ORIGINAL ARTICLE

More than Two… but not Right Now: Interpretations and Responses to Covid-19 Measures on Reddit for Two Communities of Consensual Non-Monogamy

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Abstract

Using Owen's Thematic Analysis, we reviewed the Reddit posts of participants in two online communities regarding consensual non-monogamy (CNM) during the January 2021 peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In 5,209 comments, 465 unique users in the /polyamory and /swinging forums on the social media platform Reddit referred to the pandemic with two themes emerging as most salient. In the first theme, participants described, interpreted, and responded to the social limitations of the Covid-19 era, with particular attention to limitations on CNM identity and behavior during the pandemic. In the second theme, participants articulated concerns about individual and social health. In addition to strictly personal concerns about physical and mental health, participants described challenges to the well-being of relationships and communities and ways to manage risk and mitigate social damage. We discuss the implication of these findings in light of the unique social structure of CNM communities.

Keywords Consensual non-monogamy · Swingers · Polyamory · Reddit · Covid-19

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Introduction

January of 2021 was an unusual month by all accounts, as the unanticipated Covid-19 pandemic accelerated to unprecedented rates of infection, hospitalization, and death. Without widespread vaccines, public health officials called for stark changes in social behavior. Many people on the planet found themselves challenged by these changes, but not everyone found themselves challenged in the same way.

Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of identities, cultures, communities, and practices that, to some extent, provide for extradyadic sexual or romantic interactions (Rubinsky & Niess, 2021). Some estimate that one in five people will be involved in a CNM dynamic at some point in their lifetime (Haupert et al., 2017). Our research has been motivated by a desire to chronicle the response of these under-studied communities during a unique historical moment. We have also been motivated to consider how communities centered around a multiplicity of intimate social connection deal with a pandemic that demands isolation and social distance. We sought answers in a public, online space where practitioners of the CNM forms of polyamory and swinging have gathered for years to find community and wrestle with questions of identity and sociality. During a peak pandemic month that challenged core aspects of what it means to be non-monogamous, we observed two forums engaged in the work of identifying, interpreting, and responding to the implications of Covid-19 at the personal, relational and group levels.

Consensual Non-Monogamy and Covid-19

Swinging and Polyamory

While there are broad commonalities, different identities and communities exist under the CNM umbrella. For decades, the word *swinging* has been used to refer to couples maintaining multiple CNM *sexual* relationships. In academic circles, swinging relationships are defined as generally committed, romantically connected couples who pursue extradyadic sexual activity with other couples (Kimberly & Hans, 2017; Vaillancourt & Few-Demo, 2014). In swinging, unlike other types of CNM, extradyadic sexual activity is often pursued for recreational purposes (Rubinsky & Niess, 2021). Another distinction that may set swinging apart from other types of CNM, notably polyamory, is that swinging can be framed as a *lifestyle* or activity, rather than an identity (Bentzen & Træen, 2014). For this relational type, sexual behavior in discrete engagements is emphasized and affective ties with extradyadic partners are de-emphasized (Rubinsky & Niess, 2021). To the extent that lasting emotional connections outside the dyad are discouraged, connections between swinging couples tend to occur through third-party meeting venues such as clubs or websites rather than through existing friendship or romantic networks (Serina et al., 2013).

The first widespread use of the word *polyamory* to refer to multiple *romantic* relationships has been traced back to the newsgroup alt.polyamory in 1992 (M, 2007), a more recent origin than *swinging*. In contrast to swinging, polyamory typically endorses affective attachment to multiple extradyadic relationships (Rubinsky & Niess, 2021). Many varieties of polyamory offer different foci, such as the rejection of relational hierarchy (Flicker et al., 2021), an emphasis on romance, connection, and

Table 1 Articulated Distinctions between Polyamory and Swinging

Polyamory	vs.	Swinging
"Not all about the sex"	vs.	Focused on sex acts (Minx, 2014)
Aspect of identity	vs.	Aspect of activity (Bentzen and Træen 2014)
Affective connection	vs.	
Sustained relationships	vs.	Affective detachment (Klesse 2006)
Fewer relationships	vs.	
Relationships formed in dense networks	vs.	Fleeting relationships (Sheff 2005) More relationships (techiewench 2013) Connections formed via platforms (Serina et al., 2013; Stern, 2014)

communication (Dixon, 2016), or features shared with other CNM subtypes (Sheff & Tesene, 2015). Whether or not polyamorists consider their CNM behavior as a practice or identity may be debated (Klesse, 2014). Still, what typically distinguishes polyamory from other forms of CNM is the allowance for multiple romantic relationships that may include sexual activity, but also entail the other relational behaviors and attachments that come with romantic relationships (Rubinsky & Niess, 2021). These relationships tend to emerge from extended networks of existing polyamorous relationships and acquaintanceship among partners of partners (Stern, 2014).

In the three decades since the widespread adoption of the term, members of the polyamorous community (Jones, 1995; Klesse, 2006), swingers (Hatcher, 2012), and scholars of CNM (Barker & Langridge, 2010; Brewster et al., 2017; Grunt-Mejer, 2016) have drawn multiple distinctions between polyamory and swinging. As summarized in Table 1, these are descriptive claims (albeit with normative implications) having to do with both the *content* of relationships and the *structure* of relationships. Such differences in the practice of CNM indicate possible differences in how CNM practitioners might respond during a disruptive pandemic.

While contrasts between polyamory and swinging abound, there are reasons to suspect accounts of a firm division. The drawing of distinct boundaries is one way for socially-precarious groups to strengthen their sense of identity despite underlying similarities (Bourdieu, 1984). Contradictions emerge between strict definitions of polyamory and swinging and the observable relational behaviors of those who identify with them (Rubinsky & Niess, 2021); some who identify as polyamorous practice behaviors fitting under the definition of swinging, and some who identify as swingers engage in ways that reflect a definition of polyamory (Barker & Landridge, 2010; West, 1996). For instance, the concept of polyfidelity highlights the ambiguity of these community boundaries. A polyfidelitious relationship group in which sexual activity is restricted to members of the group could be seen as fitting the definition of swinging or an open relationship, but its members may identify more closely with polyamory (West, 1996). Among swingers, a movement called "progressive swinging" encourages non-monogamous connections of both a sexual and romantic nature (Life on the Swingset, 2013). An individual who explicitly identifies as both polyamorous and a swinger adds a connection between these forms of CNM through their dual affiliation.

Identity-Making, Communication, and CNM

Previous scholarship on various forms of CNM have explored intergroup dynamics and identity-making behaviors, but typically in contrast to monogamous relationships rather than other forms of CNM (see Rubinsky & Niess, 2021 for a summary). However, identity-making behaviors between and among different CNM identities warrants attention, especially as people generally may accept CNM identities to different degrees (Matsick et al., 2014). When provided definitions of swinging, polyamory, and open relationships, individuals overwhelmingly perceive swinging more negatively than polyamory (Matsick et al., 2014). Relationship types characterized more by promiscuity or multiple sexual relationships appear to be perceived less favorably than relationship types characterized by multiple romantic attachments and commitments (Matsick et al., 2014; Rubinsky, 2018). The swinging-as-sex vs. polyamory-as-love distinction both manages the group identity-making behaviors that perpetuate the distinction and is embedded in a cultural context stigmatizing any non-normative sexuality (i.e. outside the heterosexual monogamous life script; Sandbakken et al., 2021). Cultural distinctions within CNM communities and normative judgments from outside CNM communities may affect how different CNM communities make sense of the disruptions of Covid-19.

Social distancing, a common health guidance and in many places formal policy during Covid-19, is likely to pose particular challenges to those who practice CNM. Results from a recent study of men who have sex with men (MSMs) in Brazil suggest reduced psychological well-being during the early stages of social distancing may be more pronounced for those who are polyamorous and young (Silva Camargo et al., 2022). Because people who are polyamorous may have close relationships or engage in sexual activity with those who live outside their household (Manley & Goldberg, 2021; Silva Camargo et al., 2022), social distancing may have posed particular problems for enacting those relationships in a fulfilling way (Hakim et al., 2022). Recent investigations have drawn a comparison between LGBTQ and polyamorous identities during periods of Covid-19, with social pandemic restrictions creating a pressure toward a "coronamonogamy" prioritizing a single primary relationship (Hakim et al., 2022; Rothmüller, 2021). Unsurprisingly, a recent qualitative investigation of CNM parents found that parents spent less time with non-cohabiting partners during the May-December 2020 period of the pandemic (Manley & Goldberg, 2021). However, CNM parents also deployed creative responses by queering family practices, which include some combination of disengagement with non-cohabiting partners, connecting over technology, having partners move in with them, and incorporating their non-cohabiting partner into their quarantine pod or bubble (Manley & Goldberg, 2021; Fournier et al., 2021). The degree to which these challenges or opportunities are reflected in discourse surrounding Covid-19 may highlight the role of social media in identity-making communication for these two communities, which we elaborate on in the next section.

Social Media and Health Communication

Social media plays an important role in both dissemination and sensemaking of public health information (Moorhead et al., 2013). During Covid-19, social media served as a significant site of public health information, generated by government entities (Tsao et al., 2021) and user-generated health content (Manganello et al., 2020). Across systemic and scoping reviews of the general roles of social media for health communication broadly (Moorhead et al., 2013), and specifically during Covid-19 (Tsao et al., 2021), social media is a productive avenue for supportive communication, sensemaking surrounding the social consequences of health issues, and assessing the public's mental health. However, public health and medical professions maintain concern about the reliability and quality of health information shared via social media (Moorhead et al., 2013; Manganello et al., 2020), which has often been a site of mis- and disinformation during Covid-19 (Mheidly et al., 2020).

To some degree, communication technology may facilitate enactment of CNM behaviors in the absence of physical connection, such as swinging clubs that organize virtual group activities (Cabello et al., 2020). CNM identity-gatekeeping may also occur in these spaces. For example, a recent discourse analysis observed out-group treatment of those who identify as a "unicorn" in the r/polyamory subreddit (Johnston, 2022). Social media may also offer opportunities to observe identity-making communication, albeit under pandemic difficulties for identities predicated on flexibility in socialization. However, the degree to which different CNM groups rely on that flexibility to make their identities, or the degree to which that identity is salient enough to elicit tension or distress, may be expected to vary based on the stated differences in priorities for swingers and those who are polyamorous. Amid formal and informal social distancing guidance, safely meeting new people or navigating non-monogamous relationship dynamics poses challenges (Montanaro et al., 2022). As Montanaro and colleagues (2022) note, more research is needed to understand how non-monogamous individuals understand and navigate their perception of their identity during the pandemic. For polyamorous individuals, who sometimes frame their polyamory as akin to a type of orientation (see Klesse, 2014 for discussion) or an otherwise salient part of the self (Rubinsky, 2018), and their partners as fully relational others (Rubinsky & Niess, 2021; Sheff & Tenise, 2014), the absence of safe ways to enact non-cohabiting relationships may present substantial constraints on the ability to enact identity. In contrast, swingers, who often position their CNM as recreational (Rubinsky & Niess, 2021), may have missed a desired activity due to Covid-19, but would not be expected to experience the loss of relational identity enactment to the same extent. These trends in the literature inform our exploratory research question: *How do polyamorous and swinging communities on social media talk about Covid-19?*

Methods

Data Selection

Data for this study was collected using the program *R* running the extension package *RedditExtractoR* (Rivera, 2022). Given the possibility of negative judgment and retribution against those who practice alternative sexual and romantic lifestyles, for ethical reasons it was important to choose a social media platform on which posts are public by default. Reddit fits that bill. Another ethical advantage of the Reddit platform is that users may create an account without registering their e-mail address or legal name; in fact, of the 465 unique users whose thoughts regarding COVID-19 were studied here, only 6 adopted a username with a first-name/last-name structure. In addition, profile information revealing users' personal characteristics is not required. The default-public nature of posts minimizes the possibility of a user releasing a thought to the world that they preferred to keep private, and the disconnection between offline identifiers and online usernames further reduces the likelihood of a person encountering negative sanctions in their offline communities for any online commentary. As a final mode of protection, when we share passages here, we note the subreddit source of a contribution but not the username of the contributor.

Reddit is divided as a platform into a series of "subreddit" discussion boards, each with its own substantive topic. The subreddits /polyamory and /swingers were chosen for study because they have the highest volume of posting among all subreddits having to do with polyamory and swinging, and because they are the most general thematically. Within a subreddit, conversation is organized as a series of posts with nested sets of comments reacting to posts.

When considering the content of posts and comments, it is important to note that although Reddit has 50 million daily users and is one of the 20 most-accessed websites on the Internet (Kemp, 2022), Reddit's typical population is not representative of the population outside the social media platform. Linguistically speaking, Reddit is dominated by use of the English language, marginalizing speakers of other languages. Demographically speaking, Reddit users are disproportionately young, liberal, highly-educated, lower-income, and men (Barthel et al., 2016; Kemp, 2022). As practitioners of non-monogamy are disproportionately men and members of LGBTQ communities (Haupert et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2014), it is reasonable to presume (although with pseudonymity not possible to empirically determine in the current study) that the demographics of the /swingers and /polyamory subreddits skew further from the central tendencies of the general population. Findings drawn from posts and comments should therefore not be generalized beyond the communities created in these subreddits, but rather be considered in the context of patterns that are meaningful for these communities themselves.

We began by collecting all 433 posts with 8,774 comments made by 1,997 users from January 1 to January 31, 2021 on the /swingers subreddit, and all 1,171 posts with 18,270 comments made by 3,834 users in the same period on the /polyamory subreddit. 69 users posted to both subreddits during the month. To identify posts and comments discussing issues surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, we consulted four medical glossaries of terms (Becker, 2020; Katella, 2020; UVA Health, 2021; Wake

Forest Baptist Health, 2021) to develop a set of terms consistently used to refer to the pandemic. From those terms, we identified the following text qualifiers, in which * refers to multiple wildcard characters and *?* refers to a single wildcard character:

CDC, *communicable*, *community?spread*, *contact?trac*, *coronavirus*, *covid*, *epidemic*, *infect*, *isolat*, *lockdown*, *mask*, *outbreak*, *pandemic*, *physical?distanc*, *quarantin*, *SARS*, *shelter?in?place*, *social?distanc*, *super?spreader*, *symptomatic*, *transmissi*, *vaccin*, *virus**

From our dataset of all comments and posts to the subreddits, we first selected all instances in which at least one of the above terms appeared in a post title, a post text, or a comment to a post. This resulted in the selection of 2,175 comments in 336 posts to the /polyamory subreddit and 3,034 comments in 311 posts to the /swingers subreddit. These pieces of writing were contributed by 465 unique users, of whom 237 posted their commentary only to the /polyamory subreddit, 187 posted only to the /swingers subreddit, and 41 posted to both. To be sure we understood references to the pandemic in context, we then read the post title, the post text, and all comments associated with a post if any of these contained one of the qualifying terms.

Data Analysis

To explore how individuals within the /polyamory and /swingers subreddits discussed and made sense of their identities and relationships during Covid-19, we conducted a thematic analysis using Owen's Thematic Analysis (Owen, 1984) as a guide. Given the breadth of the data set, we approached our first cycle of coding in an open way, each reading the same 5% of the data set and reporting primarily in-vivo codes utilizing common participant language and noting common theoretical ideas emerging in the small portion of the sample. After an initial 5% reading that produced several discrepancies in how each coder read the data, we met to discuss and resolve discrepancies, and reviewed a separate 5% to establish compatible coding practices.

After open-coding in the first stage, we determined that Owen's Thematic Analysis criteria would make an appropriate second-order coding scheme to identify Covid-19 themes. According to Owen's Thematic Analysis (Owen, 1984)[1], a theme must meet the conditions of repetition (i.e., multiple occurrences of specific words/phrases/or ideas by a particular participant), recurrence (i.e., multiple occurrences of a word/phrase/ or idea by multiple participants), and/or forcefulness (i.e., emphasis or intense emotional engagement) in order to cross a sufficient threshold of salience for reporting. Given the conversational structure of this data set, we interpreted repetition to have been met if a word, phrase, or idea was repeated by either a particular

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[1] Although some recent use of Owen's Thematic Analysis has extended the original framework toward critical approaches to qualitative inquiry, typically termed Critical Thematic Analysis, which adds a step in the analysis to identify prominent ideologies, power relations, or status-based hierarchies (see Lawless & Chen, 2019 for a discussion), we only employed the primary coding scheme (i.e., repetition, recurrence, forcefulness) in our analysis. As such, our own positionality was not explicitly incorporated into the analysis, which we discuss more in the Limitations section.

participant or within the same conversation, and recurrence to have been met when a word, phrase, or idea was repeated across multiple conversations and/or across the different subreddits. Forcefulness was indicated by capitalizing letters, emotionally intense, vulnerable, or otherwise emphatic language (e.g., cursing), or exclamation marks.

Using this approach, each of us read through 50% of data to develop a complete thematic analysis. When we compared these separate analyses, we found we each had identified a substantively similar set of second-order thematic codes. We then combined these second-order codes into two overarching supra-themes each containing three related sub-themes, reported in the next section. The reported results in the next section therefore reflect agreement between both of us as coders. Thematic content reported in the next section is not exclusive, and many posts contained several themes. Given that posts varied widely in length (from a few words to several paragraphs), longer posts about Covid-19 more often contained multiple sub- or supra-themes.

Findings

Our thematic analysis produced two overarching supra-themes across both the /swingers and /polyamory forums, each containing three sub-themes, as well as an "Other" theme in which mentions of Covid-19 comprised thematically relevant content but not aligned with the other thematic content, typically describing Covid-19 as a time point. The two supra-themes include (1) Describing, explaining, and responding to the social limitations of the Covid-19 era; and (2) Concerns regarding individual and social health. The first supra-theme includes sub-themes of (a) Descriptions of limits, (b) Interpretation of limits, and (c) Responses to limits. The second supra-theme includes sub-themes of (a) The individual impact of social isolation, (b) Discourse surrounding risk management, and (c) Relational health. We discuss each supra- and sub-theme here.

Social Limitations of the Covid-19 Era

Both the /swingers/ and /polyamory forums contained descriptions, interpretations, or responses to the limitations on social connections. Social connections described both those activities involved in swinging and polyamory (e.g., dating, clubbing, sexual activity), as well as more general social experiences (e.g., travel, restaurants).

Description of Limits

Both communities described limits to social connection during the pandemic. These limits included specific community or lifestyle events that were canceled or sparsely attended (e.g., polyamorous meetups and munches, or swinging takeovers, clubs, resorts, and weekends), or other general social activities that were disrupted due to Covid-19. These events had been important to the communities as *foci* (Feld, 1981), social spaces that engender connection by bringing people together. For example,

"We went mid-January and crowds were light but picked up on the weekend. Club is lightly attended as most were nervous about Covid. We have already had Covid, but know at least one couple there at the same time that did not contract" (/swingers). For another example from the /polyamory subreddit, in which "poly" is a short-hand for polyamorous:

> So I moved from Brooklyn to LA a few months before COVID and I was look-ing around for poly gatherings when I found this event held locally. Looked and sounded great but just as I was fitting it into my schedule they had to cancel the event! Ive been waiting and now Im not sure if they'll ever open again lol. I'm being dramatic I guess. Anyway, just wondering if anyone had gone to this event or any similar that I should keep track of for when life goes back to nor-mal. Thanks=O< (/polyamory).

This sub-theme contained descriptions of how the pandemic made interpersonal con-nections more difficult. Some found it more difficult to meet new partners or go on dates, and that social distancing in pandemic might stall existing or newer dyadic connections. For example, "I'm the one who'll probably get the boyfriend ;) (well not during lockdown…)" (/polyamory) in which the individual referenced lockdown restrictions for Covid-19 as preventing social connection. In addition, this Reddit user noted: "Most dating, including poly dating, isn't really happening right now anyway due to the pandemic. It'll change again, I'm sure" (/polyamory), and the fol-lowing post, in which "mono" is a short-hand for monogamous:

> Prior to covid he had just ended his last relationship and was just starting to date again before we went on lockdown. Since last March we have essentially been mono as we agreed no dating until a vaccine. Last month he decided to start dating again with the agreement that he would not see anyone in person until a vaccine. He has connected with two women who he communicates with regularly. (/polyamory).

Those in the /swingers forum also described difficulty in interpersonal connection due to Covid-19, including finding new partners, sexual activity, and dating activity. For example, "my bf says I'm beautiful lolz. We are separated by C19 and the world's largest ocean, but I don't want to live without sex!… Obviously this isn't the optimal time in human history to start this journey, as the clubs are all closed" (/swingers).

Thematically, these descriptive posts contained both more matter-of-fact descrip-tions of the state of social events due to Covid-19, and many that described the social limitations negatively, complaining or venting about them. Some of these included sensemaking interpretations of social limitations described in the next section.

Interpretation of Limits

The next sub-theme within this supra-theme involved individuals and communities' interpretation of the social limitations of Covid-19. Generally, individuals in both communities interpreted the social limitations as either self-imposed or authority-

imposed. Although both communities' posts involved interpretations of limits, individuals in the /swingers subreddit more often interpreted these limitations as both a personal and public health responsibility. For example:

> I like many other has decided to wait until we reach herd immunity before I venture back to parties, etc. I know that this is a sore subject for some swingers and this might get me banned, but we're over 350000 deaths, surely masturbation would be a better choice than risking getting sick, when the hospitals are at 0% ICU capacity (/swingers).

Another wrote, "New Orleans is now at "Active or imminent outbreak" status for covid, and [the] city is under-prepared with respect to hospital beds and ICU beds. Please don't travel unnecessarily" (/swingers).

In contrast, those in the /poly subreddit more frequently made sense of Covid-19 limitations as a *personal* health choice. For example, "I understand right now isn't good timing to explore new things what with covid-19 (already got it a few months ago and I don't want to go that route again so I've been serious about social distancing)" (/polyamory).

Both forums interpreted the social limitations as both self-imposed and as imposed by authorities (e.g., government bodies, or "media" in the abstract). While some who interpreted the social limitations as imposed by authorities did so without any normative judgment, others offered normative judgment, with some in favor of limitations and some opposed. For example, "It's maybe not safe, ethical, or legal for her to see friends while her partner is away. Where I live (Scotland) services are stretched, most community mental health services are restricted to phone calls, and many charity services have closed" (/polyamory). Opposition to authority-imposed social limitations or public health recommendations was relatively rare in terms of frequency compared to those expressing support, and limited almost entirely to the /swingers subreddit, but the posts that did exhibit oppositional interpretations met the thematic condition of forcefulness. For example:

> Like when Fauci said not to wear masks [source] (https://www.google.com/ amp/s/www.newsweek.com/fact-check-did-dr-fauci-say-no-masks-like-trump- claiming-1540383%3Famp%3D1). I understand the nuances of the statement, but he lied to achieve his agenda. What else are they saying to achieve a particular agenda? I am not a conspiracy theorist, I am a realist. I don't believe that there are any evil intentions, but they have been proven, and I believe that fauci is the top guy, to tell untruths. These are the people I should just listen to? Assholes that told us not to walk around with masks when they knew the opposite was what we should be doing?

These generally overlapped with posts that involved a response to limitations (see next section).

Responding to Limits

In addition to sense-making posts that interpret the social limitations of Covid-19, both communities described their responses to the social limitations of Covid-19. These responses primarily included an affirmation of the limitations as necessary public health precautions, a resignation to the limitations as a situation that was ongoing, or an expression of opposition to the limitations. Those that expressed opposition to the limits were generally met with a number of often vehement responses critiquing the opposition, or expressing support or affirmation for the limitations. For examples:

> Sounds hot as hell but I cannot stand if this happened recently during lockdown. If that is the case it's one thing It happened, but allowing this to be advocated on this sub is ridiculous. It's like condoning unsafe sex promotion, but since most casualties don't involve the practitioners themselves it's somehow ok (/ swingers).

In addition:

> Am I free to beat the fuck out of you? Of course not. There are rules and laws and guidelines and when your choices have the power to fucking kill people, you don't get to play the freedom card. You want to act like an American? How about you start by giving a fuck about your fellow Americans. Stay home and mask up (/swingers).

Thus, some responses involved affirmation, but others did forcefully correct or address the behavior of others, such as those above. Responses affirming social limitations of Covid-19 sometimes involved criticizing, correcting, or otherwise expressing disapproval of the behavior of those who did not comply with public health recommendations, or those who seemed to advocate or support behaviors that might spread Covid-19.

Although few individuals responded to the social limitations of Covid-19 in ways that reflected opposition to the limitations, these responses were quite forceful, and only found in the /swingers subreddit. Several of these responses involved ignoring or forgoing public health recommendations for social limitation, or otherwise justifying responses from others (e.g., justifying large parties and gatherings that met contrary to public health advisories). For examples, "Thanks for the tip. Not scared of catching a cold" (/swingers), as well as:

> If you think that living in fear and stopping everything will help out, by all means do it. I'm more afraid of not living than dying. Why can't people mind their own business? You obviously didn't help me answer a question. Just felt like putting in your unwanted two cents of scare mongering. If it wasn't for news and media I wouldn't even know a pandemic was happening at all. I don't let media tell me what to fear. Good luck and try butting out next time you feel

the urge to stick your nose in and signal how ovine you are capable of being. Have a nice day! (/swingers).

Further, both /swingers and /polyamory subreddits frequently featured strategic responses to the social limitations of Covid-19. These included adapting social behavior in ways that mitigate risk or otherwise comply with public health guidance, including connecting with others online, limiting social interactions to "bubbles," meeting outdoors, seeking venues that are open to limitations, testing, and vaccination. For examples, "I was newly poly and just dipping my toe into the pool the year before the pandemic hit. I had other partners that I'm still friendly with and chat with in socials, but they aren't in my bubble so it"ll have to wait" (/polyamory); and, "Now there's nothing wrong with meeting people online or carrying on a relationship at a distance (again, especially with COVID)" (/polyamory), as well as:

> I have a partner of 5 years who I will be moving in with (next week yay!) he is mono and has no other partners, and right now there is another person I've been dating for about 3 months, she is poly too and has a nesting partner, our relationship has mostly been online bc of pandemic reasons, and we just saw each other one time, so I'm really looking forward to being able to meet up and build our connection :) (/polyamory).

In sum, both forums involved Covid-19 comments and conversations surrounding the description, interpretation, and response to the social limitations resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, considering limitations that were either self-imposed or crafted by authorities. Although many complained about the social impacts of these limitations, which we will elaborate on in the next section, many individuals in both forums expressed general support for the limitations as a means of public and personal health protection. Outright critique or rejection of these limitations was limited to the /swingers forum and often met with counter-criticism from others.

Concerns About Health

In a second broad theme, we observed concerns regarding individual and social health in both /swingers and /polyamory subreddits. These concerns fell into three sub-themes, as described below.

Individual Impact of Social Isolation

Across both forums, but with more forceful posts contained primarily to the /polyamory subreddit, individuals posted about the individual-level impact of social isolation. Primarily, this included discussions of the negative mental or emotional impact, or implicit or explicit discussion of how the pandemic affected their mental health. A question posted to /polyamory, "Going solo during the pandemic, anyone else starting to feel REALLY comfortable being alone a lot?," prompted this reply: "Fuck no this is terrible and I need it to end ASAP. I have the most amazing partners in the

world and it still feels like I'm forgetting even how to be a human" (/polyamory). A similar response:

> Going to say that idk If I'm having less (no) connection because I'm openly identifying as polyamorous instead of traditional monogamy, or if it's the pandemic restrictions. My need for human touch is completely ignored, and I think it's negatively affecting my mental state- like, I'm going crazy because I can't feel human touch. I'm about ready to say "fuck covid restrictions, I'm literally losing my mind, I'd rather face a disease than continue falling into depressive psychosis, because human touch is a non-negotiable human necessity (/ polyamory).

In the /swingers subreddit, a small number of individuals also noted that the pandemic affected individuals' appearance and health (e.g., weight gain, grooming). For example, "We've also been there. 99% of the time are older pics. When they looked good. We know covid has been very bad for some of the people. Not being able to go to the gym and such but just be honest. There is no reason to lie and show older pics if your planning on meeting. They are going to see what you really look like. We like the idea of video chatting. No way to fake that. We had a couple that were honest and said she had gained a few pounds since the photo. She still looked great and we appreciated the honesty" (/swingers).

While individuals across both subreddits discussed health-related concerns, concerns about mental and emotional health were more prevalent in the /polyamorous subreddit. Sometimes concerns about mental and emotional health risks were connected to partner negotiations surrounding individual and social health.

Discussing Standards for Risk Management

In both the /swingers and /polyamorous subreddits, individuals described setting standards for risk management. This included two general kinds of talk. The first involved general or specific commentary on other people's health behaviors, commenting either on public health practices of the larger community/ies, or responding to the health behaviors described by others in the subreddits. These included discussions about sexual behavior as well as other kinds of social behavior that were nonsexual. Behavioral commentary about other people (not one's own behaviors) was more common in the /swingers subreddit, and sometimes very forceful. For example, in this post an individual responding to critiques about others' behavior that would have been considered unsafe during Covid-19 noted, "I do believe most of respondents are testifying to their likes precovid and hopefully after covid. Right now any party would just be reckless and your face might spice up front pages of national news" (/swingers), as well as:

> Umm.. most COVID tests are free and the results take 3 days. If you're self quarantining and so are the other parties I would think with a COVID test in hand and a 1% of less mortality rate it's a fairly safe bet you'd be okay. But that's my OPINION. I would certainly never try to tell someone else how to live

their lives. And I would certainly hope that nobody would try to tell me how to live mine" (/swingers).

In addition, some posts reflected the idea that critical commentary about Covid-19 behavior should be geographically-specific, limited to areas where Covid-19 spread was significant and uncontrolled. For example, "I posted in here about a month ago about my partner (M35) and I (F29) visiting our first swingers club. EDIT: We are Australian based so please read through comments in regards to the Covid-19 situation" (/swingers).

Interestingly, risk behaviors were not always interpreted in the same way or extent by all members of a relationship set (referred to in polyamory communities as a "polycule"). Individuals discussed how their partners negotiated or sometimes disputed what were acceptable levels of risk or how risk played into their boundary negotiation at the relational and group levels. For example, "Your partner has incompatible risk tolerance for STI and Covid, forcing you to feel like a nag to get consistent basic safety concessions from him" as well as:

> I feel like it's so much worse now with covid. I keep thinking of just removing myself from my polycule, maybe becoming a long distanced partner to my girlfriend.' I don't trust what the rest of them are doing, or how they interpret our agreements,' and I'm tired. I've only ever been in poly relationships. Sometimes I wonder if I'd also be open to a monogamous relationship, but I love and want to keep my partner (/polyamory).

While many discussed negotiating difference or problems in risk management, some said they had established a shared understanding of risk. For example, "there is a pandemic going on. My nesting partner and I had to establish clear boundaries from a safety perspective" (/polyamory).

Also included in this sub-theme were individuals asking the community for advice about how or if they should consider Covid-19 in these negotiations. For example, "Also, with COVID, I won't feel comfortable expanding my 'pod' to their partner, their partner's partners, and all of that. Just trusting one person is hard enough for me. Am I less poly for wanting a 'build our relationship base' period? Have other people done that – if so, what was it like?" (/polyamory), as well as: "My partner (M45) and I (F46') aren't on the same page due to covid. He wants to meet. I don't. I'm not sure how we move on from this. Is anyone else feeling the same?" (/swingers). These discussions also highlight the relationship between risk management and identity, where users are emphasizing the way that negotiating around Covid-19 implicates their identities (e.g., "am I less poly"). Relational discussions about risk sometimes gave way to other conversations about the impact of Covid-19 on relationships and relational health more broadly, which we discuss next.

Impact of Covid-19 on Relationship Health

The last sub-theme concerning individual and public health discussions surrounding Covid-19 involved acknowledging how Covid-19 might have impacted specific rela-

tionships. Most frequently, these were negative discussions about relational strain or dissolution, more concentrated among the /polyamory subreddit. For example:

> Covid is not helping any relationship. In my surroundings I saw families, partners and roommates argueing and fighting about how to keep themselves safe agains corona and how to combines the rules and their desires to still live. I feel corona is an extra challenge to any relationships and I am sorry it affect yours. Is their a thrust problem outside of covid regulations/actions? (/polyamory).

As well as, "Me and my partner/gf have started to realize that me being polyamorous and not fulfilling it may be a big stress on our relationship on top of the pandemic" (/polyamory), and, "We are going to refocus on us, our family, and start actually dating each other again while we address the co-dependencies that have built up and have been exasperated by the pandemic" (/polyamory). Further, this post, in which "NP" stands for "nesting partner," a partner with which an individual tends to cohabitate and share household or life responsibilities such as shared expenses:

> I don't know. Shit is really hard right now with the whole pandemic. I hate the fact that my NP can't see her BF, and that my GF can't see her partners. I'm left to do a half assed job as being a primary to two people. Some amount of why they are not seeing other people is that they are doing it for me because of meds I'm on, and that makes me feel like a fucking burden. There is no winning. The point of the above? The pandemic has changed shit. I personally wouldn't make life altering decisions until we get a handle on it. I've thought about running away to give them more freedom, but that solves nothing. (/polyamory).

Although most of these reflected more negative relational outcomes, some posts did acknowledge relationships that were formed or positively transformed in some way as a result of Covid-19. In some of these more neutral or positive descriptions, individuals noted that Covid-19 was hard or challenging, but that they were able to figure something out. For example:

> I'm in a triad and we really try to make time for the three as well as each individual two. That has been very difficult during COVID because we live together and all work from home. But we try to create those alone moments too. Because it is also very good when my two partners are together alone for me to take time to myself (/polyamory).

In summary, while both forums discussed personal and public health aspects of Covid-19, and how those health recommendations and behaviors impacted them personally and relationally, the concentration of sub-themes varied between the two forums. Specifically, discussion about Covid-19 from a public health perspective, including moral-coding of one's own and others' behavior (i.e., taking Covid-19 seriously means you care about other people, healthcare workers, or your community, and failure to do so means you do not), more frequently populated /swingers forums. Although opposition to public health guidance was relatively rare, posts that did

occur were forceful and met with significant commentary from the /swingers forum. In contrast, those in the /polyamory forum discussed a more significant impact on individuals' mental and emotional health, or specific relationships and polycules.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to explore how two public, online CNM communities discussed the Covid-19 pandemic during its January 2021 peak. Two primary themes characterized communication in the /swinging and /polyamory subreddits on Reddit. com. First, participants described, interpreted, and responded to the social limitations of the Covid-19. Specifically, participants acknowledged a number of ways in which the pandemic limited their ability to safely enact their respective CNM identities and behaviors. As in Manley & Goldberg (2021), CNM individuals identified an array of responses to those limitations, including changes to relationships and use of technology; however, responses varied between different CNM communities, reflecting their different relationship structures. Second, participants reflected on individual and social health concerns in relation to Covid-19. In particular, these included personal concerns about Covid-19 risks to individual health, as well as mental and emotional health challenges brought on by isolation, and the well-being of dyads and larger relationship sets. In this section, we discuss the implications of these findings, and the limitations of the present study, as well as directions for future research.

CNM and Identity-Making Communication on Social Media During Covid-19

Our work was motivated by interest in (1) the similarities that social identity groups characterized by multiple intimate, social connections may have experienced during a socially isolating period of the Covid-19 pandemic, by (2) how, if at all, these two groups may have differently experienced these social disruptions in relation to their CNM identities, and (3) by how this discourse was reflected on Reddit.

Despite the definitional ambiguity of both swinging and polyamorous communities, prior literature and popular discussion of both identities frequently position swinging as more recreational or as more of a lifestyle (Bentzen & Træen, 2014; Rubinsky & Niess, 2021), and polyamory as more akin to an identity or orientation (Dixon, 2016; Klesse, 2014). Our findings in the context of Covid-19 somewhat reinforce this division. Although both groups reflected similar supra-themes in their Reddit discourse, the way in which themes were discussed varied by group. Specifically, those in the /polyamorous subreddit more frequently discussed mental and emotional health concerns associated with isolation and the impacts of Covid-19 on relational quality. On the other hand, commentary on public health rather than individual health was far more common in the /swingers subreddit. This commentary often positioned swinging activities as recreational, sexual activity. Public health discourse in the /swingers group more often than not discouraged activity that would jeopardize public health and reinforced the need for social distancing on that basis. Infrequent but vehement counter-commentary calling for continued social activities regardless of Covid-19 or criticizing social distancing behaviors (generally as overly fearful) was evident

on the /swingers subreddit while being wholly absent from the /polyamory subreddit. It is noteworthy that even those arguing against the seriousness of Covid-19 did not position swinging activities as central to their identity or mental health, but as a part of social activities in which they intended to engage regardless of the pandemic.

The different emphases in discussion may be grounded by differences in these communities' relational activity. Swinging is typically described as an activity of couples, emphasizing the continuity of a primary dyadic relationship (Rubinsky & Niess, 2021) often involving marriage or cohabitation. Polyamorous individuals, by contrast, may belong to a wide range of relational dynamics in which some may cohabit with all partners, some may cohabit with only some partners, and some may not cohabit with any partners. Indeed, on Reddit, polyamorists more often mentioned feeling lonely or alone when describing their response to Covid-19, a feeling less prevalent among swingers. Findings from prior research have suggested that increased social connectivity before and during lockdown periods was associated with lower levels of stress, worrying, and loneliness (Kovacs et al., 2021; Nitschke et al., 2020), and that during the pandemic face-to-face and same-home partnerships were often prioritized over partnerships involving distances and different homes (Rothmüller, 2021). Thus, reactions to Covid-19 within the CNM community may vary with the dynamics of their members' cohabitation.

A possible implication of these findings may be that future theory and research on CNM would benefit from resisting an urge to cluster CNM identities and practices into a singular identity. Consistent with prior research (see Klesse, 2014 for further discussion), there are meaningful differences between different forms of CNM, like swinging and polyamory. There are also meaningful differences within these communities.

One direction for future work on this subject is the extent to which public discourse on Reddit about Covid-19 for these communities reflect efforts at communal coping (Afifi & Afifi, 2021). Although population centers may have localized polyamorous or swinging communities, many individuals access their CNM community via social media (Paccagnella, 2020). Thus, how online communities engage in sensemaking communication can reflect efforts to cope with crisis and uncertainty in ways that reflect communities' distinctive composition and social structure.

Limitations of Inquiry

This thematic analysis is intended to generate theoretically-useful insights to help develop understanding of two understudied communities. The themes we identify should not be generalized beyond the particular time and setting we study, which is uncharacteristic in many ways. Studying the entire population of these online communities' communications during a peak period of a pandemic has multiple advantages, including a lack of a need to sample within that population and greater likelihood of drawing out voluminous and forcefully-expressed communication on the subject. However, communication during more quiescent periods of the pandemic may be quite different in both structure and content. Further, the subreddits /swingers and /polyamory are the most general and widely-used spaces on Reddit covering their subject matter, but smaller subreddits focusing on more particular subtopics

may have had different emphases. In addition, although it is notable that we identified strikingly similar themes when dividing our analysis into 50% subsets, the way we initially worded these themes differed, possibly reflecting our different disciplinary backgrounds (i.e., communication and sociology). It is plausible that researchers approaching the same set of communications from different disciplinary perspectives could identify different themes.

It is also important to note that demographics of these subreddits are likely distinctive. Earlier, we noted distinctions between the concerns articulated on the two subreddits; these appear to reflect differences in how these communities view social interactions as a part of their identity. However, they also may reflect other differences in the characteristics of the two communities that could characterize responses to Covid-19. For instance, polyamorous individuals compared to swingers are more likely to identify under the LGBTQ umbrella (Balzarini et al., 2019), and tend to be more politically liberal (Jenks, 2014). Both LGBTQ identity (Salerno et al., 2020) and political identity (Collins et al., 2021) may shape reactions to Covid-19 in a number of ways. In addition, Reddit's users are not characteristic of the general population, but rather are disproportionately young, liberal, highly-educated, lower-income and men (Barthel et al., 2016); although we cannot characterize the demographic diversity of the subreddits we have studied due to the pseudonymity of Reddit, it is likely that participants in discussions reflect Reddit's non-representative user base and the distinct demographics of CNM communities. Although outside the scope (and possibility of the methodology) of the current study, demographic differences and varying social positions likely shape response to and discourse about Covid-19. Future research may benefit from considering the intersection of these possibilities.

This work's analysis is strictly qualitative and focused on the content of communication, rather than making quantitative claims about magnitude, frequency, or relationships beyond qualifications for descriptive content. However, future work beyond this boundary may adopt different methods to highlight larger-scale structure in communication in these communities. We notice, for instance, that the proportional share of users commenting to both the /polyamory and /swinging subreddits is greater among those discussing the Covid-19 pandemic than among the broader set of those posting to the subreddits on all topics. Is this a fluke of chance, are users who discuss Covid-19 somehow different from users on these subreddits in general, or does a topic of concern shared by two communities create a structural bridge that more strongly connects the communities through sharing of users? This topic is worth further consideration through quantitative analysis. In another avenue for further inquiry, we noted in our coding which users discussed which themes, and when themes co-occurred within the same instance of communication. These instances of affiliation create a dual structure that permit us to observe not only what themes and sub-themes occur, but how these ideas in those themes are connected in a cultural network with ties of varying strength created through the channel of shared authorship and joint communication (Mützel & Breiger, 2020).

Conclusion

Two CNM communities, as reflected in Reddit conversations during the month of January 2021 of the Covid-19 pandemic, experienced a number of personal, relational, and community stressors. Members of these communities did not react to the challenges of the pandemic with passivity or uniformity, but devoted considerable reflective and creative energy to the task of considering the possibilities and potentials before them. Some experienced lockdowns or other public health measures as either government or social imposition, for these individuals the question of which limits would be borne, which might be renegotiated, and which would be resisted was central. Others actively constructed their understanding of the situation and their role within it through careful ethical imagination. Both swingers and polyamorists on Reddit described this period as difficult and disruptive, but the nature of these conversations and the concerns within them varied between the two communities, reflecting and reinforcing differences in how each community envisions its identity, how that identity is enacted through individual and social structure, and how these enactments were consonant or conflicted with demands of the time. These findings emphasize differences both within and among CNM communities that highlight important distinctions for theory and research in CNM communication and social structure.

Declarations

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