the four walls of their homes without their vital existence of their partners. For almost all couples, it was hard to stay with losses but also they tried to see the benefits of being apart. In this section it is tried to conceptualize the "magic of touch", difficulties of "not being able to be embedded with the outside world as a couple, "benefits of being apart: "awareness of personal space", and as a result: "understanding of the value of togetherness".

3.1.1. The Magic of Touch

It was observed that all couples stated the importance of touch in their relationship so that they had hard times without their partner's touch. All participants emphasized the significance of touch as a facilitator of emotional comfort, soothing, regulation of anxiety and positive mood. In order to examine more deeply, this sub-theme is also divided into two dimensions which are "touch as safety" and "touch as joy/energy".

3.1.1.1. Touch as Safety

Emerging as one of the most dominant dimensions (mentioned by all couples), feeling safe, in other words, being contained, being regulated, being soothed, after hard times (i.e. after a fight, after a family disagreement, after a hard work day during unstable times of the pandemic) had been difficult to establish by couples without their partner's touch. For example, one woman mentioned about their fights while they were apart and how "the hug" would be a magic wand:

When we see each other face to face, we start to laugh when our eyes meet and we hug. It seems to me that it is passing. That's why I say that if he were here right now, we probably wouldn't have these discussions. But since he is far away, matters take longer. That creates a little trouble. If we were close, if we were together, maybe it would pass. We wouldn't talk much about it. We wouldn't argue. (F3)

Also, M5 stated that when they were together physically, they could coregulate each other easily. Having the partner as close to be able to touch, seeing himself through his partner's eyes helped him emotionally regulated. While emotion regulation was easy, co-regulation became easier.

When I see her physically, even though I am right, my anger suddenly subsides. (M5)

Moreover, lack of face-to-face contact and physical touch sometimes lead to emotional loadings and co-regulation might be difficult to be established in the absence of physical availability of the partner.

Normally, we rarely argue, and still we rarely argue. But right now, the arguments can take longer. The intensity of emotions can continue for a little longer because there may not be an opportunity to meet and deal with it face to face the next day. Again, you are trying to argue and come to an agreement over technological tools. (F1)

Partner's physical presence seems to be also very important for dealing with external factors such as family struggles and difficult work conditions. A woman who returned to the family home and continued to work as a psychological counselor during the pandemic said:

You miss him or you are emotionally going through a very bad period at that moment but you can't hug. I started to work as a voluntary counselor, in March, and I had clients who had covid disease. I was doing counseling voluntarily addingly to my job so this situation frankly worried me. And in these moments, I want to share with him so much or I want to cry on his shoulder. But I cannot. These parts were very difficult. I could not run away from the house and go to him. At home, I am overwhelmed by my mother or something is going on. I need him. Even it is for an hour, I want to be together and hold his hand. Not being able to do that was hard. (F6)

Her partner, who is a pharmacist, also mentioned about the relaxing effect of seeing his partner physically more than being in a phone call during his stressful work life in Covid-19:

It's really comforting to see her next to me. I'm talking about normal times. I told you yesterday, remember, for example, something is happening inside me, I am bored with something that I am living that inside of me. I don't even see her, I speak, I only hear her voice. We are talking on the phone. It relaxes me. However, looking at her face has a more positive effect on me to be able relax. (M6)

Most people mentioned how they love hugging with their partners and its absence sometimes lead to sleeping disturbances. For example, one woman participant stated:

Well, it's hard to stay physically apart (she stared at a point) and I'm a person who likes to hug. It's also a bit strange when you throw your arm in bed and you feel that it is empty. Cuddling to sleep, having someone next to you... (she started crying)-I think I'm going to cry- (she started laughing, he laughed too). When our relationship started, at the beginning, I was having a lot of sleep problems (she is crying) and he had a great

influence on me solving my sleep problem. (Returning to him) Why am I crying?... Our sleep rituals before falling in sleep..that affected all my sleep process. I had a lot of trouble with that at the beginning of the separation. Therefore, sleeping together, feeling safe, being able to see him when you turn your back... I think these are very important things. (F4)

Also, one man participant mentioned his sleeping problems while his partner was away:

Holding hands, and hugging while you sleep... Right now, I mean since the pandemic started, I could never sleep alone (joining both hands) since she has gone. I have to take something between my arms. I have a plush toy, I usually cuddle with it at or take a pillow between my arms while sleeping. I got through that period like that. This sense of touch gives me security, it feels like there's someone next to me. (M2)

3.1.1.2. Touch as Joy and Energy

All participants mentioned their love to touch. Besides the safety function of touch, all participants stated that it was hard to feel joy and energy without a partner's presence like before the pandemic. Missing the partner sometimes resulted in being lustless and experiencing emptiness. Despite trying to connect via online, it could not give the same feeling of energy of being face to face, eye to eye, knee to knee.

Being apart from him, you know, I started to feel like I couldn't find energy for other things after being apart for such a long time, besides missing him, especially in the last few weeks. Well, being constantly tired, not wanting to get out of bed, for example, of course we have work to do during the day. Sometimes we say that I wish I didn't have this job, but I'd

throw it away, watch a movie, watch a TV series, do this, do that...But now, I don't even say that. If I didn't have this job, I would just lie down. have no energy for anything. For example, I can say: I don't feel unhappy, but I don't seem to feel happy either. Well that's how I can explain it. (F5)

Her partner also stated his hopelessness and tiredness of being apart while the duration of separation is uncertain due the Covid-19 restrictions:

When I get up, I wanted to see her. However, realizing not being able to see her physically, not being able to physically touch her, or not being able to sleep together and wake up together, these were the things that wore me out. Since we couldn't see ahead, that is, there is no specific date when these things will end, it made me despair. What will happen, how long will it last. (M5)

Moreover, F1 stated the compensation function of screen in the time of Covid-19, but it creates problems in terms of liveliness.

Online meetings are also very good, and I got used to it. Both with my friends and with him. But I don't know how to explain it in words, but when we are side by side, it's such a different energy. The human mind becomes lighter. I think that technological tools make people very tired. Also, face to face communication is stronger; the human being's energy is higher. I mean physically and mentally. It has such a disadvantage, that we are so in technology during the pandemic period. (F1)

3.1.2. Not Being Ableto Be Embedded with the Physical World as A Couple

This theme was named by the couple A's sayings: *I guess we miss to be embedded with the physical world as a couple. (F1)*

All couples expressed their aspirations about being together in a vital environment and what this environment had provided them: the joy. It can be understood from their language while interviewing. They were laughing when they recognized those periods of time.

> *I miss those things hehehe, which we will define as grappling, dallying with each other at our bed. So, for example, she wakes up at 5 in the morning and says that I woke up. "Come on, get up too. Come on (she starts to smile) (he plays with his facial expressions) If I woke up, you must wake up too!" Even if it doesn't involve touching the physical result, it appeals to that emotion. I even say even them because it is not something to be preferred much (laughs). Frankly, I missed them. (M2)*

Moreover, when couple E remembers the times when they could play a game when physically together, their laughings and their longings for that joy:

> *We are a very competitive couple on the playground arena. We often play games with each other. I miss them so much because well we play chess so often, he beats me every time. Well, besides that, even though he will be against it in card games, I beat him a lot (they laugh). I miss this so much. So, it doesn't give that pleasure online. It doesn't give the pleasure of making fun of face to face. I can say I miss this. (F5)*

However, some couples expressed their sadness when they remember the days they were together. For example, M2, who was alone at home, mentioned his longings to those days when they were physically together. Being at home with all memories intensified his longings and contributed to the challenges:

> *It was difficult, so there is nothing extra that I can explain, as I said at the beginning, it was difficult, you know, those memories and things. There is a cork board where everything hangs. Tickets for the places we went,*

concert tickets, plane tickets if we went abroad, library tickets if we went to the library, everything is like that. I get up and there is a board (laughs) on the one hand, it's good to remember those memories again, but there is no one to distract the mind. In other words, there is no one who can communicate and get out of that cult world of loneliness, it was a bit difficult from that point of view. (M2)

Moreover, M3 also mentioned the memories intensified his longings and not being able to be embedded with physical world is hard:

What we spend at home with each other; you watch movies, cook together, play games, play cards, play something else (sadly speaking). When we apart, when we see something related to it, they always come to mind. It would be nice if we watched this movie together when we came across something from old photos or something. I miss them. (M3)

Almost all partners mentioned their longings for their simple shared time together physically as a couple in the flow of life. Their routines have been lost but they now reunified and they regained their routines:

What I miss the most is watching movies and series. It may be a very simple thing, but we both smoke by the way, so we make Turkish coffee or something and that's how we have a ritual. Some days when we lived together, we used to clean the house and make Turkish coffee or something for each other. We used to sit and smoke it like this, for example, I missed it. Sit like this. (showing with her body language) I mean, I never drank coffee, filter coffee or something like that because my parents never used coffee in the family house. I miss mutual coffee and cigarettes so much with him mutually. It might sound funny, though. I also miss playing games. (F4)

I think drinking together is an effect as an event. What else... in general, even such a thing was good for me. There is such a thing as rot in front of the TV. You open Survivor, you watch something empty, your brain goes blank. You do this together by emptying your mind. You know, there were things that we never noticed in our little life and that we do all the time in our daily life, but it feels good to do them again when we reunified. (M4)

For the ones that still separated, life may fit at home if they were together:

Preparing food together. Eating that meal together, um, that's the first thing that came to my mind. It would be something like this: sometimes in the morning one of us has no energy to get up at all, the other one gets up, prepares breakfast, brings it to bed, then we open a series, we watch it and it gives the energy for the whole day. Or there are meetings during the day. There are classes, but in the evening, we make pudding at work together and turn on a movie and it takes all our tiredness away. I miss them too. (M5)

3.1.3. Awareness of Personal Space

This subtheme of the "Loss of Shared Environment" super-ordinate theme can be counted as a benefit of not always being together in the shared environment. It is understandable that a shared environment may sometimes have an effect of feeling restricted, engulfing and may prevent oneself from creating one's own personal space. Five couples have mentioned awareness of personal space as a full side of the glass.

For example, M5, who depicted his relationship as respectful in terms of personal space while they were together, was trying to see the positive sides of being apart but he was sad and reported that he did not want to feel down quickly

so he felt like he should have seen the full side of glass for the possible purpose of finding motivation to continue apartness.

> *Being physically separated... (he looks around to that shared space) so if the bad part is 99 percent, the good part is maybe 1 percent. So let me start with the good side so I don't fall too quickly. So we actually know that when we're together, we shouldn't necessarily do things together. That is, if we are in the same house (looking around) and in the same room, we are aware that we do not have to do anything together at that moment. Therefore, before the pandemic, we give each other personal space. So the pandemic, maybe increased the personal time we both got to give each other. I am a person who loves to spend time alone. Maybe it had a good effect in that respect.*

However, F4, who depicted herself as dependent on her partner before the pandemic and had difficult times in terms of personal space, realized that awareness of personal space was the most significant earnings of this process. She seemed to be confident about personal space even though it was very hard, as her partner seemed to be surprised.

> *Well, I was a more dependent person. I was always willing to do almost all things together with my partner. I think I was a person who didn't give him enough free space, who gave it to myself but had difficulty in giving it to my partner. I was always aware of that, by the way. I think I was always the one who narrows him down at some point, bores and restricts him also. But in this process, by staying with myself, I can say that I understood his condition better. Getting to give that free space to him, are you going to play a game, okay, are you drinking coffee with your friends, I am here, you go yourself. It was easier for me to give this space. I think I have become more understanding, understandable and easygoing. (F4)*

Differently from participants who were mentioned above, F2, who experienced fear to be a dependable woman, had significant problems about creating her personal space even though she was willing to. She seemed to be confident and she convinced her partner as she has boundaries after they reunified again.

> *It was something that I thought about when I was in Istanbul, taking time for myself and doing things alone. I think that I will pay a little more attention to spending time with my friends in Istanbul after the pandemic. For example, I have a friend from high school; for the last 2 years, she, her husband, my partner, and I always meet together. I just need to meet up with her once in a while but we could never do that. At some point, gentlemen got involved. I think I will pay more attention to these, also about with my other friends. I can say it was a gathering from that process. I think something needs to be changed here. (F2)*

Her partner (M2) added that the balance should be established from autonomy and connectedness. When he needs connection after a long break up, he would like to spend the all time with her, but when the old routines come, something will change:

> *Before the pandemic, there was "Let's be with her for every day, let's do something every day" thing. Even if it is now, since there is a separation, I would like to do everything with her but if I know that there will be no separation after coming together, I would like to have a space too and be alone from time to time, like her.*

3.1.4. Understanding the Value of Togetherness

The pandemic brought about unexpected separation for our couples. Besides they missed each other so much and faced various challenges, all of the

six couples mentioned how happy they were together and how their shared time and environment were special for them. Absence of the partner may result in a chance of remembering how they were living such a valuable relationship. In that sense, some couples faced the pandemic as a growth chance, some thought that they should live the moment together and not procrastinate what they are willing to do. For example, F5 emphasized making spontane plans after they reunified differently from before the pandemic. Realizing the possibility of apartness and their losses, they mentioned to give more value to living in the moment.

> *I understand how precious it is to be together. Because being physically together was something that we guaranteed a lot. It was something we could say, what can separate us for 9 months, and now we have been separated for 9 months. For example, before that, it was not something we would do much to say," let's not go to class, the weather is very nice today, let's go to the princess islands". From now on, we say that whenever we can be together, we will be together. The pandemic has given us some awareness of this. (F5)*

Addingly, her partner (M5) pointed out that apartness gave them a chance for relationship growth.

> *I think, hmm, although I miss her like crazy when we were away and we didn't have any problems during our 3-month stay, the scenario where we stayed together for 9 months would have its disadvantages so that we could appreciate some things. Well, it would never turn into a situation where we would get bored of each other or we would argue all the time, but perhaps we will never experience what this situation will contribute to us in any way throughout our lives. But it has given us values that we can have throughout our lives, so I think it is quite valuable. (M5)*

Similarly, F1 gave attention to her longings to “little things” when they were together and how they were actually “great things”. She felt sad when she was thinking about what she lost but also surprised to grieve for her daily routines with her partner.

> *The feeling of missing is very intense. Depending on the mood of the day, there may be sadness. When will these days come again? Also, I am surprised. I mean, I'm actually surprised by how valuable these very little things are. When we had been living in the same city and meeting twice a week, I always used to say to him: how far we live, I wish we could see each other more often. I was complaining like that. Now I am thinking that I wish I could go out twice a week and we can have a face-to-face chat. Missing this surprises me more than it makes me sad. (F1)*

Lastly, F6 also saw this process as a chance to realize their relationship’ strength.

> *I think it was a good experience for me if I were to evaluate our relationship. Because we've never been apart and we wouldn't be able to experience this separation any other way. You know, our relationship has experienced this situation, and we have seen that it does not affect us badly, nor does it affect our love and belief in each other. That's why I think it's great that we experienced something like this. (F6)*

3.2. ADAPTATION TO NEW CONCEPTS

Thus far, it was tried to be explained and give a deep point of view of the couples’ loss experiences while they were apart. In this section, the aim is to deeply understand the shift experiences from physical to a virtual environment in terms of “restrictiveness of being in family home”, “restrictiveness of the screen”, “difficulty in arguing online”, and “normalizing the lack of sexuality”.

3.2.1. Restrictiveness of Being in Family Home

From six couples, at least one partner returned to the family home at the time of school closure on March 13, 2020. Looking into more detail who went to the family home: M1, F2, F3, F4, F5, and F6. The ones who already were living in the family house before the pandemic: F1, M3, M4, and M6. M2 and M5 were living in the student housing and they spent the four months there except M5 had sometimes gone to the family home for weekends because they were living in the same city. All participants who returned to the family home said that it was the longest stay with their family after they had left home for university. Five of six participants expressed their longings for their families and they were happy to go back. However, they thought that it was only three weeks. As times went by with uncertainty and absence of the physical presence of the partner, the other side of the coin emerged: feeling restricted in restricting times. Although they were feeling secure and seeing it as a chance to catch up with their families; changing routines, adaptation to the family rules and being the child again had some challenges for the participants. These changes due to being in the family home lead to restricted partner's sharings. Moreover, after the restrictions were released, two female participants mentioned that they could not go to meet their partner due to not being able to take their parents' allowance. Interestingly, the man who went to the family home did not mention any restricted feelings individually except M3 who was already living with his parents. Feeling uneasy while talking with partners was seemed to be peculiar to female participants. For example, F6 mentioned that she could not have an easy talk at home while they were arguing with her partner:

> *Normally, if we have a disagreement while texting, we used to talk it on the phone or we make video call. But in that period, I was with my family. I am not very comfortable in these matters. I don't like to talk when someone is with me. Umm, he was also forcing. He says, speak a little more*

comfortably, speak aloud. I have such a state of discomfort for some reason, even if my family know my relationship and they know him. But inevitably, I was not speaking comfortably there as I was at home. That was difficult. (F6)

Moreover, Couple 3 stated their restricted talks due to being in the family home.

A lot of factors are going on when you're apart. If we are texting with that stress, a solution is not easily reached. (M3)
F3: We could not talk comfortably.
M3: Here we have our family at home, both of us. At that time, there are other things we need to do, for example, they are waiting for F for dinner…

Differently, willing to spend more time with the family seemed to create a decrease of daily talk to the partner.

I mean, maybe it was because I went to my parents' house, our frequency of meeting with her online was more frequent from March to June, as if we were doing more things online together. But then it seemed to me that this frequency decreased when I went home and spent time with my little sibling. (M5)

Addingly, spending quality time with the family sometimes contributed to the loneliness of other partners. For example, M2 stated that he was feeling lonely and knew that she could not talk to him due to the fact that she was spending quality time with her parents:

There was a lot of things that she could be busy with. There was a brother, a mother, a father, a lesson, an exam, a paper... There were many things.

But I had a job. I mean, when the work was done, I had nothing to do... As she said about it, there was almost no video calling. I mean, except for that particular thing (helping her about her homework), I rarely remember that we had video calling…There was no video call, we were just texting. A message from the other side did not come from time to time. Sometimes I knew, hmm, she is in class, hmm she is writing papers, preparing for exams, or watching a movie with her family. (M2)

Lastly, returning home is associated with being a child again at home. Not being able to see the partner without parents' allowance made F5 feel angry and restricted.

We could have such discussions with my family, such as "I'm 22 years old, do you know?" So it's much more frustrating for me to be able to go to him tomorrow, but to have to stay here and away from him for reasons that don't make sense to me (like she got angry). We might not have to stay apart after June. Everyone was separated until June, everyone was in quarantine and all roads were closed. It was still very difficult to stay apart, but it was compulsory. But I can return to Istanbul now. Well...open roads, no weekend curfew etc...I have a chance to return now. Although I just talked about the healthy relationship between us (laughs), I am not in Istanbul right now due to family reasons. Unfortunately I am not in a position to say my family: "I am going to my boyfriend, I miss him so much, I will go to see him". (F5)

3.2.2. Restrictiveness of the Screen

Together with "Loss of shared environment", couples are trying to create a new environment. They are discovering new ways to continue their sharing and to maintain their relations instead of the lost environment. But speaking on the screen has its challenges and limitations. With the decrease in the diversity of the

environment, instant sharing increases, this can sometimes turn into shallow conversations and monotonous conversations. Nothing has changed, life is always the same, but there is a dilemma that sharing is necessary for a relationship.

For example, M1 emphasized the lack of a “live and mobile” environment while they were on screen. Therefore, he claimed their sharings had been affected by the restricted area of screen provided.

> *You know, when we are talking online we are just here. I'm in, she is in, there's what we're doing at that moment. Just these. It's unlikely to be anything else out of what we expected. The possibility of something else happening is related to that episode of that series. It could be a very hilarious scene. It could be Mitchel's pigeon scene in Modern Family. So we can talk about it, but it may not happen too. I miss the dynamism. That dynamism created by face-to-face meeting... I think there is an environment that we live in and it is only limited to us when we are talking online. It is much less likely that something will interact outside of us in any way and become a matter spontaneously at that moment For example, when we get together, even such a marginal person passing bycan be a conversational material for us. (M1)*

Moreover, F4, who had shared mostly the same social environment with her partner, pointed out that instant sharings had converted into daily talk about life at home and it was shallow during when they were apart. Their sharings came to a stopping point.

> *We used to talk about what we experienced during the day or we used to talk about each other. But the things we shared started to become like “what you ate today, here's what I ate today, I'm eating sunflower seed right now etc...” Those meaningless things, I think, are the things that affect the relationship. I mean I was thinking like “what we are talking*

about right now?" Why should I tell you that I'm cracking the seeds? But there was not so much to talk about anymore. (F4)

3.2.3. Difficulty in Arguing Online

Almost all couples mentioned the difficulties to argue via online platforms. They realized that especially texting was the worst connection channel while they were about to fight. Besides some couples did not find anything to fight- we know discussions and fights are sometimes beneficial to connect-, couples mentioned their durations of conflicts lasted longer than conflicts before pandemic.

For example, M6 complained that she could not express herself as she was willing to when she was away. She also experienced that arguments had been easily escalated when they were not together. Especially texting was the worst for reflection.

I'm away in the pandemic. I cannot express myself. It immediately reflects on my tone. My tone rises and he is very uncomfortable with it. I guess we just couldn't agree on that. I couldn't express myself because I'm not face to face. It's much, much harder to express myself online. Even with a single message, it can sometimes lead to a very different topic. Becuase you can't express your emotion the way you want. (F6)

Couple 3 expressed that they usually fight before pandemic but that was easy to finalize when they saw each other. However, while their daily routines were very different during the pandemic, they could not create a chance to talk via video calls or telephone calls. Therefore, texting was their only option. Their stress level was high due to their marriage process coinciding with the pandemic, disagreements increased and transition to a virtual environment were not easy for this couple.

We used to talk by texting. Talking face-to-face or talking on the phone rather than texting is more beneficial for our relationship. I have experienced it. I mean, I knew it before, but now it's clearer. I'm being tougher with the message. Maybe I write things I shouldn't write. I can be more careful when face-to-face. When I see him, I suddenly become softer. That's why I tell him a lot, if we're going to fight, let's not do it with a message. Let's talk on the phone if necessary or solve the problems face to face. (F3)

While F4 had depressive symptoms due to partner's absence during the pandemic, she could not answer the video-call offerings from their partner. Even though Couple 4 sometimes talked via video calls, M4 complained about the two dimensionality of the virtual environment and he could not reach his partner via online platforms for a long time so they used telephone calls or textings which were hard for them to understand each other.

I am not a person who can feel that I am in contact with someone by text or phone. I talk by text, but I only talk. Or I can talk on the phone, but it seems so insensitive to me. I need to see that facial expression so that I can understand what people are doing or what they mean. That's why it was like floating in space for me. Yes I know that we have been together for years, I feel good etc. But the situation that she is not with me physically created a feeling of emptiness for me. (M4)

Moreover, Couple 1, who described themselves as a couple who rarely fights, mentioned their fighting duration lasted longer before the pandemic because of the fact that there would be no chance to see each other tomorrow morning. And texting was a barrier for seeing gestures and mimics which was very significant for all our couples to see and understand the partner.

Normally, we rarely argue, and still we rarely argue. But right now, the arguments can take longer. The intensity of emotion can continue for a little longer because there may not be an opportunity to meet and deal with it face to face the next day. Again, you are trying to argue and come to an agreement over technological tools. But there was no change in the frequency of the fight. Again rare. So it's all about the miscommunication that writing gives. Because as I said, it is important to see those gestures, etc., while communicating. (F1)

3.2.4. Normalizing the Lack of Sexuality

Sex is one of the most imprtant phenemenon for couples. However, while they cannot see each other physically, their sexual routines were interrupted. Some participants mentioned their lack of sexual arousal, some mentioned the sexuality does not define their relationships so it is not a big problem, some mentioned longings for sexual routines but all mentioned it is impossible or hard to be able to sex without touching their bodies and normalized the lack of sexuality. Five couples reported they did not do anything to cope with it, but one couple used coping mechanisms like sexting, photo sharings and video calls and they reported that they did well.

Couple 1 mentioned that the absence of sex was not a big problem for them due to the fact that sexuality is not a building block for their relationship so that they did not consider it necessary. They actually did not talk about sexuality during the pandemic and they seemed nervous while talking.

M1: Of course, there is no special solution for this. We are waiting for life to return to normal. I think there is something else at this point. Since sexuality is not a main elementfor our relationship and it is not something we build our relationship on, we may be less affected than other couples in this sense. It didn't shake our relationship.
F1: Yes, we didn't mourn about it. But, we were both aware of this.

Differently, F2 experienced lack of sexual arousal during the pandemic whereas her partner was willing to continue their sexual routines via online platforms. She thought that her lack of sexual arousal might create a problem so she did self masturbating. However, they did not co-sexual routines together during the pandemic. Before they were talking about sexuality, F2 asked me if there was a question about sexuality, they could answer them via email due to the fact that she was staying in the family house during the pandemic; however, she answered the questions in a low voice, and her partner answered the questions in English.

> *I did not need self-satisfaction. For months. I thought, am I being asexual? I mean, sometimes I thought that it's going to a bad point. When we met, I think it was much better for him in that respect. Because it wasn't something I was looking for for 6 months. But I think it was something my partner was looking for a little more. That's why I have to force myself from time to time, hey you, watch a video and at least make yourself happy. Don't forget some things, so your body doesn't forget. (F2)*

Being in family home also had an effect on sexting conversations; however, online sexual activities came to this couple as an adolescent activity and they did not do anything for its absence.

> *F4: He lives with his family, I live with my family. It was not a suitable environment.*
> *M4: Yes, it was not a very suitable environment for both of us.*
> *F4: I honestly did not want to do anything at night. In other words, doing it like 13-14-15-year-old teenager...it seemed strange to me. That's why we never even proposed to each other. We never even talked about this.*

The couples 3 and 4, the sexuality talking lasted very short because they thought that there would be nothing to do if they did not see each other physically.

> *You know, its sudden interruption created a strange feeling. But there was no solution for this situation at that time. We had to meet for this, which was impossible. I was in the mode of nothing to do because there was nothing that could be done. (M4)*

> *F3: We haven't been together for quite a while. You know, there were times when I had such a desire because of such a longing.*
> *M3: So, it is the same for me. Since we couldn't meet, naturally, we didn't have such a thing, but it happened when we met. But apart from that, it is as many times as we can meet. So naturally due to the distances*.

Differently from above, couple 5 seemed to be motivated to continue their sexual routines during the pandemic and they thought that they did well. They also suggested that living in a home that respects personal space and privacy facilitated their virtual environment as a shared environment. Despite the fact that they answered the questions easily, they claimed that if I was a man as a primary investigator of this thesis, it would be hard to talk about sexuality.

> *I mean, I'm in my own house, so when such things are going to be performed, it didn't become a problem for me. Also, her family is a family that respects private areas. What is needed for this is privacy. And we both had that atmosphere. Well, apart from that, I don't know how to say (silence) (laughing), I mean I thought like why not... I think we were able to do this somehow in the online period, I think we could meet that need in a healthy way, even if it was online. (M5)*

3.3. COPING STRATEGIES FOR ADAPTATION TO THE NEW CONCEPTS

Couples joined this research separated at least three months and lost their daily routines. They could not see each other in a cafe, meet at the cinema or prepare dinner together. They faced various challenges and they were willing to preserve their relationships. All couples seemed to be motivated to protect their relationships and they used beneficial methods to cope with the separation. All couples reported that they bore up under the pandemic together as a couple. In this theme, it will be tried to explain the couples' using strategies and coping mechanisms while they were apart with four subthemes: "Coping Together", "Communicating Emotions/Struggles", "Balancing Each Other", and "Video Calls Rather than Texting".

3.3.1. Coping Together

Being apart under difficult circumstances was experienced hardly by all couples. However, all couples emphasized that coping together and bearing up under all difficulties gave them strength to move on. It was also beneficial for feeling together in mind while they were physically apart. According to the couples," knowing each other well" and" trust in relationship" facilitates "coping together".

For example, F3, who mentioned more difficulties than other participants while she was away from her partner, said that she was relified when her partner made statements about "we". Also, planning about their future together seemed to strengthen the couple in mind and their wefulness feeling.

> *I generally like his solutions because he thinks "we can do it, we will do it, it's okay" ... feeling of us, we'll deal with it together… Sometimes we were talking about the future. Thinking the future as a couple is good for me. (F3)*

Covid-19 has brought the quarantine days. In these days, interviewed couples experienced both personal and relational difficulties such as boredom, depressive symptoms, also trying to tolerate missing the partner and staying touchless romantically which served as an emotional regulation strategy while they were together. For example, F5 emphasized that the feeling of "coping together" served her to save tolerability in stressful times.

> *The feeling that if there is a problem, we will deal with it together was an incredible thing for me. Even though I didn't cope very well, that's the reason why I didn't go crazy any more. I mean the feeling of us. (F5)*

3.3.1.1. Knowing Each Other Well

All couples claimed that they had known each other well so it was more predictable how their partner would react. Knowing possible reactions prepared a safe zone to cope with challenges more easily. While they were apart, predicting how each other feel in specific circumstances may have a positive effect on uncertain circumstances. Since the interviewed couples had not experienced such a long physical break-up, being able to predict the partner's reactions and knowing the partner's vulnerabilities may help to bear the process together and find new ways suitable for the difficult circumstances. For example, M4 stated how he had known her partner and how he found ways to make her feel his presence.

> *I know her after so many years. Well, she is usually a person who closes herself in stress. Well, if she is angry, she should experience that anger inside. … I was aware of that. However, I tried things like this to change it, you know, opening a video call and trying to open a conversation… I can say that we tried to solve it in this way, but apart from that, since we got to know each other like that, I already knew her because I already knew that she would not be able to get out of that situation unless she*

handled it in her own mind. I think it's a big factor that we've been together for a long time…Because we know how each other will feel in this situation and I know how she was feeling right there. (M4)

Addingly, M3 stated that he knew his partner's reactions to their usual discussions, and they could predict their needs in stressful times so they beared up under the pandemic and also came out strong from it.

We were able to spend 4 years together was because we knew each other well and we solved other problems in Covid easier. (M3)

3.3.1.2. TrustIn Relationship: Knowing He/She Is Always There

All couples stated that knowing he/she is always there for them is the most significant protective factor to come out strong and without injuries.

For example, F2, who experienced stressful times due to her heavy study conditions during the quarantine, stated that knowing her partner's permanent supporting presence for her was reassuring.

I always knew that he was there and I could talk to him whenever I wanted. There was someone to support me and give me trust. I never doubted that. This is a very comforting process, maybe an emotion. (F2)

Moreover, M4 stated that despite their disconnected times, trust on knowing she is there protected him from feeling upset.

Let me put it this way, the existence of her was enough for me anyway. You know, it wasn't a bothersome thing for me as I knew that we would be back to normal when this period was over. Being a little disconnected wasn't something that bothered me that much. (M4)

Lastly, the male partner of Couple 3, who experienced more arguments than other couples, stated that the sense of trust in relationships that have the power of coping protects them from injuries.

> *We realized that, actually, we have a strong relationship, but since it was not like a discovery, it was as if it had to be like this, we had to get through all of these. So I felt like we did what needed to be done, not as if we had discovered something new in this process. Even if this process takes longer, when I think about it now, there is a feeling that we can somehow overcome it anyway, you know. It didn't happen like hmm how well we got through this. It seemed like it was normal. (M3)*

3.3.2. Communicating Emotions/ Struggles

Communicating emotions and struggles and reflecting upon them are being advised by most couple therapists for couples regardless of the couple's status (e.g. married or dating, cohabitating, non-cohabitating, geographically close or geographically distant). Under the pandemic, difficult conditions with unstable times, communicating emotions and struggles has also been very useful for couples who do not know how long they will be apart. While they could not know what they got in through, reflecting emotions such as their longings for each other and being able to explain what they were feeling while arguing seemed to serve to bear up under the hard conditions.

For example, M5 stated that when they were down, they cheered each other by remembering the days they were together. Also, they shared their emotions, how they were bored from long-distance and how they missed each other so much. Regardless of the apartness, home confinement due to the pandemic was also challenging. Remembering and sharing the feelings of how they were embedded with the physical world freely before the pandemic could give them strength to go on and co-imagination can emerge a hope for future

togetherness which they will be co-present in the physical world which do not include fear of death and fear of infected the others.

> *Right now we have a problem that we have to deal with as partners. It's a problem that's troubling us both. In other words, we always support each other by sharing how much we miss each other and how uncomfortable we are with this separation. We went to Kadıköy when we reunified. Our holy place… going out on the street was awesome. Cafes and restaurants were closed. Therefore, the probability of being a risk to health from the environment was much less. And we were able to travel very comfortably. The streets were empty. That day seemed like such a therapy to us. I mean, we've been reminding each other of that thing for months, every time we are down.*

Similarly, F6 emphasized the importance of sharing longings and its soothing effect.

> *The subject is longing again. This is what we felt intensely. Sometimes you can't describe it when you try to express it with sentences that there is a longing. He sends a message about it when I least expect it, before going to bed. I sleep so peacefully. (F6)*

Also, F4 stated that communicating emotions, despite how she thought it was difficult via online, when she realized her partner was angry about something served as a function of reconciliation.

> *Obviously, these were problems that were easily resolved after we explained ourselves thoroughly. It didn't evolve into something bigger, at least I don't remember. I mean, it's not because of him, but after explaining that this situation is actually about me, not because there is something bad in our relationship. Talking over the internet is challenging. Normally, we*

are a couple that never texts. That's why I don't like texting anyone. Using emojis is a problem for me. And you write something emotionless with only one sentence and you start to think about whether he is angry with me or not. As it builds, something actually grows. However, I was able to talk to him. (turned to the partner) ... I told you, remember? Do you feel uncomfortable with it? Are you upset? Are you unhappy? You told me you were unhappy. I remember. You said you felt bad, but you explained that it wasn't that big of a deal. After being able to talk to him like that, I can say that I felt that what I had in my mind was fiction. Frankly, I tried to get rid of this thought. That would affect me badly as a snowball effect. My mind is free especially in such negative things. After I was able to talk to him about this situation, I was relieved; I was able to let it flow. (F4)

Moreover, F1 also suggested that sharing directly whatever she felt was beneficial for them to understand each other.

I try to express my feelings. I'm sorry for that, I'm angry at that. He likewise. This is how we argue and try to come to an agreement. (F1)

3.3.3. Balancing Each Other

In the context of coping mechanisms, facilitator function of the partner had been emphasized by all couples. showing support actively (e.g. consoling each other tirelessly, helping him/her wherever s/he needed, providing a virtual shoulder if it is a hard time) seemed to give them a back during unstable times due to the pandemic. Interestingly, for all couples, if one partner felt lustless, the other partner did not.

For example, F5 told their consoling cycles and how they cheered up each other. As mentioned above, they did not fall at the same time and one of them was ready to provide a back. Listening to the sad partner’s complainings, sadness and

hopelessness may create a space for motivation to stand up and power to move on to be the reliever one.

> *In fact, it is a situation that we have been making fun of a lot between us. We never fall at the same time. When one of us says, "My love, it is enough, how long will we be apart, I'm fed up, I'm so bored", the other gives comfort in an interesting way without falling. "My love, look, we are going through the pandemic process very healthy, look, we didn't even fight once, because of how good our relationship is." Then the thing is, 2 days later something happens to that person and he/she starts to fall a lot. This time the other is comforting. So we've never been in a messy mood as partners (laughs). We always support each other, so I can say that whose turn it is, he/she gets upset. (F5)*

Similarly, F1 pointed out that when she was upset, her partner was the one who came to mind first to be relieved.

> *Whenever I think that I have become very lonely, my life is completely confined to the house, I would like to talk to him directly. And I can talk. In this way, he is actually an important emotional resource for me. (F1)*

Moreover, M2, who was alone at his home for a long time, found the motivation in being a facilitator for her partner's hard studying conditions. Both of them utilized this helping process that is, M2 created a space for spending more time with his partner and F4 felt comforted and became to feel lucky to have such a partner:

> *F2: If I did not have you, I wouldn't have been able to get through this process so easily.*
> *M2: She didn't force me to help her. Nothing like that happened. Yes, on the one hand, I had a desire to help, but the underlying reason behind all*

of them was to create a space to spend time together. I miss the conversation with her and I have created a solution for that. Is there anything that I can help her, like the subject of the lesson or something else, at least we can maintain a communication that way.

3.3.4. Video Calls Rather Than Texting

As mentioned before, couples mostly emphasized that understanding each other in an argument was more difficult via online platforms especially via texting. Except for one couple (Couple 4), five couples increased the frequency of video calls when they wanted to connect to each other. Couples mostly realized that texting was the worst tool to have a talk without eye contact, gestures, and mimics. Increasing the frequency of video calls was not only beneficial for healthy arguments but also created a virtual shared environment that could make them feel more social beings. Interestingly, most couples utilized video calls after a certain time when they realized the duration of apartness had started to get heavy to bear as F6 suggested:

We haven't done video calling for a while. I guess it was good to be apart at that moment. I do not know. We didn't feel the need because we were seeing each other very often while we were here. But lately, yes, we've started to do this quite often. It was almost every day. (F6)

F2 also realized that if they made more video calls before reunion, they dealt with the process better. This couple suggested that alienation happened due to the lack of video calling so they started to communicate via video calls.

Right now, after returning from Istanbul, we make video calls every day, sometimes for 1-2 hours. (F2)

Moreover, F1 also mentioned the positive effect of Zoom meeting and they created a shared space to socialize together after a while when they realized they should have taken an action to protect their interdependence.

> *We increased the frequency of our online meetings. For example, this just came to mind, we started watching a series together. These things have helped us feel good. (F1)*

Lastly, Couple 3, who mentioned more about their arguments in the interview, realized clearly that increasing the frequency of video calls instead of texting would be a more favorable coping strategy and they thought that they should have started to gain this habit.

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> *M3: It's harder to solve problems when you're apart.*
> *F3: Exactly. We used to talk by texting. Talking face-to-face or talking on the phone rather than texting is more beneficial for our relationship. I have experienced it. I mean, I knew it before, but now it's clearer. I'm being tougher with the message. Maybe I write things I shouldn't write. I can be more careful when face-to-face. When I see H, I suddenly become softer. That's why I tell H a lot, if we're going to fight, let's not do it with a message. Let's talk on the phone if necessary or solve the problems face to face.*

3.4. IN THE END…

In the end, the couples had come together at least one time. When they first saw each other, nothing was usual. There had been a virus out there and their reunion was experienced under non-normal circumstances. They could not hug freely, they should have cleaned themselves. Interestingly, most couples were shocked and stated that they had hesitations about what they would do. For a time, they could not recognize their faces and experienced alienation. However, they

survived from a long separation and devastating effects of the pandemic together. In this theme, it will be tried to understand what happened at the reunion and despite all difficulties what happened to their closeness in the end.

3.4.1. Fire in the Snow

After at least three months of separation, the couples reunited for the first time under the pandemic conditions. Despite the virus having spread heavily in June, after the intercity borders had opened, they decided to meet. 4 couples mentioned that they had contradictory feelings that "what if I bring the virus with me and infect my loved one, but I missed him/her insanely, I need a hug and I am so excited".

F6 clearly and metaphorically explained what she felt before and during reunion:

> *Huh, I thought of a very good description. We, the people of Izmir, are so longing for the snow. It was as if he was the snow I had been waiting for for a very long time. But there was a fire in this snow. I wonder if it will hurt me if I touch it, when I think about the corona. I wonder if I touch, will I burn, will anything happen to me? But I want to touch that snow so much. And I am very excited about this snow, it is something very passionate, I think exactly like the snow of the people of Izmir. It was really a very passionate, very high level of emotional intensity, what I felt under "weird". My heart was beating so fast in my body. My cheeks immediately turn red, I was red from excitement. And a heart palpitation. I will never forget that moment and my excitement. (F6)*

Moreover, F4 added, her uneasiness if she had the virus and got him infected. She stated that she felt bizarre.

Since he was still staying with his family at that time and I came from outside, we first cologne our hands before hugging. And we didn't hug properly. It was a strange feeling. We had masks in our mouths. (F4)

Lastly, F5 complained about the sadness of not being able to hug at first sight. She also mentioned the fear about carrying the virus and infecting her partner.

Just that thing was very sad. This happened every moment we saw each other for the first time during the pandemic process. Since I was the person who came from the road to İstanbul and I had to disinfect myself, the first thing I do was run to the bathroom to take a shower or wash my hands. Not being able to jump and hug his neck at that moment is a very sad feeling. Because we haven't seen each other for a long time, I want to hug as soon as I see him. If I have the virus, the moment I kiss and hug, it will be like we're both infected. So, it is very sad not to be able to touch him as soon as I see him) ... I mean, I always felt like this, I shouldn't rush to go to him, because there might be a problem if I don't wash my hands properly. I was always nervous, I always experienced that uneasiness. (F5)

3.4.2. Alienation

4 couples mentioned about alienation after reunion: Couple 2, 4, 5, and 6. Loss of touch, loss of sexual intimacy, loss of shared environment and not being able to make more videocalls were their reasons for alienation feeling.

For example, the male partner of couple 2, who expressed the difficulties of loss of touch and their fewer amounts of video calling conversations, explained his shock and hesitations when he first saw her.

It was a great joy for me. But such a big…. I wouldn't mean apathy, it's not emotionlessness exactly, but I mean...there was a difference between the person I left and the person who came (laughter), I mean, there were differences in the physical sense, here was a person who had lost of weight in front of me... I thought so at that moment, that is, she became smaller a little bit. She was like a foreign person. Actually, it was a very strange feeling. We got on the bus. There was a moment that I hesitated of whether I should hold her hand or not, whether I should put my hand on her hand or not. Because I couldn't predict her reaction, as I said, she was a stranger physically. It was a tough welcoming ceremony for me. (M2)

His partner (F2) had felt samely:

We hug when we go to bed at night, but hesitantly. Should I hug? It was something like that. We're pretty alienated. The fact that we hardly ever spoke on video from March to September also had an effect. I mean, we didn't see each other. So there was a very serious alienation. I think so.

Moreover, F4 stated her pure happiness when she first saw her partner; however, she thought that he was a familiar stranger. When she was talking about that time, she seemed to be confused. Also, her partner could not remember anything from that period of time.

Alienation, you know, there was like a foreign person, but there was such a familiar feeling. Oh, and such an (clapping her hands) happiness, frankly I can't say anything else. Pure bliss. (F4)

Lastly, Couple 5 explained their alienation and how that was like a dream in both sense: shock and happiness together.

F5: It was so incredible. Unbelievably increadible, it was unbelievable in the sense of not really believing it. He was always asking: "my love, are you really here, are you here?" Before the pandemic, we had a relationship for 10-11 months. We were very surprised how we got used to not staying together in as little as 4 months, after 11 months had passed side by side. We got used to it, of course, it never felt any less difficult, but when I saw him, I didn't think I could not believe what I saw much. It's such a different feeling. Our coming together felt like something surreal, something impossible to happen. And it was a completely different feeling that it was real.

M5: Absolutely so. She told me first "Your voice, my love," She was so accustomed to hearing my voice mechanically, that it was very strange for her to even hear me calling her while she was going up the stairs from the apartment building. Well, something happened to me too. I will enter the room, I know that she is here, but when I enter, I thought the room was empty, but she is right here. Then I say how? It felt weird to me while touching her. From that point of view, it made me feel like I was in a dream.

3.4.3. Getting Closer

All participants mentioned communication difficulties while they were not physically together. Connecting via online platforms and turning them into a shared environment was not that easy. Duration of arguments increased, being soothed was challenging; however, most couples agreed that despite all challenges, their intimacy and interdependence increased.

Both partners of Couple 1 agreed their interdependence increased during these times despite their flat daily talk or escalated the frequency of arguments.

I also think our commitment has increased. I totally agree on that. However, being monotonous... Even if it is not due to us, but due to the process, I think we became monotonous. Even though we were meeting once a week before the pandemic, even though we couldn't see each other every day, we were a couple like "let's do something different, try something different." Now the pandemic has dragged us into a lot of monotony. The things we talked about can now be repeated because we are both at home 24/7 and not working at the moment. We continue our education. Things that spoken can be repeated. We are talking only through technological tools, considering the 4-month process. I honestly think it creates a monotony… Fights can take longer. The intensity of emotion can continue for a little longer because there may not be an opportunity to meet and deal with it face to face the next day. However, we see the strength of the relationship and how connected we are under all the challenges. (F1)

Moreover, despite all escalating arguments, Couple 3 stated that they protected their closeness and increased it by accepting these days would pass. Also, having a partner and its presence for an emotional resource outweighed all communication problems.

There were times when I was feeling close to him emotionally but on the one hand, why you are not with me physically. I wish we shared physically things together, I sometimes feel stressful. But he is more positive, a "we can handle it" thing relaxes me. He is also a very relax person. I am more stressed. I am a person who constantly thinks about how we will be and what we will do. But he says, it will pass…I felt he was with me from a far by listening to his solutions, point of views etc… I mean, well, there were times when I told him about situations at home that I couldn't tell anybody at home. It was good back then. I felt him with me. It was good to share with him, the arguments, fights at home, the things that I couldn't share

more, even with my brother or with others. It allowed us to get closer, even from afar. (F3)

Lastly, despite all communication difficulties, Couple 4 protected their intimacy and led to change of male partner into a more participative one. This change seemed to increase their closeness according to the female partner's happiness and gratitude tears.

M4: I don't think it changed our intimacy during three months apart. But I feel that it has changed things, at least I feel that it has changed me. I am not an overly talkative person, on the contrary, I am a more quiet person. I'm not the kind of person who can tell something easily. You know, if asked, I talk, I talk about such an amount, if a topic comes up, I open the topic. But the fact that she didn't want to talk at that time actually had a little more impact on me. I have turned into a person who constantly opens up such topics in order to do something about her, maybe just to make her enjoy herself a little more (her eyes are full of tears and she is smiling at the same time). During this period, this inevitably affected our relationship. For example, I can say that I have become a much more sharing, more talkative person than before that period.

F4: Oh yes, after what you said, it actually affects something else. It makes you feel more comfortable with me, as you don't share that much before; it makes me feel more comfortable in the same way. That's why it makes our relationship even more grounded.

CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

This qualitative study aims to investigate the experiences of couples who had to stay apart due to the pandemic restrictions, how they were impacted by being apart and what are the coping mechanisms they used while they were apart. The results of the study were gained from the experiences of six couples who had to stay apart due to the pandemic restrictions. All interviewed couples experienced at least three months of separation and they could not see each other face to face. After their reunion, two couples (C4 & C6) did not separate again; however other couples re-separated and could meet once a month at most. Since themes emerged from commonalities of couple experiences, three months separation and their first reunion experiences were thematized. Based on the findings of semi-structured interviews with the apart couples due to the pandemic, four superordinate themes were emerged: "Loss of Shared Environment", "Adaptation to New Concepts", "Coping Strategies for the Adaptation to New Concepts" and "In the End". These four super-ordinate themes and each sub-theme under them will be discussed by looking into the previous findings in terms of similarities and differences.

4.1. LOSS OF SHARED ENVIRONMENT

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the interviewed couples unexpectedly (e.g. supposedly it should have been a three weeks holiday so they had returned to the family home) separated for an uncertain time period and found themselves in a long-distance relationship. Due to separation, couples lost the partner's touch, their everyday routines, had to adapt in a new environment, and had to maintain their relationships. In the current study, most couples stated that they missed their shared activities with their partners' physical availability. According to the social baseline theory (Beckes & Coan, 2011), human brains' first need -baseline- is to be close to the social resources. Having a romantic partner is one of the most significant social resources. Loss of partner's physical availability costs loss of the

partner's touch. Touch is maybe the most common topic of daily talk during the Covid-19 pandemic, in which people have been warned not to touch anybody or anything due to the risk of infection. People had to control their distance from their loved ones to protect them. Besides the mitigating effect of physical distance on spreading of the virus, the increasing stress effect of losing touch "in a time of stress" should be discussed. In the current study, couples who had to stay apart due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were examined. All interviewed couples mentioned how touch was important for their intimacy and what touch provided them: Safety; soothing/regulation, co-regulation/reconciliation; and joy/energy.

The significance of touch in couple relationships is well studied in literature. Jakubiak and Feeney (2016) suggested that touch procures the sense of security between couples. In this study, "Touch as Safety " and its dimensions as soothing, regulation and co-regulation show similarity with the previous findings. According to Dainton et al. (1994) stated that care, affection and connection which are the keys of romantic relationships can be signalized by interpersonal touch. They also claimed that interpersonal touch is a non-verbal form of responsiveness if it is demonstrated kindly in a significant circumstance (Dainton et al., 1994). Holt-Lunstad et al. (2008) also suggested that touch was found to be a facilitator for reducing stress**.** By looking into literature, one of the findings of the current study, the difficulty of soothing/regulation without touch is inline with the previous work. The interviewed couples stated that they need their partner's touch in the stressful times to be soothed and to be relaxed. It is important to note that the interviewed couples could soothe each other in stressful times without touch with verbal support; however, it is evident that receiving physical touch from a partner reduces cortisol level more likely than verbal support **(**Ditzen et al., 2007). Moreover, touch has a buffering effect of stress (Robinson et al., 2015). Kirschbaum and Hellhammer (1994) found that cortisol level increases in response to stress. According to a daily diary study of Ditzen et al. (2008), it was found that participants showed lower cortisol levels when they received affectionate touch. Interestingly, "huggable communication device" was

developed to enhance the social support system for modern technology-based societies and the authors found a significant cortisol level decrease when one talked to the partner with this huggable communication device (Sumioka et al.,2013).

Affectionate and responsive touch is also important for co-regulation between partners. The interviewed couples stated that they had difficulty in reconciliation after an argument without physical touch. According to Fishbane (2011, p. 341), "couples regulate each other through love, touch and empathy". In the absence of physical touch, co-regulation between partners is sometimes hardly established despite love and empathy as participants stated in the current study. Moreover, Field (2010) suggested that increased the frequency of affectionate touch is negatively associated with fighting. It is meaningful for this study's findings because the couples stated that they had hard times to regulate each other while arguing in the absence of physical touch. Suffering sleeping problems without physical existence of the partner is one of the dimensions under this theme. Looking into the previous work, due to physical separation, increased sleeping problems were found for both couples in a study from Diamond et al. (2008). According to Sbarra and Hazan (2008), couple sleeping is one of the co-regulation examples in which facilitates and preserves the homeostasis of the couple system. However, both partners did not mention sleeping problems at the same time in the interview; however, the one who defined himself/herself as more anxious than the other partner emphasized difficulties to fall asleep without partner's touch with similar that Diamond et al. (2008) found that highly anxious partners demonstrated separation-related sleeping difficulties (Despite this study did not give an attachment scale to the couples, all participants had sayings about their roles in the relationship).

Discussing the other dimension of Magic of Touch; the partner's touch was stated to be necessary for joy. The interviewed couples pointed out that they were feeling lustless and in a negative mood in the absence of the partner. Looking into the previous research, it is evident that receiving affectionate touch from the partner is positively correlated with positive mood and negatively

correlated with negative mood (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017). Debrot and his colleagues (2013) also found that responsive touch is also associated with positive affect for the touched partner. While in the time of Covid-19, which led to lack of physical touch of the partners, negative feelings of participants seemed to increase and became hard to be regulated. While they were unable to come physically close to each other due to the restrictions, they stated that they lost their vital shared environment which includes the other social resources- being able to go outside together freely, stability of their routines, their leisure time together. Bitter laughter may be associated with trying to live with their longings. In the same vein, Sigman (1991) stated "Relationships are not only (re)produced through interactions between the two partners, but they also continue 'outside and apart from any particular interactional event" (p. 108). To be short, they had created a space together with many thirds; however, they lost what they were familiar with. The second sub-theme was named by a participant's words: "we, together, missed so much to be embedded in the physical world". This statement means a lot. Outside world includes their social needs which provide them with joy, as touch may also provide. In this theme, the outside world does not mean out of home, but a container. Co-presence in the real environment which includes both affectionate touch and a shared space may create joy. It can be their bedroom or their kitchen, but also going to the cinema, or walking together in the street. The point is that they missed being physically together in the vital flow of life. They missed the liveliness.

According to Lyons et al. (1995), shared leisure can be considered as a facilitator for social support and an amplifier for the ones' ability to fulfil their socio-emotional needs. While interviewing, couples were smiling and laughing bitterly when they remembered the days they were together. This finding is supported by the literature as mentioned in a study by Orthner (1975) leisure time was found to be associated with enjoyment and leisure time shared with a romantic partner was found to foster relationship satisfaction.

Discussing the second sub-theme, Awareness of Personal Space, it was stated by participants as one of the positive parts of the distance. Looking into the

literature about personal space and coupleness, Feeney and Fitzergeral (2022) suggested that holding a balance between autonomy and connection is one of the most significant challenges for couples in the time of stress. According to Kluwer et al. (2020), strong connection and high autonomy may be correlated with relationship quality. In the present study, most couples claimed that the importance of their personal space increased and they stated that awareness of personal space was one positive aspect of the apartness that they would like to carry into the future-when the separation is over. According to the studies conducted during Covid-19, physically separated couples reported that reduced time spending has a negative effect on connection (Evans et al., 2020). Interestingly, the interviewed couples in the current study mostly stated that they realized their personal space was valuable and added that it was easy to see the importance of personal space when they were apart. Besides their experienced difficulties such as lack of touch, sleep problems, lack of joy, they mostly found a way to realize the importance of being on their own and suggested that personal space relieved the relationship and met their autonomy needs. This may be because they spend too much time before the pandemic and need for autonomy and it was hard to mention when they were together. In a similar vein, Sahlstein (2004) suggested that being in a long-distance relationship provides the couple having freedoms in which they would not have while they are physically proximal. However, one participant who suggested that they argued about intimacy, care and personal space before the pandemic, mentioned her desire for connection and closeness while they were apart. She conversely complained about her partner's personal space and sometimes she felt she did not receive the support and care that she expected. This finding is consistent with research by Karantzas et al. (2022), who suggested that couples who had significant vulnerabilities before the pandemic and had restricted coping strategies can be impacted more by the external stressors based on vulnerability-stress-adaptation-model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Despite the fact that they were more aware of their personal space while they were apart, all interviewed couples stated that they realized the value of

togetherness after they faced such losses. The sense of togetherness was challenged due to the restrictions; however, the restrictions seemed to serve to evaluate their relationships and how they were lucky while they were physically together in terms of their sharings, their physical intimacy, and their sense of security. They also stated how they missed each other. According to Le et al. (2010), missing a romantic partner while geographically distant from each other may be motivated to enhance the relationship. Missing the romantic partner that motivates a couple to maintain their relationships may serve to understand the value of the physical availability of the partner in the current study.

Most couples stated that seeing their resilience in the face of apartness benefits the idea of being together. They were apart due to the pandemic restrictions and they did not expect to experience such a hard time. Feeling the partner close despite physical distance and loss of shared environment was considered a relational growth chance and aids them to realize the value of togetherness. In the same vein, Sahlstein (2004) suggested that being apart enables being together in terms of being a reminder of a good quality of relationship they had.

Most couples stated that they would make spontaneous plans and live the moment more likely before the pandemic in order to increase their physical sharings. This finding is consistent with a qualitative study about social virtual reality (VR) and long-distance relationships by Zamanifard and Freeman (2019). Participants stated that experiencing real time activities via social vr sometimes could not fill the gap which the live environment provided. It will be discussed more under the “The Adaptation to New Concepts" section.

4.2. ADAPTATION TO THE NEW CONCEPTS

In the present study, the shift experiences of couples from face-to-face to virtual was investigated with four subthemes: a) restrictiveness of being in family home, b) restrictiveness of the screen, c) difficulty in arguing online, and d) normalizing lack of sexuality.

Returning to the family home was not a predicted main topic of this thesis; however, at least one part of interviewed couples returned to the family home due to restrictions by thinking it was only a three-week holiday. All returned participants stated that a long duration stay with family had some advantages and disadvantages. To be more specific, the results focused on the impacts of being in family home on participants' couple relationships. It was shown in the results section that being in the family home restricted the sharings with the partner due to participants not feeling easy if their parents heard what they talked about. Looking into the Turkish family structure, collectivistic cultures like Turkish culture, one's behavior is more likely to be under group control so the one develops a thought on self more likely with the relationships than its own features (Triandis, 1990). According to Kağıtçıbaşı (2005), emotional relatedness and interdependency is important for families from collectivistic cultures. Therefore, fluid boundaries between family members are not considered as a boundary violation, also supported by collectivistic cultures. In the current study, feeling uneasy while talking to the partner might be a premise that the parents did not respect privacy. For adult children at home, it was perceived as boundary violation; however, engaging and controlling the sharings of couples might stem from an emotional need for the parents. In addition to this, some female participants stated that they were supposed to receive permission from their parents when they were willing to meet their partners. This restriction was not shown up for male participants. As Sunar and Fişek (2005) suggested that the Turkish culture can still be characterized as traditional, authoritarian, and patriarchal. According to Ataca (1992), there is a common tendency to tolerate the agresiveness of their sons and to give more independence to them comparing to their daugthers in Turkish culture.

Moreover, some participants stated decreased sharings and they were feeling lonely when the returned partner was spending quality time with his/her family. In a mixed method study by Sahlstein (2004), it was found as a theme in which 10% participants reported loneliness due to "Segmentation" that was the time experienced apart intensified the idea of being completely separated and

living the different lives. In the current study, some participants mentioned their loneliness and feeling less cared when the partner was not available to connect and engaged in family time.

Discussing the second sub-theme, restrictiveness of the screen is one of the most expectable findings of the current study. All participants mentioned and complained that creating a new environment in online platforms was challenging. First of all, participants stated that the "live and mobile" environment provided them novelty. Physical co-presence in the outside world decreases the flat days and increases excitement. With the shift in environment to the virtual environment was unable to provide them "the live and mobile" environment. This finding is consistent with a study by Zamanifard and Freeman (2019) who found that long distance couples yearned for a sense of co-presence with other people as a dyad which did have a vital importance for couples. Moreover, Turkle (2017) suggested that "Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone" (p. 154). This statement by Turkle (2017) shows resemblance to a statement by one of the interviewed couples in the current study: "there is only you and me; there is no possibility of any novelty except the most enjoyable scene in Modern Family".

One of the challenges of the shift in environment to virtual environment was stated by interviewed couples is the difficulty in arguing online. As mentioned above, Field (2010) claimed that partners who less physically touched each other were more likely to fight. In the absence of touch and physical co-presence, participants stated that their duration of arguments got longer than before the pandemic. In the same vein, according Knobloch & Theiss (2010), times of transitions which involve many uncertainties are one of the predictors of relational turbulence between couples who were in long distance relationships. Importantly, the time of Covid-19 is one of the biggest transition reason for couples. By trying to adapt the new circumstances brought by Covid-19 such as being in the family home, fitting all social events on the screen, relating with the romantic partner via online altered the couples' patterns of interdependece

(Solomon & Theiss, 2011). Well, it is understandable the duration of arguments got longer while adapting the all huge transitions.

In addition to the challenges of the transition, their loss of eye-to-eye contact in a live environment and loss of touch which unables co-regulation may on the stage: "*When we see each other face to face, we start to laugh when our eyes meet. Here we are hugging. It seems to me that it is passing. That's why I say this. If he were here right now, we probably wouldn't have these discussions. But since it is far away, matters take longer."* The lack of touch of the virtual environment leads to emotional carriage which the participants could not express fully. There is a boundary between them: a screen. Although they stated that the best way to argue when apart was video chats, there would be never ever like face-to-face arguing, according to their statements**.** This may cause more robotic engagements and less feeling soothed by the partner as the participants stated. Moreover, according to the interviewed participants, the worst way to argue was texting due to the lack of gestures and mimics. Jiang and Hancock (2013) suggested that people preferred high "cue multiplicity and synchronicity" and less "mobility" during conservation. Texting is a communication tool which offered less cue multiplicity and synchronicity and high mobility. They offered an adaptive strategy as increasing self-disclosure to mediate the constraints of texting which will be discussed in the Coping Strategies section.

Normalizing lack of sexuality is one of the most unexpected and surprising findings of this study. While almost every couple dynamic was somehow adapted into online platforms, maintaining sexuality was not prefered to be adapted. "Returning to the family home, feeling restricted, other things that determine the value of the relationship instead of sexuality, seeing online sexting as not mature" were the statements of couples. Although they were feeling the arousal, they did not grieve for that loss and they stated that the optimal solution was "waiting for the reunion". In the same vein, there is a study which examined the non-cohabiting partners' sexuality during physical distance in the context of Covid-19. The participants in that study stated that the lack of sexual intimacy during crisis had a very small portion in the couple dynamics (Collado et al., 2021). However,

their participants mostly used coping strategies such as video-chatting, sending nudes or texting. They concluded that the reason others who did not use online sexual tools might be the doubt about the security of online platforms (Collado et al., 2021). This may be an explanation for the couples in the current study; however, suppressing sexuality over distance may stem from being in the family home and "typical Turkish family structure": enmeshed and having blurred boundaries (Triandis, 1990; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005). Moreover, many attitudes, behaviors, and concepts associated with sexuality are socially constructed. Sexual attitudes may include general beliefs about the norms of the culture, personal decisions about when sex is acceptable, and the perceived appropriateness of certain sexual behaviors (Marks & Fraley, 2005). For example, in the Turkish culture, premarital female virginity is considered to be an important social norm that is linked to the concept of sexual purity with the honor of the woman, her family, community, and, ultimately, the state. Moreover, Askun and Ataca (2007) found that women indicated that they perceived more restrictive attitudes about sexuality by both the mother and the father compared to men. Turkish parents are said to exert strong restrictions on their daughters (Ataca, 1992; Kagitcibasi & Sunar, 1992). Therefore, it is understandable that normalizing lack of sexuality is an adaptive way in Turkish culture while at least one partner returned to the family home. Moreover, the interviewed women much said to feel decreased sexual desire; maybe it is because being a daughter again in the family home where an acceptable sexual life cannot be even thought.

4.3. COPING STRATEGIES FOR ADAPTATION TO THE NEW CONCEPTS

One of the investigated research questions of the present study was what the couples had been doing to cope with the stress of the isolation without their partners in the context of collective trauma. While almost all the world was quarantined, resilience and coping mechanisms have been started to work on by psychologists all around the world. Looking into the literature about couples'

coping mechanisms, dyadic coping mechanisms have been suggested. Before looking at dyadic coping mechanisms, it is important to give a definition of dyadic stress. Bodenmann (2005) portrayed dyadic stress as a stress in which both partners face and concern at the same time. Covid-19 pandemic induced stress (e.g. being apart in stressful times in this context for couples) can be considered as dyadic stress and couples should find strategies in order to maintain their relationships and protect from any injuries that may be caused by the apartness. Carr and Koenig-Kellas (2018) suggested the ones who feel interpersonally close to each other very likely stay resilient in the context of crisis. For holding resilience, Bodenmann's (2005) theory of dyadic coping, positive supportive dyadic coping, common dyadic coping, delegated dyadic coping and negative forms of dyadic coping can be considered. Looking into the resemblances with the current study's findings, our participants used all dyadic coping mechanisms except negative forms of dyadic coping (being hostile, setting a strict emotional distance) that Bodenmann (2005) suggested. However, one woman participant used a strategy which was holding a distance from her partner and their sharings came to the stopping point. Despite these negative forms of dyadic coping, her partner used a strategy which can be considered as positive supportive dyadic coping by validating her feelings empathetically and making more self-disclose than before the pandemic. She claimed that feeling support from the partner and seeing him making more self disclosure protected the relationship. In the same vein, Jiand and Hancock (2013) suggested that couples in long distance relationships are more likely to self-disclose in order to decrease the effects of restricted communication (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).

The fourth main theme of the current study, "Coping Strategies with the Adaptation to New Concepts", and included four sub-themes: "coping together: wefullness, communicating emotions and struggles, balancing each other and video calls rather than texting". Looking into the first subtheme; coping together is about "feeling of "we"" in the current study. Participants stated that having the idea of "we" protected them from feeling isolated and lonely. Nuru and Bruess (2021) developed "wefulness theory" for couples during challenging times.

Wefulness theory is based on relational shared consciousness in which couples create in order to be “here and now” in the same setting together in order to collectively find new ways for their relationship maintenance (Nuru & Bruess, 2021). They also did a qualitative study and found “negotiating wefulness amidst challenge” as one of their study’s supratheme. This finding is consistent with the current “coping together” finding in terms of feeling of “we” in stressful times.

Participants in the current study mostly stated that knowing each other well and knowing the partner’s emotional availability for support facilitated them to bear up under stress together. This finding shows resemblance to a study which investigated the experiences of couples who separated due to incarceration of one of the partners. The authors, De Claire et al. (2018) found that “having a special connection” which included knowing each other well, positive shared identity, and protection enabled them to cope with and maintain their relationships while physically apart.

Communicating emotions and struggles during apart is one of the subthemes of the coping mechanisms. Emotion-based conversations (such as sharings of their longings before sleep and reflection of emotions while arguing), and having dreams about the future were used by the couples mostly. According to Jiang and Hancock (2013), the adaptive increased self disclosure behavior was found to predict the intimacy of long-distance couples. According to Stafford (2005), conservations based on personal and intimate talks and self disclosure more deeply emerged more easily via online than face-to-face talk. However, some of the interviewed couples stated that some conservation became flatter and shallow than before the pandemic because there was nothing outside except the illness. This may be because the interviewed couples did not experience long-distance relationships before so that they might have difficulty adapting to the situation. However, as time went, they started to find emotional techniques like day dreaming (Holt & Stone, 1988), seeing the relationship as a container and a protector and appreciating it, sharing their longings for each other or their vulnerable feelings.

Balancing each other is one of the findings of this study. Participants stated that when one partner feels emotionally overwhelmed, the other took the responsibility and provided a back. For example, one participant stated: "*We never fall at the same time. When one of us says, enough! How long will we be apart, I'm fed up, I'm so bored", "the other gives comfort in an interesting way without falling*". Another participant said: "*I am too bored with my school work, he took all the translation issues, I wrote the articles in Turkish and he translated them. If he was not there for me, I would never ever have graduated".* These statements may be explained by Bodenmann's spill-over effect (2005) which is that one of the partners' stresses may expand through the relationship and impact all the system. In order to prevent the spill-over effects, participants should balance each other in order to hold the couple system intact.

After counting the coping mechanisms used by long distance couples during pandemic, it is important to emphasize which platforms they used as a shared environment to feel together. All couples mentioned that physical regulation was their best; however, while it was impossible, the most beneficial way to feel together was to meet via video-calls to minimize the effects of limited communication. Based on media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), Jiang and Hancock (2013) claimed that people opt for face-to-face interactions which offer high cue multiplicity (how many cues available such as facial expressions, voice tones, body gestures), high synchronicity (sharing the real time and desiring the partner's availability), and less mobility. According to this framework, video calls can be considered as the most appropriate tool to compensate for the providings of face-to-face interactions.

4.4. IN THE END…

People may think that a reunion after a long separation would be great. If reunion happened under normal circumstances, this idea would be valid; however, all interviewed couples reunited for the first time in summer, 2020- which was the time perceived as the highest risk of infection despite releasing some restrictions.

Before the reunion, they were feeling excited; however, mostly their first excitement “grumbled in the gizzard”. They could not freely enact their first meeting due to the risk of infection. They stated that they were feeling contradictory feelings like one participant said: “it was like fire in the snow”. Fear of infection and fear of infecting loved ones have been studied in literature. For example, Schimmenti et al. (2020) emphasized the fear of infection and the human need for connection under social distancing rules. They claimed that feeling potential thread from a loved one results in self protection first from the closest ones. However, the fear of not being able to protect them contradicts. “Mutually opposing fears” (p. 43) change off quickly, creating ambivalence and paralyzing. Addingly, Sigley (2020) suggested that the lack of touch of loved ones may lead to overbalance of self anxieties in the face of others; connection falters. The first moment of the reunion of the interviewed couples may be discussed with this idea. Our participants mentioned their shock and indecisiveness about what they would do. They stated their hesitations about hugging; however most of them mentioned the fear of infecting the partner. Moreover, reunion is another transition for couples who had adapted to be apart. As relation turbulence theory suggested, transitions bring many uncertainties and challenges which couples had to find new ways to adapt into the new circumstances (Solomon & Theiss, 2010). In reunion, four couples emphasized the feeling of alienation, as one of the most striking findings of the current study. They stated that as an immediate reaction, they had difficulty to recognize the partner; for example, one male partner said: “Is that you that I left six months ago?” or another female partner said: “My love, is it your voice?” “Are you really you?” As mentioned above, lack of touch may lead to disconnection (Sigley, 2020). Feelings of alienation may emerge from the physical disconnection of the interviewed couples. Despite the fact that they hold emotional connection to maintain the relationship, it would be hard to connect without physical availability of the partner (Stafford, 2005). The immediate response of alienation may also stem from usage of technological devices to communicate. Adibifar (2016) mentioned technological usage’s associations with mass alienation. Moreover, Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) asserted that forced self

isolation could be an explanation of feeling alienation. Loss of sense of community due to social isolation may obstruct being able to feel belonged which is one of the basic needs of humans and emotionally connected to the others (Glasser, 1986). Individuals in LDDRs are more likely to terminate their relationships after transitioning to proximity than while geographically separated. Moreover, extreme idealization during separation corresponds with postreunion instability. Perhaps partners' overly idealized views and feelings that they 'understand each other completely' set the stage for encountering a 'stranger' with reunion (Stanford & Merolla, 2007).

Despite all difficulties of reunion, they stated that they normalized the situation in a couple days. They stated they adapted to each other and focused on spending time together due to catching up. They stated how they missed each other and most of them stated that it was incredibly different from other meetings. The perception of stranger love converted into the most familiar one. After they adapted, they realized that they started to feel closer before the pandemic and they were being able to say: "Pandemic cannot beat us". The reasons that they mentioned were "being able to bear up together, receiving the partner's affectionate support without touch but with emotional sharings, protecting the relationship from the "spill-over effect" and balancing each other, seeing the relationship as a container in the face of the difficulties of apartness, conceptualizing the pandemic as a growth chance and seeing their relationships beat the challenging times". These findings show resemblance to the deployment cycle. In a qualitative study from Knobloch et al. (2016), a male participant who returned home from the military said: "*We have become more open. We don't keep things from each other no matter how hard it might be for the other person to hear. It has helped them understand each other's mental state*" (p. 165). In the same vein, one of the interviewed participants of the current study said: "*I have turned into a person who constantly opens up such topics in order to do something about him, maybe just to make her enjoy himself a little more. During this period, this inevitably affected our relationship. For example, I can say that I have become a much more sharing, more talkative person than before that*

period". Moreover, military couples also stated that they felt closer than before the military and appreciated what they had. The significant authors, studied in long-distance relationships and their communication dynamics, Stafford and Merolla (2007), Mietzer and Lin (2005) may have the answer. They found that long distance couples reported enhanced communication strategies and experiencing their love more romantically in order to maintain the relationship into the future (Stafford & Merolla, 2005) and gained a chance to grow their relationships by learning to connect without physical proximity and to develop trust and patience (Mietzner & Lin, 2005).

4.5. CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study aims to understand the experiences of couples who had to apart due to the pandemic restrictions. Also, it is tried to contribute to the "long-distance couple" literature in Turkey. Looking into the literature, the researchers mostly emphazied on married and dating couples living in the same city. As a result of the study, couples had challenging times while they tried to connect despite the fact that there were miles between them. "Coping Together", "Balancing Each Other", "Communication of Emotions and Struggles" and "Videocalls instead of texting" subthemes may give some suggestions to the couple and family therapists.

Especially in pandemic, many therapists started to work via Zoom, Skype or other videocalling programs. It was a new experience to adapt in online settings for most therapists especially couple and family therapists. Similar to long distance couples, therapists, also, had to connect their clients via screen. Loss of shared environment theme also includes some implications for the therapists while trying to build an emotional bond like long distance couples if they were not cohabitating. Couple therapists have to aware of different relationship patterns for one couple. The relationship between them, the relationship of the one of the partners, the relationship with the relationship between the couple and the therapists… Now, the therapists should have also one more client: The screen, the

environment that the third of them created (Mc Kenny et al., 2021; Burgoyne & Cohn, 2020). Therapist should aware of the limitations of the online therapy. Moreover, management of the conflicts might be difficult (Balzarini et al., 2020). The present study suggest that touch implicates regulation, trust and joy. Couple therapists mostly use experiental methods in order to help their clients to build secure functioning relationships (Heiden-Rootes et al., 2021). While it is impossible to do eye to eye contact and knee-to-knee contact in online setting, therapists may find new and creative ways to compensate the lack of touch. While creating new environment is challenging, safety and security may be established by an exercise such as “safe place” exercise from EMDR approach (Richardson et al., 2009). Safe place may be created for both of them by using the protocol for the individual and adapted it for the couple system and it may function as a container if they have trying times to connect via online. Previous research showed that day dreaming was found to be beneficial for couples (Holt & Stone, 1988). Co-imagination techniques can be developed and utilized for the couples which may serve them to create a secure base to connect.

Moreover, couple playfulness can be enhanced and couple play therapy techniques can beimproved for online settings. As literature suggested, playful couples are better at communicating their struggles (Hazar, 2019). Furthermore, as some couples stated that watching their favourite films online, playing games online may be recommended for long distance couples.

Uncertainty was one of the most challenging phenomena for the couples during Covid-19. Making plans for future may serve to make uncertain certain and may enhance the couple in mind (Sahlstein, 2006). Another finding of the current study is that alienation in reunion can come to the therapy setting as an issue. Increasing the frequency of video calls and reflecting on the alienation can diminish the effects of alienation.

As the current study suggesting that communicating emotions/ struggles and reflecting on them seemed to be beneficial for couples to cope with the apartness. While the emotion connection sometimes is challenging from apart, couple therapists should be aware of the importance of feelings and encourage

them to share their vulnerable emotions while arguing. Emotion Based Couple Therapy techniques can be used. Literature suggested that self disclosure is one of the coping mechanisms for the long-distance couples (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Encouraging couples to self-disclosure may be beneficial and giving evidence from the literature may serve them to be convinced about its importance. More importantly, couple therapists should understand that appreciating of couples'coping mechanisms and their efforts is valuable. And also the strength of the relationship belief should be hold and enhanced. The idealization of the partner and relationship was found to be beneficial for this study; however, too much idealization may create disappointments in reunion so that couple therapists should be there for the balance and the reality (Stafford & Merolla, 2007).

Lastly, the couple therapist should know that reflection upon the relationship is very important for couples. All participants stated that the interview served as to look at what they got through, how they dealt with and how it was possible to preserve the power of the coupleness at the end of the interview. The therapy setting functions obviously for reflection; however, teaching the couple how they can reflect upon their relationships outside of the therapy room and making it as a ritual may be benecifial.

4.6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SUGGESTIONS

This qualitative study conducted to understand the experiences of couples who had to stay apart due to Covid-19 restrictions. While the sample size was enough to investigate the experiences of couples in the light of IPA, the results of the current study cannot be generalized for the population. Couples were selected homogenously as most as possible such as the age range (the age range of the participants were from 21 to 28), being in a heterosexual relationship at least one year prior to the pandemic and the frequency of their reunion should be once a month at most. All of the couples could not see each other face-to-face at least three months due to the pandemic restrictions and their frequency of reunion was once a month; however, their duration of being able to face-to-face interactions

after the first reunion differentiated. This was the first limitation of the study. Some of them could stay longer with their partners; some of them could meet only for weekends. The further research can be conducted by controlling the spending days of meeting. Moreover, a longitudinal study can be conducted to investigate their experiences after surviving such a hard time while the pandemic has been going on.

The most common statements were stated by the participants was that how their relationships were powerful to cope with the challenges. Reflecting on the relationship in front of an unknown person may result in social desirability bias so that many possible challenges might not be expressed. Social desirability bias scale may be given to the participants and a mixed method study may be done for future research.

Moreover, this study was conducted with young adults. Future research may be done with adolescents and how they were differentiated from the adults in terms of coping mechanisms and challenges of the apartness. Moreover, the interviewed participants were at least 20 months together so that they stated they knew each other well before pandemic. However, it might be interesting to investigate the couples who started to date just before the pandemic and had to stay apart. Further studies can be done with the couples who were fresh lovers just before the pandemic, and still together now. It will be valuable for the literature to investigate how fresh couples' adaptation to the stressful times while trying to know each other. Also, further research can be conducted by different sexual orientated couples, race and ethnicity.

In this study, any attachment inventories were not given to the participants. Despite the fact that they introduced themselves like anxious or avoidant, it would be scientifically clear to give adult attachment inventory or make partner attachment interview before the questions as a future suggestion. It would be beneficial to understand the experiences under the stressful times which the attachment styles manifest itself. Further research can be done with the base of attachment theory.

Since the interviews were conducted via online platforms, the restrictiveness of the online had been experienced. The interviews were conducted via Zoom. However, when there are three people on the meeting, the time duration of the meeting limited to 40 minutes. The duration of the interviews were about 70-80 minutes so that some participants might feel like interrupted. As a future direction, upper level Zoom may be downloaded.

The last limitation of the current study was the questions about sexuality. While it might be hard to talk about sexuality in front of an unknown person, the other limitation for the participants was being in the family home. Some participants answered the questions in English, some of them talked in a low voice. Maybe the sexuality questions were sent to the participants via e-mail in a locked file for the security reasons.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHICS AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographics:

How old are you?

What are your educational backgrounds?

How long have you been together?

How long have you been apart?

How many times that you had a chance to meet again?

What is the frequency that you experience reunion?

Interview Questions

1.How are you experiencing this Covid-19 pandemic? What does it mean to you?

2. Are there any differences in your ways of experiencing Covid-19?

3. How do you experience Covid-19 as a couple?

4. What are good and bad sides of being physically away from each other? What do you miss the most about being physically together?

5. What will you have experienced differently if you have been together physically during this time?

6. How was your relationship affected by this experience? (can you give an example after each question)

a. How has your intimacy been affected? Can you give an example?

b. How have your sharing thoughts and ideas been affected? Can you give an example?

c. How has your sexual life been affected? Can you give an example?

d. How has your ways of resolving conflict affected? Have you ever fought? Can you give an example? How was it different than before Covid-19?

7. How have you been dealing with this process together? Could you use each other as a source for your emotional well-being? Can you give an example?

8. What did you learn about each other and your relationship during this time? What would you like to continue doing when you get back together? Can you give an example?

9. If you had a chance to be physically together, how was the experience when you met after a period of time?

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

AraştırmanınYürütüldüğü Kurum	İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi
Araştırmanın Adı	**Covid-19 Pandemisi Sürecinde Ayrı Kalmak Zorunda Kalmış Çiftlerin Deneyimlerinin Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analizi**
Araştırmacının Adı	**Gülşah Gülebakan**
Araştırmacının E-mail Adresi	
Araştırmanın Danışmanı	**Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Yudum Söylemez**
Danışmanın E-mail Adresi	

Bu araştırma, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Klinik Psikoloji Yüksek Lisans Programı öğrencisi Gülşah Gülebakan tarafından Dr.Öğretim Üyesi Yudum Söylemez danışmanlığında yürütülmektedir. Bu araştırmanın amacı Covid-19 pandemisi sebebiyle ayrı kalmak zorunda kalmış çiftlerin deneyimlerini anlamaktır ve bu araştırmanın alanyazına katkı sağlaması beklenmektedir.

Bu araştırmaya katılmayı kabul ettiğiniz takdirde, yaklaşık 50 dakika sürecek bir görüşmeye katılmanız beklenecektir. Bu görüşmede Covid-19 pandemisi sebebiyle ayrı kalmak zorunda kalan çiftlerin deneyimleri konusundaki düşüncelerinizi ve gözlemlerinizi öğrenmek için sizden bazı sorulara yanıt vermeniz istenecektir. Görüşmeler, sonraki analizlerde kullanılmak üzere zoom platformu üzerinden görüntü ve ses kaydına alınacaktır.

Bu araştırma bilimsel bir amaçla yapılmakta ve katılımcı bilgilerinin gizliliği esas alınmaktadır. Verdiğiniz tüm bilgiler gizli tutulacaktır. Ses kayıtları araştırma süresince yalnızca araştırmacının ve danışmanının erişimi olan bir harici bellekte muhafaza edilecek, araştırma sona erdiğinde silinecektir. Araştırma bulgularının sunumu ve raporlamasında kişi isimleri kullanılmayacak, elde edilen bilgiler toplu olarak değerlendirilecek ve bilimsel yayınlarda kullanılacaktır.

Bu araştırmaya katılmak tamamen isteğe bağlıdır. Görüşmeye katılmanın üzerinizde herhangi bir olumsuzetki yaratması beklenmemektedir. Ancak görüşme sırasında yanıt vermek istemediğiniz, size kendinizi rahatsız hissettiren sorular olursa bu soruları yanıtlamadan geçebilirsiniz. Görüşme sırasında dilediğiniz

zaman kaydın durdurulmasını isteyebilirsiniz. Görüşme başlamadan önce, görüşme sırasında veya sonrasında dilediğiniz zaman soru sorabilirsiniz. Katılmayı kabul ettiğiniz takdirde çalışmanın herhangi bir aşamasında herhangi bir sebep göstermeden araştırmadan çekilme hakkına sahipsiniz. Araştırmadan çekildiğiniz durumda verdiğiniz bilgiler değerlendirmeye alınmayacaktır.

Görüşmenizin sonuçları, araştırma sonlandırılmadan önce gözden geçirmeniz için sizinle e-mail yoluyla paylaşılacak ve geri bildiriminiz doğrultusunda gerekli değişiklikler yapılacaktır. Burada amaç, sizin görüşlerinizin ve deneyimlerinizin en doğru şekilde anlaşılmasını sağlamaktır.

Araştırmayla ilgili bilgi almak, soru sormak veya yorumlarınızı paylaşmak isterseniz, araştırmacı Gülşah Gülebakan ile xxx adresinden iletişime geçebilirsiniz.

Bu çalışmaya tamamen gönüllü olarak katılıyorum. Bana anlatıları ve yukarıdaki açıklamaları anladım. Çalışmaya katılmayı ve verdiğim bilgilerin bilimsel amaçlı yayınlarda kullanılmasını kabul ediyorum.

Katılımcı Adı-Soyadı:	
Tarih:	
İmza:	

ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL

Ethics Board Approval is available in the printed version of the dissertation.