Article – Theme section

Baked bunnies, couple selfies, and video-call gardening
Visual communication in couple relationships during COVID-19

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Abstract

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has had manifold societal implications. This paper reflects on the role of visual communication for maintaining relationship stability in couple relationships during the first wave of the pandemic, which we understand as a circumstantial turning point. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews with couples before, during, and after the first wave of COVID-19 in Switzerland, complemented by creative visual methods, follow-up surveys, and video calls. Our results show that visual practices are embedded in rather stable communication repertoires of couples during their relationship maintenance phase. Our study also points to the simultaneous use of a variety of visual practices, which led to a high "visual saturation". These visual practices were found to contribute to relationship stability by reinforcing intimacy, a key factor in couple relationships, thereby shielding the relationships from circumstantial change.

Keywords

Visual communication, couple relationships, relationship stability, communication stability, turning points, COVID-19

Introduction

In early 2020, lockdown measures were introduced globally due to the rapid diffusion of COVID-19, creating particular communication challenges for social relationships (Kemp, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020). While public social gatherings were drastically reduced, a trend toward an increased use of digital technologies was observed (Lee et al., 2022). In order to keep in touch with family, friends, colleagues, and other social contacts, people turned to digital platforms (Kemp, 2020). In particular, the use of video-conferencing tools increased (Nguyen et al., 2020), with meetings and even birthday parties being held online (Hargittai & Nguyen, 2020). These are indicators of an increasing relevance of visual technologies and visual communication based on the use and exchange of, e.g., photographs, images, videos, and gifs, just to name a few exemplary visual items, during the pandemic.

Previous research has identified general changes in close social relationships induced by COVID-19 and overarching trends regarding changes in the usage and frequencies of communication tools and technologies (Garfin, 2020; Hargittai & Nguyen, 2020; Kemp, 2020; Marzouki et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020). These studies are a valuable foundation for the present study. However, studies with an explicit focus on the role of visual communication in the context of COVID-19 remain scarce. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of how visual communication contributes to maintaining stability in couples' relationships in turning points. The COVID-19 pandemic is here understood as a circumstantial turning point impacting couple relationships in a way that is beyond the control of those involved (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Pittman, 2001; Lloyd & Cate, 1985).

This article is based on a research project on visual communication and the visual technologies used in the communication repertoires of close social relationships in Switzerland. The project focuses specifically on the roles, functions, and significance of visual communication in everyday life. However, with the emergence of the pandemic, the notion of the "everyday" changed significantly, as life could no longer be characterized as "ordinary". As the study was started before the first wave of the pandemic, it yields interesting insights regarding the changes and stability of communication. The main research question addressed in this article is: In what ways have visual practices contributed to maintaining stability in couple relationships in turning points, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in Switzerland?

In this paper, we first discuss the importance of visuals in couple relationships, after which we illustrate the methodological design of the project, which is based on qualitative interviews conducted *before*, *during*, and *after* the emergence of COVID-19, visual

methods, surveys, and in-depth video calls with couples in Switzerland. Subsequently, we present and summarize the findings. Finally, we discuss the results and present our conclusions. Our findings indicate that, overall, the dyad-specific communication universe of our participants remained rather stable. Minor adaptions were observed in usage frequencies, leading to slight changes in communication routines. Visual practices, that is, what people do with visuals, also remained stable and were found to be crucial in reinforcing intimacy within the relationship, which in turn contributed to maintaining the stability of the couple relationship. Video-calling was widely used among non-cohabiting couples, enabling a kind of shared everyday experience between the communication partners. Moreover, the act of taking pictures was found to be an important factor in relationship maintenance. Not only did it foster physical closeness, it was also understood as a sign of relationship commitment (Schwarz, 2010). Furthermore, our results show that a great variety of other visual practices connected to sending, publishing, looking at, and talking about visuals also contributed to feelings of connectedness, closeness, and commitment, further maintaining stability within couple relationships. Visuals and visual technologies were found to be important in general, and during the pandemic especially, in both remote and face-to-face situations.

Mediated and visualized social interaction in close relationships

Creating and experiencing intimacy and close connection in social relationships have always been important social goals and general basic needs in society (see, e.g., Marar, 2012; Mosier, 2006; Sanderson et al., 2007). Social relationships are created, maintained, and continuously reconfirmed in constant communicative interaction (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Duck, 2003; Hardey, 2004; Krotz, 2014). We understand social relationships—and couple relationships in particular—as social processes based on a variety of turning points that steer the direction of the relationship itself and, thus, determine whether it is maintained (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Duck & Mc Mahan, 2015). The present paper considers turning points as central elements in understanding couple relationships as ongoing processes (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Duck & Mc Mahan, 2015; Kellas et al., 2008). Turning points are key events which bring about irreversible change in the couple relationship's trajectory (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Pittman, 2001; Kellas et al., 2008; Theiss & Solomon, 2007; Winn, 2007) that are negotiated through continuous interactions of communications in the sense of an "ongoing conversation" (Berger & Kellner, 1964, p. 4). Previous research has characterized various reasons for relationship turning points, including those of a dyadic, individual, network, and circumstantial nature (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Pittman, 2001; Lloyd & Cate, 1985). While dyadic reasons come from within the couple, individual reasons are rooted in one of the partners, and network reasons include factors from third parties (Baxter et al., 1999; Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Circumstantial factors are initiators of turning points that come from outside the relationship and are beyond the couple's

control (Baxter et al., 1999; Baxter & Pittman, 2001)—such as a global pandemic. Previous research has not specifically mentioned COVID-19 as a circumstantial turning point for relationships yet. Rather, physical separation in general, e.g., due to work or school in different geographic locations or due to one of the partners being in the hospital (Baxter et al., 1999; Baxter & Pittman, 2001; Lloyd & Cate, 1985), has been characterized as a circumstantial turning point. In this paper, we argue that COVID-19 can be understood as a circumstantial turning point for close relationships, as it impacted everyday life on several levels, including physical separation, which required new ways of staying in touch.

In phases of change, couples must strategically adapt their communication to the respective situation (Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Weigel & Murray, 2000): "couples need to reconfirm attachments and caring for one another, create shared meaning and a sense of mutual understanding, engage in joint problem-solving, establish new mutual relationship patterns, and reinforce emotional sharing and intimacy" (Weigel & Murray, 2000, p. 437). This means that couples must adjust their communication patterns accordingly in order to maintain stability (Weigel & Murray, 2000). As turning points are based on communicative negotiations that induce or enable coping with change, they are strongly intertwined with the increasing mediatization of communication in everyday interaction. Previous research has shown that media and communication technologies are used for the creation and preservation of intimate bonds (Barker et al., 2018; Cefai & Couldry, 2019; Chambers, 2013) and evoke feelings of closeness, mutual engagement, and gestures of self-disclosure, all of which promote connectedness and intimacy and, thus, contribute to relationship stability and satisfaction (Cabrera García & Aya Gómez, 2014; Finn, 2012; Hertlein & Chan, 2020; Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2012). Indeed, intimacy can act as a buffer against "negative forces" (Hand et al., 2013, p. 12), such as a pandemic. Intimacy has many different dimensions (see Lobinger et al., 2021). Generally, following Jiang and Hancock (2013), intimacy is understood "as a dyadic and interdependent relating process whereby a personal, subjective sense of closeness develops through enduring interactions using a range of interpersonal media over time" (Jiang & Hancock, 2013, p. 557). Digital media can, for example, foster closeness and, thus, intimacy and can be used for bridging spatial and physical distance (Broadbent & Bauwens, 2008; Gan, 2021; Gómez Cruz & Miguel, 2014; Su, 2016). As such, a kind of "always on" connection (Madianou, 2016, p. 183) can be created, whereby people experience a sense of continuous closeness (Andreas et al., 2016). These communicative practices are interwoven into a seamless web of co-present encounters and mediated ways of communicating at a distance (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013; Licoppe, 2004), creating a "hybrid presence" (Simonsen, 2021). Research has shown that the simultaneous use of both face-to-face and technologically mediated exchanges is positively correlated with relationship satisfaction (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013; Haythornthwaite, 2005). However, the exact set-up of the communication universe is highly unique and dyad-specific (Madianou & Miller, 2013). Importantly, media and technology usage in social relationships also comes with ambiguities. Commu-

nication technology does not only foster connectedness and closeness within the couples, but can also lead to feelings of distance and thus create conflicts within the relationship (Baym, 2010; Roberts & David, 2016). In the present study, we focused on the ability of communication technologies as connectors, while acknowledging their ambiguity and potential as disruptors.

Within this highly diverse communication technoscape of social relationships, visuals are of central importance, both in co-present and distant mediated interactions (see, e.g., Van House, 2009) for "being there" as well as to "feel close," "share everyday life" (Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2012, p. 754), and create intimacy (Andreassen et al., 2018; Lobinger et al., 2021; Thorhauge et al., 2020). In the present paper, visuals are understood, following Aiello and Parry (2020), as "non-linguistic pictorial elements that feature in cultural artefacts distributed via media technologies" (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 5). In our paper, not only *sharing*, but more generally, the act of *doing* something with visuals is relevant. Therefore, we use the term visual practice to describe mediated and visualized acts of communication, including practices such as the production of pictures, sharing pictures, talking about pictures, and practices of seeing. In our understanding of visual practices, we follow practice theory (Couldry, 2012; Reckwitz, 2003; Schatzki, 2016), where communication practices are understood as social acts (Schatzki, 2016), and "doing" something with media (Couldry, 2012). Thus, visual practices comprise "what people do with photographs" (Edwards, 2012, p. 224) and with visuals in general. Therefore, we underscore that not only the content of visuals but the act of doing something with visuals can also be important in initiating and cultivating relationship closeness and intimacy (Lobinger et al., 2021). Due to their associative and holistic character (M. G. Müller, 2007; Nöth, 2011), visuals are particularly suitable for triggering and displaying human emotions, which make them ideal elements for creating intimacy (M. G. Müller & Kappas, 2010) and maintaining relationships. Previous research in the field of visual communication has shown that visuals are highly suitable for creating connectedness and, thus, maintaining relationships in both remote and co-present situations (Linke, 2011; K. F. Müller & Röser, 2017). Furthermore, the *act of creating* visuals itself is intertwined with close connections and intimacy (Schwarz, 2010). Not only is taking pictures or creating videos together understood as a commitment and confirmation of a relationship, it is also as a reflection of the physical and emotional closeness of the visually depicted people (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018; Schwarz, 2010). This closeness can also be encouraged by the technology itself, inviting participants to perform their relationship in front of the camera (Gómez Cruz & Miguel, 2014). Moreover, sharing visuals assumes crucial functions for creating a sense of intimacy (Lobinger, 2016b), for example, when they are exchanged for the sake of "perpetual contact" (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), typically in regular and highly ritualized forms (Kofoed, 2018). This "visual chitchat" (Villi, 2012) can include greetings in the morning and sharing pictures of meals or the sunset on the way home from work. Such seemingly banal or meaningless visuals are exchanged for the sake of visual connectivity. They are relevant only to the respective

communication partners, refer to a shared story, and build on existing knowledge about the other (Farci et al., 2017; Kofoed & Larsen, 2016). Furthermore, visuals can be highly valuable means of *sharing moments* with others. The immediacy of the visual exchange allows for real-time sharing (Lobinger et al., 2021); thus, not only does it overcome spatial and temporal distance, it also allows a particular experience of simultaneity (Villi, 2015), of "being present" at the very scene of the communication partner, as the example of video-calling illustrates. This kind of simultaneous participation in each other's lives creates a sense of visually mediated co-presence (Lasén, 2015; Villi, 2016), fosters closeness and togetherness, and strengthens the intimate bonds between the communicators (Prieto-Blanco, 2016). Further, *doing* something with pictures together, such as looking at pictures or creating photo books, can create intimacy and a feeling of physical closeness (see, e.g., Prieto-Blanco, 2016; Rose, 2010). Here, emotions and memories of shared activities are triggered by visuals that serve as emotional resources in material form (Prieto-Blanco, 2016; Rose, 2010; Van House et al., 2004).

A repertoire-oriented approach to analyzing potential changes

Previous research indicates that visuals and visual practices are important factors in establishing and maintaining relationships and that they contribute to feelings of connectedness, closeness, and intimacy between communicative partners. However, visual practices do not occur in isolation. They can be best understood when studied against the backdrop of the whole communication repertoire of which they are part (see, e.g., Licoppe, 2004). In the present paper, visuals are investigated following the approach of repertoire-oriented, non-media-centered media research (Couldry, 2011; Hepp, 2010). This means taking into account the complex intertwining of mediated communication and face-to-face communication (Hasebrink, 2015; Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017; Licoppe, 2004; Madianou & Miller, 2013) when examining visual practices. This approach enables grasping changes in visual-communicative practices in social relationships against their whole communication repertoire. In what follows, we outline the methodological design of the study.

Method

The findings presented here are based on pair and individual interviews, surveys, and video calls conducted in (Swiss) German, French, Italian, and English with couples in Switzerland. Non-English quotes included in this article have been translated into English by the authors. We conducted three interviews per couple: one pair interview (i.e., with both partners) and a follow-up individual interview with each partner. The selection of participants followed a theoretical, selective sampling approach (Lamnek, 2010), ensuring the highest possible contrast regarding (regional) origin, age, level of education, profession, duration, age differences of the partners, housing situation (living together, living apart,

and different cantons or countries), same-sex or different-sex relationships, and whether the couples had children. Each participant received an incentive of 50 Swiss Francs for participation, due to the extensive interview procedure. The first set of interviews (the "before" cases) were conducted prior to the pandemic. The second set of interviews (the "in-between" cases) started before COVID-19 but were then interrupted due to the pandemic situation in Switzerland. In these cases, the pair interviews had been conducted but not (both of) the individual interviews. These interviews were then pursued after the first wave of COVID-19. The third set of interview data (the "after" cases) includes cases in which both the pair and individual interviews (i.e., all three interviews per couple) were conducted after the first wave of the pandemic in Switzerland (starting in July 2020). There were nine "before" cases, one "in-between" case, and eleven "after" cases. Couples from the "before" cases as well as the "in-between" case were recontacted during the first peak of the first wave of COVID-19 in Switzerland for additional surveys and follow-up video calls. The aim was to learn more about how these participants were affected by the situation and how their communication repertoires had changed. In the "after" cases, an additional interview question addressed changes in communication practices due to the emergence of COVID-19.

Pair and individual interviews

Three semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted per couple. In the first pair interview, the couple was interviewed together (Linke, 2011). Typically, in the pair interview, couples tend to present a negotiated viewpoint of the relationship, while individual viewpoints or conflicts tend to be disguised in favor of a consistent performance "façade". Thus, we conducted an additional individual interview with each member of the couple to learn more about the individual points of view. The interviews typically lasted about two hours.

The pair interviews addressed topics such as the relationship history of the participants, typical days within their relationship, and their ways of keeping in contact. The participants were asked to collaboratively create their communication repertoire by inserting and placing ways of communication, tools, apps, and devices on a minimally structured network drawing, focusing specifically on visual components (Hepp et al., 2016; Schönhuth & Gamper, 2013). Implementing visual creative methods (Lobinger, 2016a)—network drawing and visual elicitation (Collier, 1957; Harper, 1986, 2002; Lapenta, 2012)—was helpful for stimulating the participants' narration (Harper, 2002) and creating connections between the various interviews. In the present study, the jointly created network drawings were not used as visual data material in their own right, but rather served for eliciting narration within the interviews. Moreover, the participants were asked to bring three to five significant and/or typical visuals of their relationship. As these visuals had particular meaning for the relationship, they were especially suitable for participatory

photo-elicitation (Harper, 1986, 2002; Kolb, 2008; Lapenta, 2012; Lobinger, 2016a). During the interview, the narrations about the images (Awan & Gaunlett, 2011) provided important information, as the pictures alone did not necessarily reveal their meaning for the couple (Radley et al., 2005). In the pair interviews, the participants also talked about the significance, meaning, and frequency of visual practices, such as sending, publishing, and looking at pictures and the respective platforms used.

Subsequently, the network drawing served as a familiar entry into the individual interview, where individual points of view on visual communication were of interest. Here, the topics under discussion included communication with other people, such as friends and family; forms of visuals (e.g., images, videos, or gifs); the role, rituals, and aims of taking pictures; the photography equipment; and practices of sending, publishing, archiving, and storing visuals. Additionally, norms and rules of visual communication and more sensitive topics, such as potential conflicts in connection with visual practices, were thematized. In the interviews conducted after the first wave of the pandemic, an additional question addressing changes in communication practices and the role of visuals was included.

Surveys and video interviews

In May and June 2020, during and shortly after the peak phase of the first wave of the pandemic in Switzerland, 10 couples were recontacted and invited to complete a short survey. In total, 16 completed surveys were obtained. The surveys were created in English, German, French, and Italian, with mainly predefined answers or a movable bar to indicate intensities through semantic differentials (-3, "a lot less," to +3, "a lot more," e.g., "Do you currently take more or less pictures of your partner?") or scales (from 0, "no change at all," to 10, "a lot of change," e.g., "How much has your life situation changed with the emergence of COVID-19?"), as well as an open text field for further information. Changes in everyday life, communication in general, and visual practices were addressed. Moreover, the subjective well-being of the participants was assessed using a scale from 0 to 10; values lower than 2 were used as exclusion criteria for video interviews with the participants due to possible personal loss and trauma in connection with COVID-19. Further, an open-ended question invited the participants to provide additional information they considered important. Rather than seeking quantitative results about change, the surveys served to reach out to participants and to provide a first assessment of their well-being in these difficult times. Participants who faced personal crisis, e.g., had suffered a serious illness or loss, would not have been included in further in-depth interviews for ethical reasons.

Using Jitsi Meet (jitsi.org/jitsi-meet/), a user-friendly, secure, and open-source video-conferencing tool, we then conducted video interviews with seven participants, ranging in length of around 20–40 minutes. The participants were asked about general changes and changes in visual communication on a typical day in their relationship compared with their everyday life before the pandemic and were invited to discuss their use of

pictures and visual practices. Again, the couples' network drawings were used to facilitate the verbal narration.

The present paper is based on 21 couple cases. The number of surveys and video calls differed from case to case depending on the availability of the participants and their belonging to a certain dataset (the "before," "in-between," or "after" cases) (see Table 1, Appendix A). The data obtained in the surveys and video interviews were compared with the data collected prior to COVID-19 (pair and individual interviews) to examine potential changes and consistencies in the dyadic communication repertoires of the couples in the context of COVID-19. Additionally, the couples in the "after" cases reported retrospectively on changes in communication practices in the context of COVID-19. In sum, a highly dense and heterogenous dataset emerged, amounting to more than 96 hours of interviewing, over 950 images (and other visuals, e.g., videos and gifs), and 16 completed surveys. This plurality of visual and verbal data material (Lobinger, 2022) from different points in time allowed for a detailed exploration of how the participants perceived the pandemic and how it affected the communication in their relationship.
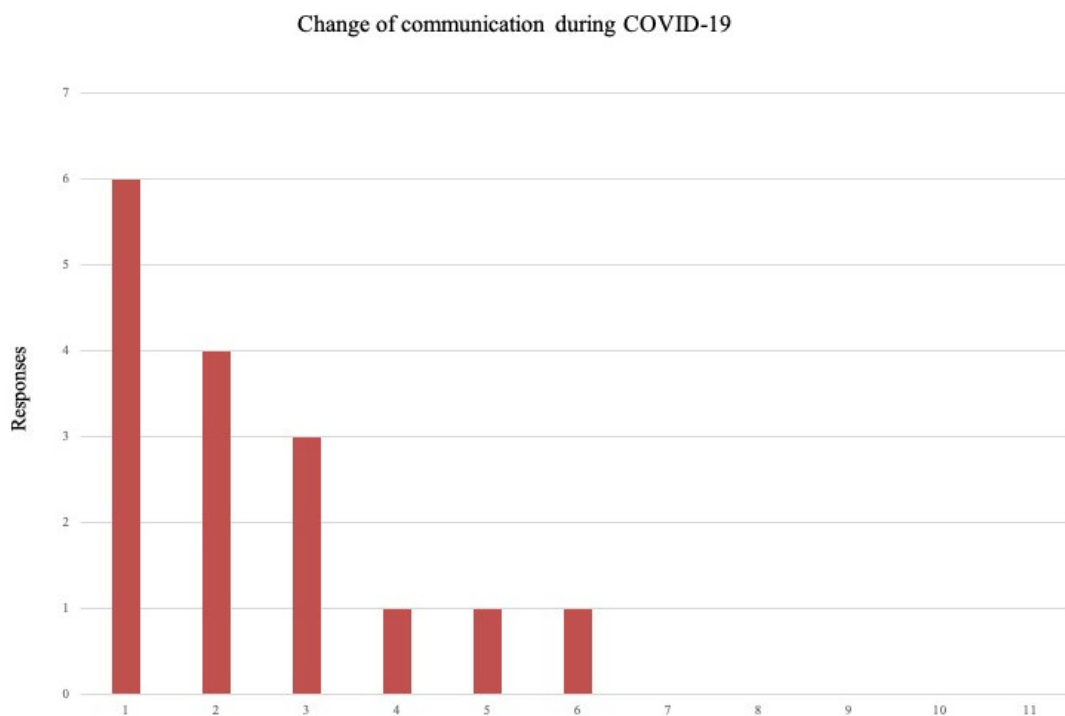

Figure 1: Survey results. Eleven-point scale from 0 ("our communication has not change at all") to 10 ("our communication has changed a lot") Responses by individuals, not by couples.

Data analysis of verbal and visual data

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis (Kuckartz, 2014), based on deductive and inductive categories (Schreiber, 2014), using NVivo. Additionally, case summaries (Kuckartz, 2014) condensing core information about each couple case enabled an overview of each couple's main characteristics regarding visual practices as well as general relationship biographical information. The visual data were anonymized and analyzed following a combination of quantitative and qualitative image analytical approaches. All analytical steps strived toward an integration of both verbal and visual data.

Results

Our results show that visuals were important, especially with regard to their intertwining with other communication elements. Taking into account the variety of media and media technologies in the couples' communication repertoires, we found that the communication repertoires remained relatively stable, evident from the couples' verbal narratives during the interviews and video interviews as well as from the survey results (see Figure 1).

In the survey, of the 16 responses, six indicated no changes in their communication (0 on a scale from 0 to 10), while 1 and 2 were mentioned four and three times respectively. Three participants mentioned slight changes ranging from 3 to 5. This first glimpse into the data was then deepened with qualitative (video) interviews. Our results show only small changes, mostly in terms of the intensities and usage frequencies of single items of the repertoires, especially related to visuals. For example, exchanging visuals increased along with engaging in video calls. We found that the stability of communication repertoires is connected to the stability of (visual) communication practices in established couple relationships. Most couples could rely on a previously negotiated communication repertoire that had been established in similar situations. Only one couple needed to adapt to the new situation brought about by the pandemic, with major changes in their communication repertoire. For example, Lily and Nathan did not need to change their communication repertoire, even though their situation had changed from seeing each other daily to seeing each other much less. As they had already experienced periods of being spatially separated for several days, for example, with Lily living and studying in a different canton, they had an established communication repertoire that could be adopted in the changed situation. Conversely, Hannah and Timo had never experienced longer or regular periods of spatial distance (apart from short holiday periods). Accordingly, no ready-made back-up communication repertoire for coping with increased spatial distance had been established. They had to negotiate and establish new ways of communicating and needed some time to cope with the new situation while developing a "new communication rhythm".

Our results further show that changes in communication practices also depended on external reasons, such as the living and work situations of the couples, fostering an increase or decrease in fact-to-face contact and accordingly, in mediated ways of communication and co-present media usage. However, it is important to note that cohabiting and non-cohabiting couples showed somewhat similar patterns, since non-cohabiting couples in Switzerland always had the opportunity of face-to-face contact during the entire first wave of the pandemic. In other words, non-cohabiting couples had alternating communication phases. On the one hand, in phases of intensified face-to-face contact and co-present media use we saw a decrease in mediated ways of communication. We found the same pattern in cohabiting couples with both partners working from home. On the other hand, in phases with less or no face-to-face contact of non-cohabiting couples, we witnessed an increase in digitally mediated ways of communication. This corresponded to the practices of the cohabiting couples where only one or neither partner worked in their home office. However, how the couples adjusted their communication repertoires was highly couple-specific. Boundaries regarding appropriate versus inadequate communication practices were constantly negotiated within the couple in relation to the participants' subjective and normative assessment of what was "good" and considered "too much" against the backdrop of the totality of the elements. Furthermore, here, the intimate nature of the relationship was crucial: Visuals considered meaningful within the relationship would be considered pointless when shared outside the couple and vice versa. For example, even though COVID-19 memes were considered a nuisance when received from group chats, they were seen as funny when shared within the couple.

Doing something with visuals *together*

Our results show that the couples spent more time watching movies and series (e.g., Netflix), news on TV, scrolling through social media (e.g., Instagram), or playing video games when they were physically together compared to the preceding period. This concerned both co-habiting couples and non-cohabiting couples in their phases of face-to-face contact. Further visual activities such as creating photo albums, looking at visuals together, and talking about pictures were found to be important ways of co-presence and hybrid presence. Martin, for example, reported that looking at pictures together with his wife Gloria made them realize "how good they have it", strengthening their faith that they would make it through the pandemic together. Additionally, several of the participants reported having downloaded TikTok during the pandemic so they could look at visuals as a way of spending time together, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. As the pandemic continued, however, we observed "media fatigue" setting in. Co-present media use of the above-mentioned media technologies decreased in favor of some "offline" time, such as playing board games or going for a walk together.
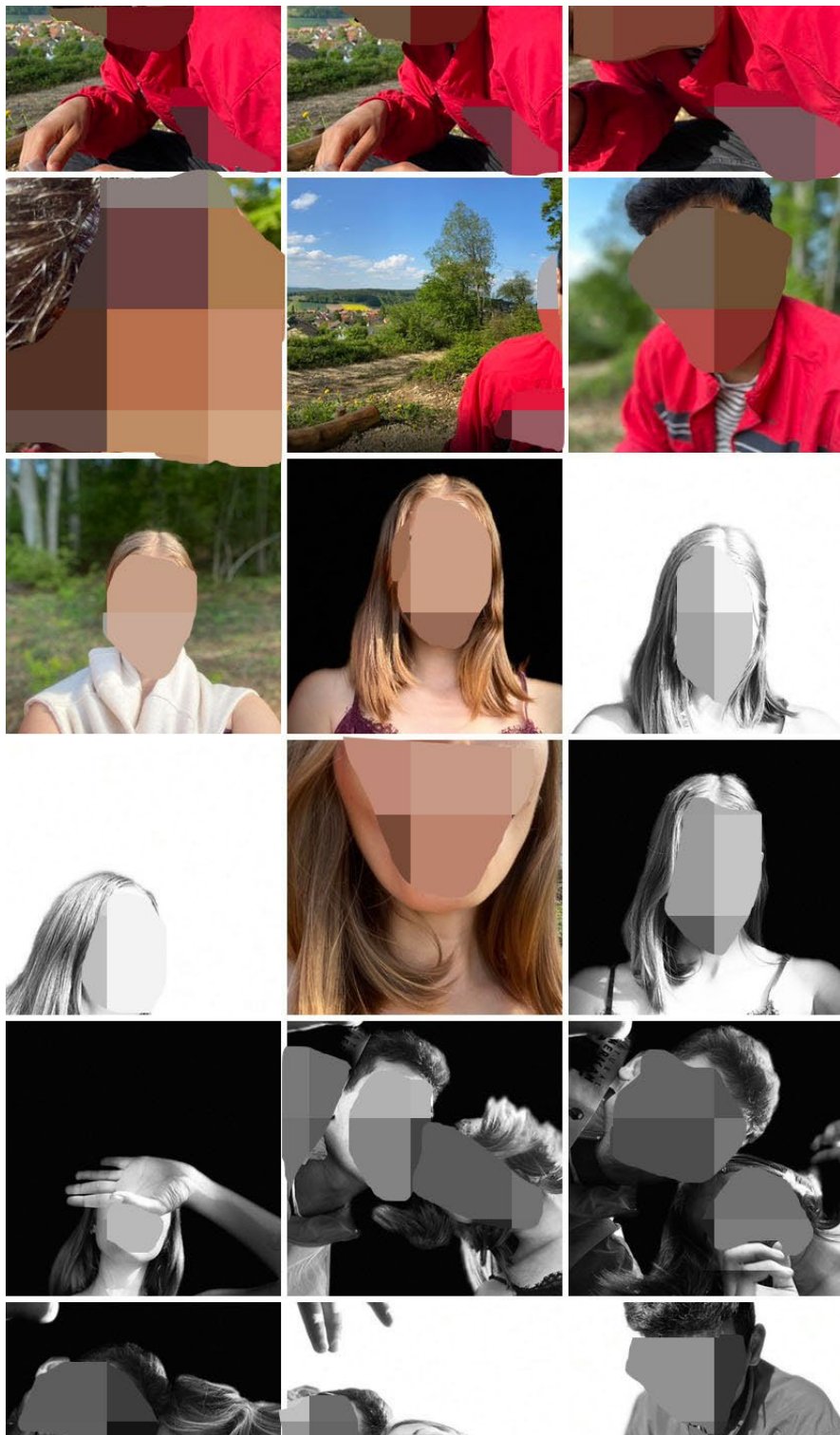
Figure 2: Experimenting with different features. Pictures are anonymized (all identifiers are eliminated) and reproduced with permission.

However, these "offline" activities were also accompanied by photography devices and activities, such as experimenting with new devices and technological features (e.g., with a new camera or on the phone). In some cases, due to COVID-19, new visual equipment was acquired, which was accompanied by an increase in photo- and video-taking activities. Kim, for example, bought a drone during the first wave of the pandemic, a "corona purchase", as she called it, and experimented with taking videos while outside with Fiona. Similarly, Lily and Nathan tried out new features on their phones and took a series of pictures of themselves and each other while walking outside together. Hannah reported being photographed more by Timo, who had purchased a new phone. He photographed her especially in "silly" and "random" everyday situations, such as her trying to engage in acrobatic positions and failing. Both co-habiting and non-cohabiting couples engaged in visual activities of this sort. Hugo and Manon increasingly engaged in taking pictures with their new camera, which they had acquired shortly before COVID-19 but had not found the time to try it out until pandemic restrictions came into force. Interestingly, we found that pictures of the couple together or of each other served as a "test object", or an experimentation, with visuals. Hugo and Manon, for example, experimented with taking a series of formal couple portraits at home. This increased visual activity of taking pictures led to an increase in sending visuals, as these couple pictures were then shared with both their parents.

Similarly, Lily and Nathan tried out various features on their phones, and a whole series of photographs emerged (see Figure 2). In this photo shoot, they experimented with light, color, and posing in front of the camera, both as a couple and separately. Taking pictures together and of one another had always been an important visual practice in the case of Lily and Nathan. The novelty, however, was that the act of taking a photo structured their time together—like a "third player" (Schwarz, 2010, p. 162).

Interestingly, when asked in the video interviews about taking couple pictures during COVID-19, most participants indicated that they did not take pictures as a couple during the pandemic, as they did not "feel the need". However, when the interviewers asked the participants to see some of the pictures they had taken during their "photo experiments", couple photos were among the photographs shown. The participants then argued that these pictures were taken only to "experiment" with the newly purchased devices or other technical features and not to create a "couple representation":

> I see. Yeah, it's just – it's very specifically […] about the camera because, somehow, the new iPhone has like a portrait mode that you can use to darken or lighten or otherwise. And that's what we wanted to know, how it works with other objects, or how it works with two faces, or how it works otherwise. But it's really about exploring and less about […] how the pictures themselves came into being. (Nathan)

This ambivalence in making and assessing couple images suggests that in the maintenance phase of a couple's relationship, taking pictures in the absence of an obvious photo

opportunity such as a holiday, celebration, or other special activity might not be considered an appropriate visual practice. This corroborates previous research on taking selfies (see, e.g., Diefenbach & Christoforakos, 2017), which has shown that selfies are often considered a selfish, self-centered, or even narcissistic practice. Thus, experimenting with pictures served as a kind of "excuse" for taking pictures of themselves as a couple and of each other, transforming the situation into a photo opportunity and playfully engaging in a shared visual activity. In turn, a few of the participants perceived the pandemic as an inhibitor of photo opportunities.

Visually simulating a shared space

Further, our results indicate that the emergence of the pandemic led to an increase in exchanging pictures of daily activities. Exchanging pictures of daily activities, for example, of baking and cooking achievements, tidying up at home, or the growth of house plants, was common among both non-cohabiting and cohabiting couples in which at least one of the partners did not work from home. Madeleine and Pierre, for example, kept sending each other text messages on WhatsApp as well as pictures of their own garden and its blooming flowers. They also kept calling each other on the phone, as they were spatially separated during work hours, similar to their practices before the pandemic. Hannah and Lily shared pictures of their home-baked goods with their partners (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3 and 4: Examples of photo-sharing.

Before the pandemic, this had played a subordinate role in both couples' photo-sharing activities. Photo sharing had rather happened in extraordinary situations, such as when baking cookies for Christmas with the family. In contrast, the freshly baked bunny and banana bread were taken in a rather ordinary moment. This suggests that every-day moments, "too trivial" to photograph before the pandemic, have suddenly become worthy of photography, which was also due to the fact that spending more time at home meant that the participants had more time for such activities. This change in the photo-worthiness of certain motifs and situations suggests an elevation of daily life activities worth photographing and exchanging, aiming at experiencing these very moments of ordinary and mundane everyday life together.

Similarly, our results show an increase in video-calling, especially for non-cohabiting couples. Fiona and Kim, for example, used FaceTime a lot more than before the pandemic, engaging in regular video calls every three hours for checking in. They explained that video-calling was used as a way to create a shared "presence", where they not only talked to each other but also worked on separate projects while being on a call together. Similarly, Hannah described that videocalling had assumed an essential role in terms of "seeing the other" and coping with the new situation. Before, video calls had only played a subordinate role in their communication. In fact, their multiple hour-long video calls included playing online games and spending

Figure 5: Example of video-calling.

time together while doing other things besides talking, similar to Fiona and Kim. This underscores the importance of actually "seeing" each other and having the possibility of mutually experiencing their activities in a kind of "shared presence", even while spatially separated. Knowing that the partner is "there" was perceived as most important, fostering a sense of closeness despite the impossibility of physical presence.

Similarly, for Lily and Nathan, video-calling became increasingly important in terms of bridging time and distance. Typically, the calls started as WhatsApp voice calls. Within the course of the conversation, they would change to video call to show something to the other, for example, the growth of Lily's plants in her garden, or they simply wanted to "see" each other (see Figure 5).

This different mode was perceived as more intimate and "close". When living together before the pandemic, video calls had not played a significant role. In the case of Carolina and Matteo, where cantonal borders prevented them from seeing each other face-to-face, phone calls were perceived as much more important than before COVID-19. Other couples (e.g., Giuseppina and Silvestro) mentioned that if they had not been living together, digitally mediated ways of communication, such as video-calling, would have definitely been more important.

However, these results are based on communication *within* the couple and, thus, between the partners. As briefly mentioned before, digital technologies were important in the communication with others *outside* the couple, even if they played a rather subordinate role within the couple during the pandemic. For Giuseppina and Silvestro, for example, FaceTime was still important for staying in touch with family, even though they had not used it within the couple.

Discussion

The main goal of the current study was to examine how visual practices contributed to relationship stability during the turning points of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland. In line with previous research (see, e.g., Hampton et al., 2018), our results show that stable communication practices generally meant stability within the relationship, as they contributed to relationship satisfaction. Indeed, our results suggest that established communication repertoires in couple relationships remained quite stable during the pandemic. In general, the communicative elements themselves (e.g., the kinds of apps, media technologies, or forms of communication) did not change, with few exceptions, such as TikTok (which were then adopted as co-present shared activities), or work-related media technologies (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams). If something *did* change, however, it was the usage frequencies or intensities of the respective media technologies *within* the repertoires. Accordingly, in sum, only slightly diverse routines and rituals emerged in terms of communication practices. We observed increased intensity in visual practices such as video-calling. In what follows, we discuss the role of visual practices against the backdrop

of relatively stable communication repertoires and the extent to which visual practices contributed to feelings of connectedness, closeness, commitment, intimacy, and, thus, the stability of the couple relationship.

Our results show that face-to-face contact increasingly coincided with mediated communication. For couples in co-presence, watching movies and series together and joint social media use were important visual practices for fostering relationship stability. Visual activities were thus transformed into a shared activity that the couple undertook together. This physical closeness of the partners produced feelings of physical intimacy through joint engagement in visual practices (Lobinger et al., 2021). Also, visual practices such as the couples looking at their photographs and talking about them were found to be important for creating feelings of physical closeness (Prieto-Blanco, 2016; Rose, 2010) and emotional intimacy (Lobinger et al., 2021), as well as for relationship enactment (Van House, 2009). This is due to symbolic and material aspects of the visual material, which can arouse emotions and particular positive memories of shared experiences. Thus, visual material becomes a central emotional resource that couples can draw on (Lobinger et al., 2021). As our results also show, referring to such positively connoted memories of the past in visual form is especially central in times of change as couples draw strength to persevere, thus contributing to the current stability of the relationship. Even though some couples reported a general "media overload" or "media fatigue" (Buneviciene et al., 2021; Park & Lee, 2019; Xiao et al., 2021), which led to a decrease in (visual) communication practices, visuals again contributed to maintaining stability, in that the couples' offline activities were also accompanied by a variety of visual practices such as taking pictures. In accordance with previous research, the act of creating visuals was used as a means of fostering physical closeness and intimacy within the couple (Schwarz, 2010). Not only the co-present situation of performing in front of the lens, but also, the depicted closeness in the picture contributed to emotional closeness (Lobinger et al., 2021). Taking pictures, especially of the relationship itself, can be understood as a sign of committing and confirming the relationship (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018; Schwarz, 2010). Especially when shared online, pictures can be understood as a sign of "safety" (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018; Krueger & Forest, 2020; Papp et al., 2012) and function as a visual statement of belonging (Venema & Lobinger, 2020). Thus, taking couple pictures can foster feelings of safety, mutual commitment, and belonging. Especially in times of change, this creates physical closeness and emotional intimacy, providing the couple with stability as the relationship is visually confirmed.

Furthermore, our research underlines that photo-sharing works as a "visual clin d'oeils",[1] creating intimacy (Farci et al., 2017; Kofoed & Larsen, 2016; Thorhauge et al., 2020) based on the shared memories of the couples. Visuals, such as pictures of baked goods or tidied rooms, were exchanged. Even though such visuals of daily life and achievements might seem banal or meaningless for people outside the relationship, they were crucial for experiencing stability in the couple relationships. The exchange of these pictures created a sense of visual connectivity (Kofoed, 2018) based on mutual acts of self-disclosure (Lobinger et

al., 2021). Self-disclosure and responsiveness in communication interactions are known to stimulate intimacy within the couples (Finn, 2012; Hampton et al., 2018; Hand et al., 2013; Hertlein & Chan, 2020; Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Daily moments experienced by one partner were shared in a digitally mediated space, overcoming spatial and temporal restrictions (Gómez Cruz & Miguel, 2014; Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Madianou, 2016; Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2012), and enabling a quasi-simultaneity of both partners (Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Lasén, 2015; Villi, 2016). Thus, sending pictures of baked bunnies, banana breads, or tidied rooms could serve as means of stabilizing the relationship, creating a sense of connectedness and intimacy through the sharing of ordinary and mundane events in daily life. Partners always know what the other is doing, which is shown in visual form.

Similarly, video calls enabled a sense of a shared digitally mediated space. In accordance with studies reporting a worldwide increase in video-conferencing tools (Kemp, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020), we found that video-calling also assumed a crucial role for our participants in terms of "seeing each other". Such video calls allowed for strengthening the intimate connection between the communication partners when spatially separated; a finding previously identified for long-distance and transnational relationships (Gan, 2021; Hampton et al., 2018; Licoppe & Morel, 2012; Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2012; Prieto-Blanco, 2016). Thus, seeing each other in real time with the help of media technologies was found to be the next-best alternative to face-to-face communication, a mode that remains very important for couple relationships. Indeed, video-calling is generally perceived as "rich" and "warm", not least due to its multimodal nature of combining language and visual (Hampton et al., 2018; Licoppe & Morel, 2012; Valacich et al., 1993) and high degree of social presence (Rice, 1992). Accordingly, multimodal media have been found to contribute decisively to relationship closeness (Kahlow et al., 2020). Among the many ways of mediated communication, visual communication was considered the most intimate, the most personal, and the most satisfying, as it allowed for a certain "simulation of physical closeness, or proxemics" (Su, 2016, p. 237). In establishing "real-time" connections, it allowed the partners to see together, see each other, and see what the other was seeing (Hampton et al., 2018; Lobinger et al., 2021) in a "synchronous gaze" (Lobinger et al., 2021). In simulating a daily life and synchronized schedule experienced by geographically close couples (Jiang & Hancock, 2013), stability was maintained within the couple, including in times of change and spatial distance.

Conclusion

In sum, this study provides insights into how visual practices contribute to stability and maintenance in couple relationships in Switzerland in the context of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the study shows that when investigating visual practices, it is important to consider the entirety of communication elements, as well as contextual factors (e.g., living and work situation) in the relationships. As our findings show, stable

communication repertoires enable stable (visual) communication practices and, thus, contribute to the overall stability of the couple relationship. Similar to Weigel and Murray (2000), the study underscores that couples need to adapt to change by establishing new or renegotiating communication patterns. However, our study also shows that in the maintenance phase of established close relationships, communication is typically already negotiated, which means that fewer adjustments are necessary. Less stability would be expected regarding the communication of relationships in their initiation phase. In fact, our results suggest that couples who do not yet have an established communication repertoire need to negotiate a "communication rhythm" as they cannot rely on an established set of communication practices. Similarly, research findings on dating during COVID-19 emphasize the difficulties in initiating couple relationships during the pandemic (Duguay et al., 2022; Myles et al., 2021; Portolan & McAlister, 2022). With respect to visual communication, this study supports the argument that visuals need to be examined within the practices in which they are embedded. Therefore, the repertoire-oriented approach was helpful for studying the communication practices of couples. Our findings further underscore the importance of focusing on communicative issues during a global public health crisis, and circumstantial turning points in general, and acknowledging the crucial contribution of stable communication in a relationship in coping with extraordinary situations.

Second, our study suggests that visual communication contributes decisively to this stability through visual practices that promote intimacy within the couple (Lobinger et al., 2021). Indeed, intimacy as well as functioning communication practices (Hand et al., 2013; Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Wiley, 2007) are key aspects of relationship stability. Different visual practices such as doing something with visuals, looking at, talking about, creating, and exchanging them were found to create a sense of emotional and ambient intimacy within the couple relationship, both in co-present and remote situations (Lobinger et al., 2021). While previous studies have found that single visual practices, such as exchanging "banal" visual content, mutual visual exchanges, visual self-disclosure, and video talks, are important for creating closeness and intimacy, our paper shows that close relationships use many of these practices in interrelation. In fact, the communication repertoires of close relationships are highly saturated with visuals. In particular, this "web" of highly entangled visual practices contributes to creating feelings of connectedness, synchronicity, commitment, and closeness and in reinforcing intimacy within the couple in times of circumstantial change. As intimacy is a key factor in stable and satisfied relationships and can work as a buffer for circumstantial implications (Hand et al., 2013), visual practices contribute to relationship stability by fostering intimacy within the couple. Additionally, in the ways our respondents described visuals and visual practices, we learn about "good" and "bad" practices, and about what they consider a "good" and "healthy" relationship. Our study emphasizes, firstly, the desire to maintain the relationship long-term, and, secondly, the importance of continuous connectedness and a negotiated "communica-

tion rhythm". This was underlined by all our participants, both same-sex and different-sex couples. We need to critically consider that our sample included only couples that present themselves as "traditional" dyadic couples based on an ideal concept of the "pure relationship" (Giddens, 1992, p. 58) that strives towards love, reciprocal self-disclosure, and mutual benefit and satisfaction for both partners in the continuation of the relationship (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1999). Thus, their understanding of being in a couple relationship is based on particular hegemonic and normative assumptions of what is considered a "good" couple relationship (see, e.g., Barker et al., 2018) with "healthy" communication practices.

To sum up, our study adds to previous research by identifying 1) visual practices as embedded in stable communication repertoires, 2) that a variety of visual practices are used simultaneously, resulting in a high "visual saturation", and 3) that visual practices, in reinforcing intimacy within the couple, are a key component in creating and maintaining stability within couple relationships. In sum, our study indicates that visual practices allow for shielding couples against circumstantial change that *could* potentially harm the relationship. Our study shows that even though a pandemic *can* be understood as a circumstantial turning point that *might* have a dramatic impact on couples' relationship maintenance, this was not perceived as such a profound period of change for the relationships examined *here*.

This study comes with several limitations. First, we focused on couple relationships in their maintenance phase. Therefore, no conclusions could be drawn regarding couples in the dating or dissolution phase. Still, we can assume that adapting to extraordinary situations might be more challenging for couples who do not yet have an established repertoire, with critical implications for relationships and personal well-being. Interestingly, our respondents predominantly underlined the positive aspects of visual practices and of visual technologies during COVID-19 and did not mention major conflicts or problematic issues. We noticed that visual technologies, such as video calls, were positively framed and generally characterized as important, useful, and even essential, reflecting a rather uncritical and utilitarian view on technologies in pandemic times also prevalent in public discourses. Here, we often saw complaints about, e.g., "Zoom fatigue" (Leswing, 2021; Murez, 2021; Riedl, 2022; Theiler, 2021), but also a reiterating idea: "if the pandemic had happened in times without communication technologies, we would never have made it through" (Gabbiadini et al., 2020; Ovide, 2020; Paul & Cantor, 2021; Roose, 2020).

Further research could investigate post-pandemic visual practices as well as the somewhat contested adequacy and appropriateness of couple pictures, examining the social functions of couple pictures in the course of relationship development. Despite its limitations, our study contributes to creating a better understanding of the role of visual practices in couple relationships for relationship maintenance and stability during circumstantial turning points.

Notes

1. "Clin d'oeil" means "winking of an eye" and refers to pictures sent just for the purpose of saying "I'm thinking of you" (mentioned by our participants).

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Acknowledgement

Appendix A – Overview table couples

Cases	Gender	Age	Type, duration of relationship, children	Living situation during COVID-19	Work situation during COVID-19	Number of surveys	Number of video calls	B ("before"-case) IB ("in-between" case) A ("after"-case)
					General information			
G01 Hannah/ Timo	F/M	18/18	Couple, 2 years	Living apart	Both working from home	2	1 (Hannah)	B
G02 Cara/Mike	F/M	37/54	Couple, 4 years, Cara has 1 child, Mike has 2 children	Living apart	Working full time (Cara), working from home, reduced hours (Mike)	2	1 (Mike)	B
I03 Marika/ Tommaso	F/M	33/33	Married, 12 years, 2 children	Living together	Quit one of her two jobs (Marika), working full time (Tommaso)	2	0	B
I04 Dennis/Valentina	F/M	35/30	Married, 17 years, 2 children	Living together	Not applicable	0	0	B
F05 Zoé/Lucas	F/M	28/28	Couple, 2 years	Living together	Both working from home, reduced hours	1 (Zoé)	0	B
F06 Manon/Hugo	F/M	32/31	Couple, 3.5 years	Living together	Both working from home, reduced hours	2	1 (Hugo)	B
I07 Carolina/ Matteo	F/M	19/19	Couple, 3 years	Moved in together during the COVID-19 pandemic	Reduced working hours (Carolina)	2	2	B

Article: Baked bunnies, couple selfies, and video-call gardening

Cases	Gender	Age	Type, duration of relationship, children	Living situation during COVID-19	Work situation during COVID-19	Number of surveys	Number of video calls	B ("before" case) IB ("in-between" case) A ("after"-case)
I10 Diego/Mari-anna	M/F	32/31	Married, 6.5 years	Living together	Both working full time	0	0	A
G11 Raul/Tobias	M/M	24/22	Couple, 1.5 years	Living together	Both working from home	2	0	B
G12 Lily/Nathan	F/M	23/25	Couple, 7.5 years	Living apart during COVID-19	Both working from home	2	2	B
G13 Fiona/Kim	F/F	26/24	Couple, 1.5 years	Living apart	Both working from home	1 (Fiona)	0	IB
G17 Gloria/Martin	F/M	69/69	Married (2nd time), 14 years, Martin has 2 children	Living together	Both at home	0	0	A
F19 Liesel/Fernand	F/M	80/91	Married, 50 years	Living together	Both at home	0	0	A
F22 Madeleine/Pierre	F/M	62/61	Married, 32 years, 2 children	Living together	Living together, both still work-ing in the office	0	0	A
I23 Natalia/Patricia	F/F	29/40	Married, 3 years	Living together	Both working full time	0	0	A
I24 Costanza/Alberto	F/M	25/25	Couple, 3.5 years	Living together	Working full time (Costanza), working from home (Alberto)	0	0	A

Cases	Gender	Age	Type, duration of relationship, children	Living situation during COVID-19	Work situation during COVID-19	Number of surveys	Number of video calls	B ("before" case) IB ("in-between" case) A ("after"-case)
I25 Dreina/ Leonardo	F/M	22/22	Couple, 2.5 years	Living together	Both at home	0	0	A
I26 Filiberto/ Chiara	M/F	23/21	Couple, 5 years	Living apart	Both working from home, living apart	0	0	A
I27 Giuseppina/ Silvestro	F/M	35/36	Couple, 9 years	Living together	Working from home (Giuseppina), work-ing full time (Silvestro)	0	0	A
I28 Lisandra/ Walter	F/M	58/65	Couple, 9 years, both have children	Living together	Working part-time (Lisandra), working full time (Walter)	0	0	A
I30 Alessandro/Ivan	M/M	35/36	Couple, 5 years, Alessandro has 1 child	Living together	Working from home (Alessan-dro), working full time (Ivan)	0	0	A

Note. All participants' names are anonymized. The couple ID gives information about the language of the interviews; G=German; I=Italian; F=French. For "after"-cases, there is no survey or video-interview data.