

Puklek Levpuscek, Melita; Poredos, Mojca

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Difficulties in the Close Social Relationships of Slovenian Students during the Covid-19 pandemic

MELITA PUKLEK LEVPUŠČEK*¹ AND MOJCA POREDOŠ²

~ This study examined the difficulties experienced by Slovenian upper-secondary school and university students aged 18 to 25 in their close social relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic. We examined the extent of social difficulties in six domains (relationships with friends, establishing a new relationship with an intimate partner, sexuality, relationship with a current intimate partner, parental control and living with parents, and family conflict) in the pre-pandemic period and in the first two waves of the pandemic. We were also interested in whether demographic variables were related to the students' perceived social difficulties. The results showed that the severity of reported difficulties increased in all six domains during the government-imposed quarantine periods, with relationships with friends and the opportunity to establish new intimate relationships being the most affected. In addition, we found differences in the extent of perceived difficulties related to educational status, gender, intimate relationship, and change in living situations. The study offers insight into the socio-emotional life of students during a non-normative life event that educators should acknowledge.

Keywords: close social relationships, difficulties, family, friends, intimate partners, Covid-19 pandemic

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1 *Corresponding Author. Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia;
Melita.Puklek@ff.uni-lj.si.

2 Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Težave slovenskih dijakov in študentov v tesnih medosebnih odnosih med pandemijo covida-19

MELITA PUKLEK LEVPUŠČEK IN MOJCA POREDOŠ

~ V študiji sva preučevali težave v tesnih medosebnih odnosih, s katerimi so se spoprijemali slovenski dijaki in študentje, stari od 18 do 25 let, med pandemijo covida-19. Primerjali sva stopnjo težav v tesnih odnosih na področjih odnosov s prijatelji, vzpostavljanja nove partnerske zveze, spolnosti, trenutnega partnerskega odnosa, starševskega nadzora in prebivanja s starši ter družinskih konfliktov v času pred pandemijo in v prvih dveh valovih pandemije. Zanimala naju je tudi povezanost nekaterih demografskih spremenljivk z zaznanimi težavami v tesnih odnosih. Rezultati so pokazali, da se je stopnja zaznanih težav v času dveh valov pandemije povišala na vseh šestih področjih odnosov, najbolj na področju odnosov s prijatelji in vzpostavljanja nove partnerske zveze. Stopnja zaznanih težav je bila povezana tudi z izobraževalno stopnjo udeležencev, s spolom, prisotnostjo ali z odsotnostjo partnerskega razmerja in s spremembo prebivališča. Študija nudi strokovnim delavcem na področju vzgoje in izobraževanja vpogled v socialno-emocionalno življenje mladih v času nenormativnega življenjskega dogodka in omogoča razmislek o intervencijah ob podobnih dogodkih v prihodnosti.

Ključne besede: tesni medosebni odnosi, težave, družina, prijatelji, intimni partnerji, pandemija covida-19

Introduction

Establishing and maintaining close interpersonal relationships is important at all stages of development but is especially intense with regard to making commitments to others in a variety of social contexts from late adolescence through the twenties. Young people in their late teens and early twenties face three major developmental tasks associated with close interpersonal relationships: (a) the transformation of family roles and relationships and psychological individuation from parents, (b) the development of interdependent relationships with peers (mutual and lasting friendships with acceptance and respect for the independence of each in the relationship), and (c) the development of intimate partnerships (Conger, 1991; Zupančič, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic declared in March 2020 (WHO, 2020) was not only a health risk but also affected various areas of life, such as education, work, family life, and socialising. As social contact was restricted to limit the spread of new coronavirus infections, adolescents and emerging adults were at a severe disadvantage in gaining important social experiences and were, therefore, more vulnerable to developing potential problems in psychosocial functioning. Maintaining social distance also significantly altered young people's daily routines and habits, severely affecting their search for social support and communication with people with whom they did not live (Brooks et al., 2020). This study adds value to previous research on the living conditions and mental health of young people during the pandemic Covid-19 by comparing their perceptions of difficulties in close social relationships during the pre-pandemic time and during the first two waves of the pandemic.

Literature Review

Close Social Relationships in Late Teens and Early Twenties

In his theory of the developmental period between adolescence and young adulthood, Arnett (2000; 2003) describes 'emerging adulthood' (from age 18 to mid-20s) as a time of continued exploration and development of a clear identity, self-focus, a sense of being in-between, an optimistic perception of one's life goals, and the experience of life possibilities in a variety of areas, especially work and study, partnership, and worldview. Relationships with parents and friends improve in quality during this period, while romantic partnerships take on an increasingly central role in individuals' lives, providing them with the most important social support, emotional satisfaction, and experience of interdependence and shared pursuits (Collins, 2003; Fuhrman & Buhrmaister, 1992). Young people gradually individuate from their parents and are no longer under their

daily influence and supervision. The parent and adult child in emerging adulthood form a relationship between two adults (Tanner, 2006), which allows family members to develop more reciprocal interactions and greater respect for each other's personal autonomy than during adolescence (Aquilino, 2006). Emerging adults have more opportunities to satisfy their need for independent life than adolescents do. Those who move away from their parental home report fewer negative feelings towards their parents, feel more psychologically connected to them, value their parents' opinions, and report fewer conflicts with them than those who live with their parents (Arnett, 2014). However, the effect of moving away from the parental home varies between countries and cultures. Positive associations between leaving their parents' home and better psychological adaptation and more constructive relationships with parents were mainly found in samples of North American and northern and western European emerging adults (e.g., Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; Kins & Beyers, 2010; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006), while the findings in some other parts of Europe with a cultural tradition of strong and prolonged reliance on one's family did not support such an association. Emerging adults in southern and south-eastern parts of Europe who live with their parents longer have comparable rates of satisfying relationships with parents and life satisfaction than their peers who moved away from home (e.g., Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007; Mendonça & Fontaine, 2013; Zupančič et al., 2014).

Although the role of parents remains important, young people increasingly rely on social support from peers (Brauer & De Coster, 2015; Puklek Levpušček, 2006). Adolescents spend more time with peers and less with parents; high quality peer relationships and peer acceptance are among the most important predictors of socioemotional adjustment and mental health of young people (Bukowski, 2001; Waldrup, 2008). Towards the end of adolescence, romantic partners and friends become the main source of emotional support and companionship (Fuligni & Masten, 2010; Pnevmatikos & Bardos, 2014; Shulman & Kipnis, 2001). Interest in and formation of romantic/intimate relationships is a normative rite of passage for young people (Moore et al., 2012). Moreover, romantic experiences and sexual experimentation in adolescence and the early twenties provide the foundation for building personal preferences for emotional and physical intimacy that later lead to more mature romantic relationships and sexual behaviours (van de Bongardt et al., 2015).

The Impact of Social Isolation on Young People due to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Social isolation due to the Covid-19 pandemic brought many difficulties for young people in accomplishing social developmental tasks. Instead of

expanding peer relationships outside of the family and practising independent life by moving away from the parental home, young people's social space became confined to the home environment, and their personal contacts were limited to family members, while social contacts with friends and romantic partners often remained only virtual (Power et al., 2020). Young people had to find new ways to maintain relationships with friends, intimate partners, and other relatives, mostly using virtual communication tools such as video conferencing, social media, phone calls, and text messaging. Limited research on the social and emotional lives of children and young people conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the negative psychosocial effects of the pandemic: children and youth became more passive during quarantine; they slept longer, were less physically active, and spent more time in front of their computers. Furthermore, the level of emotional problems increased with the prolongation of quarantine (Orgiles et al., 2020). Early studies conducted in China a few weeks after Covid-19 emerged reported worsening physical and mental health status and increased rates of anxiety, depression, irritability, and loneliness in youth (Jiao et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Similar symptoms of psychological distress and cognitive and emotional dysfunction were later reported by authors in other parts of the world (e.g., Power et al., 2020; Rauschenberg et al., 2020; Shanahan et al., 2020). The pandemic not only affected the mental health of young people but also disrupted protective factors for mental health under stressful conditions, such as supportive relationships with family members, friends, schoolmates, teachers, romantic partners, and others (Gruber et al., 2020; Jokić Zorkić, 2021).

The impact of physical distancing and quarantine during the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's difficulties in social lives has not been well studied. Rauschenberg et al. (2020) found that 30% of German youth aged 16–25 years felt socially isolated 'often' to 'very often' even after the most restrictive social distancing measures in the country were lifted. Lep and Zupančič (2020) examined the Covid-19-related worries that Slovenian youth have about their future. Participants were most concerned about the future global economic situation, fulfilling their study obligations, and future employment opportunities, while they had lower concerns about their friendships or partnerships. Similarly, the results of the OECD survey of 90 youth organisations from 48 countries showed that young people expressed the greatest concerns about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mental well-being, employment, disposable income, disruption to education and family relationships, and friendships³ (OECD, 2020). One of the most vulnerable groups of young people in Slovenia were students in the final

3 In descending order.

grade of upper-secondary school who were preparing for the state final exam (*Matura*). Slovenian students and their parents both emphasised a lack of personal contact with the teacher and poor communication with the teacher as the most frequent difficulties while preparing for the *Matura* in 2020 (Puklek Levpušček & Uršič, 2021). It is important to note that all the above studies were conducted during the first quarantine period, or when infection control measures were already beginning to lift in the first wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. At that time, young people's concerns focused mainly on financial, academic, and psychological well-being, and to a lesser extent on their social relationships.

The Present Study

This study examines the difficulties in close social relationships experienced by students in their late teens and early twenties during the two government-imposed closures in spring 2020 and autumn/winter 2020/21 to prevent the transmission of Covid-19. Our study aims were as follows: (a) to determine which domains of close social relationships were most affected in the first two waves of the coronavirus pandemic, (b) to compare the level of difficulties in close social relationships experienced by students in the pre-pandemic period and during the first and second waves of the coronavirus pandemic, and (c) to determine how gender, educational status, intimate relationship status, and change in living situations were related to perceived difficulties in close social contacts.

Method

Participants

The participants were 650 Slovenian upper-secondary school and university students aged between 18 and 25 years ($M = 19.5$, $SD = 1.8$). Approximately an equal number of upper-secondary school students (44.5%; $n = 289$; $M_{age} = 18.1$, $SD_{age} = 0.3$) and university students (55.5%; $n = 361$; $M_{age} = 20.6$, $SD_{age} = 1.8$) were included in the study. Among the upper-secondary school students, the majority were in their final (4th) year of school (76.5%; $n = 221$), while the others were in their 3rd year of school (23.5%; $n = 68$). Among the university students, 79.8% ($n = 288$) were enrolled in a bachelor's degree programme, while 19.1% ($n = 69$) were master's degree students; 1.1% ($n = 4$) of the university students responded by checking 'other', indicating that they were probably enrolled in a graduate year or had taken a year off between studies.

Most of the participants were women (75%; $n = 482$). We excluded seven participants who identified their gender as 'other' from further analyses of

gender differences due to their low numbers. Female university students were overrepresented in this study ($X^2(1) = 24.77; p < .001$) compared to other groups. They represented 46.2% ($n = 300$) of all participants, compared to 28.8% ($n = 187$) of female upper-secondary school students, 15.2% ($n = 99$) of male upper-secondary school students and 9.8% ($n = 64$) of male university students.

In the pre-pandemic period, most participants lived with their parents or in a shared apartment or dormitory during the week and moved to their parents' home on weekends and holidays (semi-resided with their parents). Only a minority of participants did not live with their parents (see Table 1). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the living independence of young people decreased, as 24.5% ($n = 159$) of them (mostly university students) returned to their parents' homes, while only approximately 10% of participants (9.4% in the 1st wave of the pandemic and 11.3% in the 2nd wave of the pandemic) gained or retained their living independence during the pandemic.

Table 1

Living Arrangement of the Participants in the Pre-Pandemic Period, the 1st and the 2nd Waves of the Pandemic

	Pre-pandemic time		1 st wave of pandemic		2 nd wave of pandemic	
	Upper sec. school	University students	Upper sec. school	University students	Upper sec. school	University students
	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)
Residing with parents	246 (85.1%)	186 (51.5%)	277 (95.8%)	312 (86.4%)	276 (95.5%)	301 (83.4%)
	432 (66.5%)		589 (90.6%)		577 (88.8%)	
	39 (13.5%)	156 (43.5%)	7 (2.4%)	34 (9.4%)	9 (3.1%)	35 (9.7%)
Semi-residing with parents	195 (30%)		41 (6.3%)		44 (6.8%)	
	4 (1.4%)	19 (5.3%)	5 (1.7%)	15 (4.2%)	4 (1.4%)	25 (6.9%)
	23 (3.5%)		20 (3.1%)		29 (4.5%)	
Living independently						

About one-third of upper-secondary school students ($f = 93$; 32.2%) and half of university students ($f = 177$; 49.3%) were currently in an intimate relationship. There were significantly more university students than upper-secondary school students who reported being in an intimate relationship ($X^2(2) = 19.94, p < .001$).

Instruments

Due to the lack of research on the topic of the difficulties experienced in close social relationships during the pandemic, we designed a questionnaire for the purpose of this study. The survey included information on demographics and social difficulties in the second wave of the pandemic (the current situation) and the first wave of the pandemic and the pre-pandemic period (both measured retrospectively).

The participants first reported their gender (male, female, or other), age in years, educational status (secondary school or university), and year of study. Then they reported their living situation (residing with parents, semi-residing with parents, or living independently) in the pre-pandemic period and in the two waves of the pandemic, as well as their current intimate relationship status (single, in a relationship).

Next, participants rated the extent of social difficulties they experienced in the second wave of the pandemic (2nd wave), in the first wave of the pandemic (1st wave), and in the pre-pandemic period (pre-pandemic). Participants rated the same 15 items three times. The response scales for the pre-pandemic and 1st wave were formed in the past tense (1 – *I did not experience it as a problem at all* to 5 – *I experienced it strongly as a problem*), while the response scale for the current situation (the 2nd wave) was formed in the present tense (1 – *I do not experience it as a problem at all* to 5 – *I experience it strongly as a problem*). The items described six domains of social difficulties: *Relationship with Friends* (4 items; pre-pandemic: $\alpha = .88$, 1st wave: $\alpha = .85$, 2nd wave: $\alpha = .79$; example of an item: lack of physical contact with friends), *Establishing New Relationship with Intimate Partner* (1 item: having less opportunity to establish a new intimate relationship), *Relationship with Intimate Partner* (3 items, reported only by those who were in an intimate relationship; pre-pandemic: $\alpha = .89$, 1st wave: $\alpha = .88$, 2nd wave: $\alpha = .81$; example of an item: alienation with a partner), *Sexuality* (1 item: less opportunity for sexual activity), *Parental Control and Living with Parents* (3 items, pre-pandemic: $\alpha = .87$, 1st wave: $\alpha = .90$, 2nd wave: $\alpha = .85$; example of an item: lack of privacy at home), and *Family Conflicts* (3 items, pre-pandemic: $\alpha = .75$, 1st wave: $\alpha = .78$, 2nd wave: $\alpha = .77$; example of an item: conflicts with parents).

Procedure

After receiving approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, we conducted the survey in December 2020 and early January 2021. A link to an online survey in the *ika* application was sent to teachers in upper-secondary general and vocational schools and university professors, who shared the link with their students during online lectures or they

invited students to participate in the study via e-classroom platforms, such as Moodle. Additionally, we reached out to young people by posting the invitation on various social networks.

After reading an informed consent form, telling the participants that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, and that they should be without any physical or mental impairment, participants completed the questionnaire.

After careful consideration, we decided to present the set of items to the participants in reverse chronological order (from the most recent situation to the most distant). We assumed that it would be easier for participants to recall the most recent events first. However, we present the results in chronological order to make it easier for the reader to follow. Additionally, we designed the survey in the online application so that participants answered only the items relevant to them according to their selected options in the demographic section (e.g., only participants in an intimate relationship answered the items on difficulties in the intimate relationship). On average, participants completed the survey in 10 minutes. Data were processed using the SPSS 25 statistical package.

Results

First, we calculated the descriptive statistics for the items and domains of difficulties in close social relationships for the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods and checked for the normality of distribution. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the variables were not normally distributed. Therefore, we used nonparametric tests in further analyses. We used the Friedman Test to compare the level of difficulty in close social relationships in three situations, in the pre-pandemic period and during the first and second waves of the coronavirus pandemic (Table 2 and Table 3). To reveal the association of gender, educational status, intimate relationship status, and change in living situations with perceived difficulties in close social contacts, we used the Mann-Whitney U test.

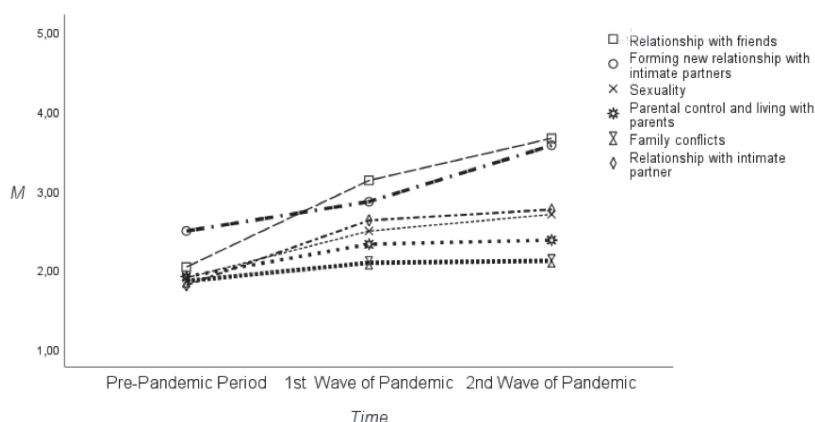
The Level of Social Difficulties in Pre-Pandemic and Pandemic Periods

We calculated the average levels of difficulty in close social relationships during the two waves of the coronavirus pandemic and the pre-pandemic period. As shown in Figure 1, the mean scores in difficulties were below the medium value of the rating scale in the six domains of participants' close social relationships during the pre-pandemic period. However, during the two waves of the pandemic, the severity of difficulties increased in all domains of close social relationships. The domain of *Relationships with Friends* was the most affected, followed by the domain *Establishing New Relationship with Intimate Partner*.

The average level of difficulty in these two domains during the two waves of the pandemic was moderate to substantial. Although the magnitude of difficulties also increased for the domains Sexuality, Parental Control and Living with Parents, Family Conflicts, and Relationship with Intimate Partner, the mean scores in these domains remained below the medium value of the rating scale during the two waves of the pandemic.

Figure 1

Social Difficulties in the Six Domains of Students' Close Social Relationships Across Three Time Points (Pre-Pandemic Period and the 1st and the 2nd Wave of the Pandemic).



Note. The scores of the six domains of difficulties in close social relationships were calculated as an average score per item. The range of the response scale was 1 to 5.

Next, we compared the level of difficulties experienced in close social relationships in the pre-pandemic period and during the first and second waves of the coronavirus pandemic by using the Friedman Test, a non-parametric test similar to repeated measures ANOVA (see Table 2). We reported the effect size in the form of Kendall's W, as recommended by Tomczak and Tomczak (2014). Post hoc analysis was done using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests (see Table 3) with a Bonferroni correction applied, resulting in a significance level set at $p < .0003$.

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for the six domains of perceived difficulties in close social relationships as reported by participants for the pre-pandemic period (T1, no restriction), the first wave of the pandemic (T2), and the second wave of the pandemic (T3). Overall, results showed that restrictive measures due to the coronavirus pandemic were strongly related to perceived social difficulties in all studied domains.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and the Results of the Friedman Test: Comparison of Difficulties in the Six Domains of Youth's Close Social Relationships Across Three Time Points.

	Pre-pandemic situation		1 st wave of pandemic		2 nd wave of pandemic		Friedman test	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	χ^2 (<i>df</i> = 2)	<i>W</i>
Relationship with Friends	2.0 (0.9)	2	3.1 (1.0)	3	3.7 (0.9)	3,8	618.94*	.48
<i>Lack of physical contact with friends</i>	2.0 (1.2)	2	3.5 (1.2)	4	3.9 (1.1)	4	619.16*	.48
<i>Alienation with friends</i>	2.1 (1.1)	2	3.1 (1.2)	3	3.4 (1.2)	4	401.93*	.31
<i>Lack of opportunity to make new friends</i>	2.0 (1.0)	2	3.0 (1.3)	3	3.7 (1.2)	4	530.00*	.41
<i>Lack of opportunity to strengthen new friendships</i>	2.0 (1.0)	2	2.9 (1.3)	3	3.6 (1.2)	4	525.39*	.40
Establishing New Relationship with Intimate Partner¹								
<i>Less opportunity to establish new intimate relationship</i>	2.5 (1.1)	2	2.9 (1.4)	3	3.6 (1.4)	4	189.07*	.26
Sexuality								
<i>Less opportunity for sexual activity</i>	1.9 (1.1)	2	2.5 (1.4)	2	2.7 (1.5)	3	223.30*	.17
Parental Control and Living with Parents	1.9 (0.9)	2	2.3 (1.2)	2	2.4 (1.1)	2,3	191.42*	.15
<i>Having more parental control</i>	2.0 (1.0)	2	2.4 (1.3)	2	2.4 (1.3)	2	134.15*	.10
<i>Living in the parental home</i>	1.8 (1.0)	2	2.2 (1.3)	2	2.2 (1.3)	2	123.02*	.10
<i>Having less privacy at home</i>	2.0 (1.1)	2	2.4 (1.3)	2	2.5 (1.3)	2	175.00*	.14
Family Conflicts	1.9 (0.8)	2	2.1 (1.0)	2	2.1 (1.0)	2	101.30*	.08
<i>Conflicts with parents</i>	2.1 (1.0)	2	2.4 (1.2)	2	2.4 (1.2)	2	84.68*	.07
<i>Conflicts with siblings</i>	1.8 (0.9)	2	2.0 (1.1)	2	2.0 (1.1)	2	67.87*	.05
<i>Conflicts among other family members</i>	1.7 (0.9)	1	1.9 (1.1)	2	1.9 (1.1)	2	78.38*	.06
Relationship with Intimate Partner²	1.8 (1.0)	1,3	2.6 (1.3)	2,3	2.8 (1.3)	2,7	123.42*	.23
<i>Having less opportunity to strengthen intimate relationship</i>	1.8 (1.0)	1	2.8 (1.5)	3	3.0 (1.5)	3	120.02*	.23
<i>Having less privacy with an intimate partner</i>	1.9 (1.1)	2	2.8 (1.5)	2,5	3.0 (1.6)	3	109.44*	.21
<i>Alienation with intimate partner</i>	1.7 (1.1)	1	2.3 (1.4)	2	2.3 (1.4)	2	56.96*	.11

Note. The table presents the items that were used for the 1st and the 2nd waves of the pandemic. The scores of the six domains of difficulties in close social relationships were calculated as an average score per item. The range of the response scale was 1 to 5.

* Statistically significant at $p < .001$.

¹ Only single participants responded to this item, $n_1 = 368$.

² Only participants in a relationship with an intimate partner responded to these items, $n_2 = 266$.

Table 3

The Results of Post Hoc Analyses Done with Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Tests (z) and Corresponding Effect Sizes (r)

	Change in difficulty from T1 to T2		Change in difficulty from T1 to T3		Change in difficulty from T2 to T3	
	z_{T1-T2}	r_{T1-T2}	z_{T1-T3}	r_{T1-T3}	z_{T2-T3}	r_{T2-T3}
Relationship with Friends	-17.02*	-.47	-20.35*	-.56	-13.59*	-.38
<i>Lack of physical contact with friends</i>	-17.22*	-.48	-19.35*	-.54	-9.40*	-.26
<i>Alienation with friends</i>	-14.09*	-.39	-16.96*	-.47	-7.18*	-.20
<i>Lack of opportunity to make new friends</i>	-13.72*	-.38	-18.53*	-.51	-12.67*	-.35
<i>Lack of opportunity to strengthen new friendships</i>	-13.52*	-.37	-18.80*	-.52	-12.19*	-.34
Establishing New Relationship with Intimate Partner¹	-4.63*	-.17	-11.58*	-.43	-9.87*	-.36
<i>Less opportunity to establish new intimate relationship</i>						
Sexuality	-10.31*	-.29	-12.82*	-.36	-4.48*	-.12
<i>Less opportunity for sexual activity</i>						
Parental Control and Living with Parents	-10.68*	-.30	-12.36*	-.34	-2.66	-
<i>Having more parental control</i>	-9.01*	-.25	-9.90*	-.27	-1.85	-
<i>Living in the parental home</i>	-8.66*	-.24	-9.57*	-.27	-1.54	-
<i>Having less privacy at home</i>	-9.90*	-.27	-11.03*	-.31	-2.42	-
Family Conflicts	-8.18*	-.23	-9.45*	-.26	-2.18	-
<i>Conflicts with parents</i>	-7.09*	-.20	-8.05*	-.22	-.84	-
<i>Conflicts with siblings</i>	-6.82*	-.19	-7.08*	-.20	-.83	-
<i>Conflicts among other family members</i>	-6.46*	-.18	-7.64*	-.21	-1.93	-
Relationship with Intimate Partner²	-8.63*	-.37	-10.11*	-.44	-2.43	-
<i>Having less opportunity to strengthen intimate relationship</i>	-8.72*	-.38	-9.75*	-.42	-1.62	-
<i>Having less privacy with an intimate partner</i>	-7.63*	-.33	-9.37*	-.41	-3.06	-
<i>Alienation with intimate partner</i>	-6.05*	-.26	-6.30*	-.27	-.53	-

Note. The table presents the items that were used for the 1st and the 2nd waves of the pandemic.

T1 – pre-pandemic time; T2 – 1st wave of pandemic; T3 – 2nd wave of pandemic.

* Statistically significant at $p < .0003$, due to Bonferroni correction.

¹ Only single participants responded to this item, $n_1 = 368$.

² Only participants in a relationship with an intimate partner responded to these items, $n_2 = 266$.

As evident from the post hoc analyses presented in Table 3, participants reported a significant increase in perceived difficulty from pre-pandemic time to the 1st wave of the pandemic, from the 1st wave of the pandemic to the 2nd wave of the pandemic, and from pre-pandemic time to the 2nd wave of the pandemic in the three domains: *Relationship with Friends*, *Establishing New*

Relationship with Intimate Partner, and *Sexuality*. The effect sizes (Cohen, 1992; Tomczak & Tomczak, 2014) were mostly medium (between .30 and .50) for all three domains.

Participants reported more intense difficulties during the 1st and 2nd waves of the pandemic compared to the time of no restrictions but there was no significant change between the two waves of the pandemic in the following domains of close relationships: *Relationship with Intimate Partner*, *Parental Control and Living with Parents*, and *Family Conflicts*. Effect sizes for the domains Parental Control and Living with Parents and Family Conflicts were predominantly small (between .10 and .30), whereas the effect size for the Relationship with Intimate Partner was predominantly of medium size (between .30 and .50; Cohen, 1992).

Furthermore, we compared the levels of specific difficulty within each of the close relationship composites across the three periods. As shown in Table 3, there were significant increases from pre-pandemic time to the second wave of the pandemic in all four perceived difficulties in the Relationship with Friends domain (lack of physical contact with friends, alienation with friends, lack of opportunity to make new friends, and lack of opportunity to strengthen new friendships). Further, during the first and second waves of the pandemic, students recognised more parental control, living in the parental home, and less privacy at home as more problematic than in the pre-pandemic period; however, their perception of these difficulties remained stable from the first to the second waves of the pandemic. Similarly, conflict with parents, conflict with siblings, and conflict among other family members increased from the pre-pandemic time to the two waves of the pandemic, but no significant differences were found between the first and the second waves of the pandemic.

Students who had an intimate relationship perceived more difficulties, such as having less opportunity to strengthen intimate relationships, having less privacy with their intimate partner, and alienation from their intimate partner in both waves of the pandemic than in the pre-pandemic time. However, their reported data did not change significantly from the first to the second waves of the pandemic.

Social Difficulties and Demographics

We further analysed how students' perceptions of social difficulties in six relationship domains at three periods were related to their educational status, gender, intimate relationship status, and their move back to the parental home during the first and/or second waves of the pandemic. Because the dependent variables did not meet the criteria for parametric tests, we used the

nonparametric equivalent Mann-Whitney's U . We reported effect size in form of an r value, as recommended by Tomczak and Tomczak (2014).

University students ($n_{UNI} = 361$) reported more intense difficulties in the *Relationship with Friends* ($U = 42396$, $z = -4.12$, $p < .001$, $r = -.16$) domain in the second wave than upper-secondary school students ($n_{HS} = 289$) did. Specifically, university students reported more difficulties due to lack of physical contact with friends ($U = 46686$, $z = -2.42$, $p = .01$, $r = -.10$), lack of opportunity to make new friendships ($U = 42844$, $z = -4.07$, $p < .001$, $r = -.16$), and lack of opportunity to strengthen new friendships ($U = 36841.5$, $z = -6.67$, $p < .001$, $r = -.26$) than upper-secondary school students did. Furthermore, university students in the second wave of the pandemic reported less opportunity to establish a new relationship with an intimate partner ($n_{HS} = 192$, $n_{UNI} = 176$, $U = 12943$, $z = -4.01$, $p < .001$, $r = -.21$) than upper-secondary school students did. University students also perceived living in the parental home as more problematic compared to upper-secondary school students in the pre-pandemic period ($n_{HS} = 285$, $n_{UNI} = 342$, $U = 44089$, $z = -2.22$, $p = .03$, $r = -.09$) and in the first ($n_{HS} = 284$, $n_{UNI} = 346$, $U = 42697$, $z = -2.96$, $p = .003$, $r = -.12$) and second waves of the pandemic ($n_{HS} = 285$, $n_{UNI} = 336$, $U = 41981$, $z = -2.76$, $p = .01$, $r = -.11$).

Females ($n_F = 482$) reported slightly more difficulty than males did ($n_M = 161$) in the *Relationship with Friends* domain during the pre-pandemic period ($U = 34744$, $z = -2.00$, $p = .05$, $r = -.08$) and during the first ($U = 34655$, $z = -2.04$, $p = .04$, $r = -.08$) and second waves of the pandemic ($U = 33506.5$, $z = -2.61$, $p = .01$, $r = -.10$). Regarding specific items within the *Relationship with Friends* domain, females reported more difficulties than males due to lack of physical contact with friends (pre-pandemic: $U = 34522$, $z = -2.22$, $p = .03$, $r = -.09$; 1st wave: $U = 32840$, $z = -3.01$, $p = .003$, $r = -.12$; 2nd wave: $U = 33408.5$, $z = -2.78$, $p = .01$, $r = -.11$), the lack of opportunity to make new friendships (2nd wave: $U = 33997.5$, $z = -2.45$, $p = .01$, $r = -.10$), and lack of opportunity to strengthen new friendships (2nd wave: $U = 34229.5$, $z = -2.32$, $p = .02$, $r = -.09$). Females also perceived more conflict with siblings (2nd wave: $U = 34220.5$, $z = -2.37$, $p = .02$, $r = -.09$) than males. In contrast, males reported the lack of opportunity to establish new intimate relationships as more problematic than females did in the first wave ($n_F = 263$, $n_M = 101$, $U = 10934$, $z = -2.67$, $p = .01$, $r = -.14$). Males ($n_M = 161$) also perceived the lack of opportunities for sexual activity more negatively than females did ($n_F = 482$) in both the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods (pre-pandemic: $U = 33949$, $z = -2.55$, $p = .01$, $r = -.10$; 1st wave: $U = 31669.5$, $z = -3.60$, $p < .001$, $r = -.14$; 2nd wave: $U = 30506.5$, $z = -4.18$, $p < .001$, $r = -.16$).

Across all three periods, single students ($n_S = 369$) reported a higher score on the *Family Conflicts* domain than students who were in a relationship

did ($n_{IR} = 271$) (pre-pandemic: $U = 43219$, $z = -2.99$, $p = .003$, $r = -.12$; 1st wave: $U = 45459$, $z = -1.99$, $p = .05$, $r = -.08$; 2nd wave: $U = 44011.5$, $z = -2.62$, $p = .01$, $r = -.10$). Specifically, the former reported more conflict with parents (2nd wave: $U = 45130.5$, $z = -2.18$, $p = .03$, $r = -.09$), more conflict with siblings (pre-pandemic: $U = 43608$, $z = -2.99$, $p = .003$, $r = -.12$; 2nd wave: $U = 43478.5$, $z = -2.99$, $p = .003$, $r = -.12$) and more conflict among other family members (pre-pandemic: $U = 42307.5$, $z = -3.69$, $p < .001$, $r = -.15$). Students who were single also reported more problems in the domain *Parental Control and Living with Parents* than students in intimate relationships did (pre-pandemic: $U = 45419.5$, $z = -2.03$, $p = .04$, $r = -.08$; 2nd wave: $U = 44989.5$, $z = -2.18$, $p = .03$, $r = -.09$). Specifically, students who were single reported higher parental control in the second wave ($U = 42294.5$, $z = -3.44$, $p = .001$, $r = -.14$) than their peers with intimate partners did. In addition, students who were single reported a higher lack of opportunities for sexual activity (pre-pandemic: $U = 42649.5$, $z = -3.41$, $p = .001$, $r = -.13$; 2nd wave: $U = 44880.5$, $z = -2.28$, $p = .02$, $r = -.08$) and a higher lack of opportunities to make new friends (pre-pandemic: $U = 43461.5$, $z = -2.99$, $p = .003$, $r = -.12$; 2nd wave: $U = 42689$, $z = -3.28$, $p = .001$, $r = -.13$) than young people who had an intimate partner did.

Those students who moved back to their parents' home during the pandemic ($n_M = 159$), thus losing their residential independence, reported higher scores in the domain *Parental Control and Living with Parents* than those who lived at home all the time ($n_H = 418$) (1st wave: $U = 28650.5$, $z = -2.59$, $p = .01$, $r = -.11$; 2nd wave: $U = 27513.5$, $z = -3.21$, $p = .001$, $r = -.13$). More specifically, the former perceived more difficulties because of parental control (1st wave: $U = 29443$, $z = -2.19$, $p = .03$, $r = -.09$; 2nd wave: $U = 29001.5$, $z = -2.43$, $p = .02$, $r = -.10$), living in the parental home (1st wave: $U = 27056.5$, $z = -3.51$, $p < .001$, $r = -.15$; 2nd wave: $U = 26287.5$, $z = -4.04$, $p < .001$, $r = -.17$) and lack of privacy (2nd wave: $U = 29496.5$, $z = -2.15$, $p < .03$, $r = -.09$) than the latter did. In the second wave of the pandemic, students who had moved back into the parental home reported more difficulties in the domains Sexuality ($U = 29196$, $z = -2.31$, $p = .02$, $r = -.10$), Establishing New Relationship with Intimate Partner ($n_H = 264$, $n_M = 92$, $U = 9670.5$, $z = -3.00$, $p = .003$, $r = -.16$), and the Relationship with Friends ($U = 28966.5$, $z = -2.93$, $p = .02$, $r = -.10$) than students who lived with parents during the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. In the Relationship with Friends domain, students who had moved back to their parents' home reported fewer opportunities to establish new friendships ($U = 29267$, $z = -2.31$, $p = .02$, $r = -.10$) and fewer opportunities to strengthen new relationships with friends ($U = 26894$, $z = -3.67$, $p < .001$, $r = -.15$) than those who lived at home before and during the pandemic.

Discussion

This study examined the difficulties Slovenian students aged 18 to 25 experienced in their close social relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study included six domains of potential difficulties in close relationships: Relationship with friends, establishing a new relationship with an intimate partner, sexuality, relationship with current intimate partner, parental control and living with parents, and family conflict. We compared the extent of students' social difficulties in the pre-pandemic period and in the first two waves of the pandemic. We were also interested in whether gender, educational status, intimate status, and change in living situation were related to students' perceived social difficulties. Below, we address the difficulties that participants reported in the three domains of close social relationships (friends, intimate partners, family) during the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods.

Relationship with Friends

Of all domains of close social relationships, relationships with friends emerged as the most vulnerable for students due to movement restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. As noted in our study, measures of social isolation not only reduced the frequency of physical contact with friends, but students also reported a significant increase in alienation from friends and a significant decrease in opportunities to make new friends and consolidate new acquaintances in both waves of the pandemic. These findings reflect the importance of friendships in adolescence and emerging adulthood, which are more emotionally intense and intimate than friendships at other stages of development (Arnett, 2014). Young people's friendships are characterised by greater openness, reciprocity, and trust than those of children. Young people's contacts with friends are also more frequent, longer, and involve more emotional exchanges than those of adults (Conger, 1991). Zupančič (2020) found that young people place high importance and trust on their friends, regardless of age, gender, or intimate relationship. The results of our study confirmed that social isolation due to the restrictions placed on people's movement and social interactions negatively affected relationships in the main social microsystem of young people in both waves of the pandemic, and perceived difficulties in friendships even increased from the first to the second lockdown due to Covid-19.

Compared to the pre-pandemic time, university students in the second wave of the pandemic reported more difficulties in relating to friends than upper-secondary school students. The closure of academic institutions during the pandemic particularly affected university students who spent most of the spring

semester of the 2019/2020 academic year and most of the 2020/2021 academic year online. In our sample, 48.8% of university students were living independently or semi-independently with their parents before the Slovenian government declared a pandemic state on March 12, 2020. Of these students, 45% returned to their parents' home in the first or second wave of the pandemic. Most of the university students in our sample were younger undergraduates who had made new acquaintances and friendships with fellow students from different parts of the country during their studies. Movement restrictions during the pandemic prevented contact with these friends. In contrast, upper-secondary school students mostly lived at home in the pre-pandemic period; during the pandemic, they had friends nearby and met with classmates more frequently than university students due to the somewhat less severe restrictions on closing upper-secondary schools. More friendship problems were also reported by those young participants who had to return to their parents due to dormitory closures and movement restrictions in the state regions. In the second wave of the pandemic, they perceived more problems in establishing and maintaining new friendships than their peers who were already living with their parents before the pandemic did. As mentioned earlier, most participants who had to return to their parents during the pandemic were university students who were less able to maintain their newly established friendship networks at university due to the prolonged closure of academic institutions and movement restrictions. In terms of gender differences, females reported more difficulties with friendships than males did during the pandemic time. More specifically, females perceived a lack of physical contact with friends as a greater problem than males in both waves of the pandemic. In addition, women in the second wave of the pandemic emphasised fewer opportunities to make new friends and strengthen relationships with new friends than men did. The findings reflect differences in the quality of friendships between men and women. Female friendships are more intimate, confidential, emotionally intense, and reciprocal than male friendships are (Bauminger et al., 2008; Wissink et al., 2009). Women and their more pronounced need for mutual care, mutual disclosure, help, and verbal communication with a friend (Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006) were, therefore, more affected by social isolation from the Covid-19 pandemic than men were.

Intimate Relationships

The study compared students' difficulties in their current intimate relationships, in establishing new intimate relationships, and in engaging in sexual activity in the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. Of the three aspects, the

opportunity to establish new intimate partnerships was most limited during the Covid-19 pandemic. It decreased significantly since pre-pandemic time through the first two waves of the pandemic. The reported difficulties in establishing new partnerships increased, on average, to the level of 'substantial' during the second lockdown. This finding highlights the vulnerability of single young participants who were unable to form new intimate relationships due to their social isolation and limited mobility. Similarly, perceived opportunities for sexual intercourse were significantly reduced during both pandemic lockdowns. Shulman and Connolly (2013) found that partnership stability and duration grow relatively slowly in late adolescence and early twenties. During this developmental period, many young people change partners, are single for a while, or engage in brief romantic/sexual relationships. Love relationships that involve passion and intimacy are still nascent at this age and do not necessarily involve long-term plans for a future together (Seifge-Krenke & Shulman, 2012; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Social isolation and movement restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic deprived young people of important romantic experiences and sexual experimentation that set the stage for later mature emotional and physical intimacy (van de Bongardt et al., 2015).

Difficulties in maintaining current intimate relationships increased significantly during the pandemic, but no significant change in reported difficulties was found between the first and second waves of the pandemic. The only exception was the difficulty of 'having less privacy with an intimate partner', which was rated significantly higher by participants in a relationship in the second wave of the pandemic than in the first wave. We assume that students gradually found ways to cope with restrictions during the pandemic waves to maintain an intimate relationship. They used communication tools, such as video calls and text messaging, some young couples lived in the same household, while others met in person despite the strict lockdown measures. However, staying at home and living with parents may not prevent fewer opportunities for physical intimacy between young partners. Establishing and maintaining an intimate relationship with a romantic partner is a lengthy process and requires a great deal of experience in the partners' daily activities together. Through pleasant and unpleasant joint events, partners develop mutual sensitivity, empathise with each other's position, learn ways to resolve conflicts in their relationship, and define the boundaries of their freedom in the relationship (Arnett, 2014; Zupančič, 2020). These are all foundations of a solid and lasting love relationship that have been challenged by the pandemic restrictions.

Relationship with Family

The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted the important social developmental task of young people, which is gaining independence from their parents and establishing a mature parent-child relationship. Periods of stay-at-home requirements, academic closures, increased engagement with parents and other family members, more parental monitoring, and reduced physical interaction with friends and intimate partners will 'likely have yet unknown effects on this cohort's developmental trajectory' (Lindberg et al., 2020, p. 2).

The young participants in our study perceived more difficulties due to parental control and less privacy at home during quarantine periods compared to the pre-pandemic period. More frequent and intense contact between all family members also set the stage for more family conflict. However, the increase in reported difficulties was of low magnitude, and mean scores in these domains remained below the rating scale average in both pandemic waves. This result may reflect the Slovenian cultural tradition of strong and prolonged reliance on one's family as a source of security and support (Zupančič et al., 2014), which somewhat prevented students from feeling more constrained in their pursuit of personal autonomy while living with parents during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Those students who moved back to their parents' home after a period of independence or semi-independence had more negative perceptions of living with their parents than those who had lived with their parents in the pre-pandemic period. Presumably, the former were less accustomed to their parents' requests and demands and had to adjust to living together again. Independent living provides young people with more opportunities to practice personal autonomy, contributes to psychological independence from parents (Kins et al., 2013; Seiffge-Krenke, 2013), and helps build a mature parent-child relationship. Living with parents, enforced by the Covid-19 situation, and extended parental supervision likely creates the conditions for prolonged development of young people's individuation.

Study Limitations

This study has some important limitations. The sample was gathered from convenience sampling. It is predominantly female and only students in the last two years of upper-secondary school and university students were included in the study. A more balanced sample might provide better insight into the social difficulties of young people. In addition, our data are likely to be subject to recall bias due to retrospective data collection. The follow-up study with in-time measurement of difficulties in close social relationships would be preferable. Even though online data collection has many advantages, we should not overlook possible

disadvantages, such as it being more impersonal and less controllable (e.g., we cannot interfere if the answering instructions are unclear; we cannot ensure the sample population is from the targeted population; Evans & Mathur, 2005; Nayak & Narayan, 2019). Our aim was to determine the extent of difficulties in students' close social relationships in the pre-pandemic and pandemic situations and to report possible differences in some demographic variables. However, more detailed and systematic studies that include additional psychosocial factors related to the quality of social relationships would be desirable to gain better insight into the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' mental health.

Conclusions

The restrictions on individual freedom of movement and social interactions imposed to deal with Covid-19 have significantly affected the social lives of young people. Although students were at low risk for hospitalisation and death from Covid-19 compared with older age groups, the pandemic measures affected other aspects of their physical and mental health and likely slowed the completion of their normative developmental tasks in close/intimate social relationships (Lindberg et al., 2020; Wignall et al., 2021). This study found a significant increase in reported difficulties in relationships with friends, intimate relationships, and family relationships during the first two waves of the pandemic compared to reported pre-pandemic levels. The most affected areas of close relationships were relationships with friends and the opportunity to form new intimate relationships. More negative experiences of lockdown measures were found among students who were single and those who had to move back into the parental home due to lockdown restrictions. Intimate relationships appear to be a protective factor that mitigates several negative outcomes in young people. The magnitude of reported difficulties in current intimate relationships, living in the parental household, and family conflict did not change from the first to the second lockdown, which may suggest that students developed adaptive mechanisms to cope with the ongoing pandemic situation. Close social relationships, particularly with peers, are an important component of students' psychological wellbeing and mental health, providing comfort and security. In the event of future pandemic waves, it would be very important to maintain the stable living and study conditions of students as far as possible.

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Publication Ethics

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Biographical note

MELITA PUKLEK LEVPUŠČEK, PhD, is a full professor in the field of educational psychology at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her research interests include school and social anxiety, personality, interpersonal relations and social media use in emerging adults; personal, motivational and social determinants of academic achievement, and professional development of teachers.

MOJCA POREDOŠ, PhD, is an assistant professor in the field of developmental psychology at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her research interests include personality, interpersonal relations in the family with an emphasis on financial and psychological individuation and neurodiverse child development.