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**LGBTQ Emerging Adults and COVID-19**

Allison Powell

2022 Sociology and Anthropology Honors Theses at Trinity University

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I hope acceptance, peace, and community will come for all of us, whether we find it in our biological or chosen families. So much remains uncertain, but our transitions to adulthood have only just begun, and there is so much time ahead of us in which anything can happen—including support and validation from our loved ones.

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**ABSTRACT**

Emerging LGBTQ adults experience a period of major developmental milestones complicated by multiple marginalizations, and now, a global pandemic that has disrupted the social world. Both emerging adulthood and the COVID-19 pandemic are short but intense periods occurring concurrently for young people at this time, and both factors influence the spheres of housing, family, school, and friends for LGBTQ emerging adults in this study. Emerging adults are at particular risk of being negatively affected by the ways the pandemic has altered their life course and social world, and LGBTQ emerging adults are even more at risk due to their marginalized identities. While some LGBTQ emerging adults were negatively affected by the challenges and disruptions posed by the pandemic, others saw improvements in their family relationships or housing situations during this time. Qualitative interview data indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic complicates life transitions and events for LGBTQ emerging adults, who are uniquely positioned between newfound independence as emerging adults and extended dependence on their families and caregivers.

## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I study the ways LGBTQ emerging adults in South Texas have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years. To do this, I use qualitative interview data to examine two spheres: housing and family, and school and friends. Interviews were conducted as part of a longitudinal study of 26 LGBTQ-identifying youth in San Antonio and surrounding counties. Working as part of the Texas Queer Youth COVID Study team, I tracked changes in our participants' lives over the course of the pandemic through two qualitative interviews and monthly online surveys. Our research team spoke to participants once at the onset of the pandemic, and again one year later, collecting data on family relationships, mental health, current events, major life changes, living situations, partnerships, employment, education, and identity.

Emerging LGBTQ adults are by definition experiencing a time of great transition. In this research, one challenge is to identify the differences between life events specific to this time of transition and life events specific to the pandemic. While we did not intend to study COVID-19 at the onset of this study, the pandemic hit as interviews for the Texas Queer Youth COVID Study began. While we asked participants some specific questions about COVID-19, their responses to questions unrelated to COVID-19 were also influenced by the pandemic as it progressed. For these emerging adults, even transitions and events occurring naturally as they age are colored by their experience of the pandemic. Both emerging adulthood and the COVID-19 pandemic thus far are short but intense periods that are occurring concurrently for youth. For some youth, the pandemic may have created interruptions in this emerging adult phase, possibly altering their living situation or interaction with family members. Amidst disruptions of the social world, emerging adults are already going through life transitions.

Furthermore, this study rests on the idea that LGBTQ young people may experience emerging adulthood differently from cis straight young people in the ways they manage family relationships, partnerships, mental health, and housing. With this project, I am looking to uncover the experience of LGBTQ emerging adults who sit at this intersection of experience. The participants in our study can be considered “emerging adults”, meaning they are older teenagers or in their early 20s experiencing “the prolonged transition to adulthood extending into the 20s” (Schwartz, Cote, & Arnett, 2005). I want to reveal something about the balance between independence and dependence on the family during the pandemic—especially when their family relationships are influenced and complicated by queer identity.

## **LITERATURE**

In this project, I discuss the ways LGBTQ emerging adults have experienced life events during the pandemic as the social world has been upended and transformed over the past two years. Between 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic initially forced the shutdown of schools and businesses, and drastically altered the ability to socialize outside the home. For many queer emerging adults, the social world outside of their home provides the opportunity to engage with other queer emerging adults who share their experiences (Pacely et al, 2021). Often, emerging adults in our study discussed vast friend networks of other LGBTQ youth, but the conditions of the pandemic limited their access to contacts outside of their households. Emerging adults may be affected by lockdown and the pandemic differently than older adults in part because “social connectedness and social identity have more prominence in youth” and social interaction became so limited at the onset of the pandemic (Power et al, 2020). The pool of research on the effects of COVID-19 on young people, especially LGBTQ-identifying young



people, is beginning to grow now that the pandemic has gone on long enough for articles to reach publication. Existing scholarship examines the effects of isolation and lockdown on the social world, mental health, and virtual learning for youth. For emerging adults, the pandemic has disrupted a significant development period, influencing “educational interruption, job loss, financial and housing insecurity, and feelings of isolation” (Waselewski et al, 2020; Hawke et al, 2021). Scholars have found that during the onset of the pandemic, around one fifth of youth aged 18-25 experienced symptoms of anxiety and depression, and youth of this age used strategies like “social connection, relaxation, staying busy, and routine” in order to cope with the pandemic’s disruption of their lives (Waselewski et al, 2020). For young people at this time, coping by maintaining a routine may be difficult since the typical life events and milestones young people expect to experience have become halted, skipped over, or uncertain (Hawke et al, 2021).

During the time of emerging adulthood, participants in our study experienced life events such as graduating high school or college, entering the workforce, navigating romantic relationships, and changes to their living situation, such as moving out of their parents’ household. Emerging adulthood literature assumes the idea that “adult status is not merely biological but socially constructed” (Arnett, 1997). Because of this social aspect, different cultures and groups may adopt different symbols and criteria signifying a complete transition to adulthood (Arnett, 1997). For LGBTQ+ emerging adults, the process and symbols of transitioning to adulthood may be different from those of cisgender, straight emerging adults, particularly in the realms of romantic relationships and living situations. Emerging adulthood is already an intense period to navigate, and LGBTQ emerging adults are likely to experience exacerbated effects during the uncertainty and disruption of the pandemic.

## **Emerging Adulthood**

The ages of participants in our study ranges from 16-21 at the time of recruitment. While many authors refer to people of this age as youth or young adults, I frame this age group in emerging adult literature in my analysis of the influence of COVID on LGBTQ young people. Emerging adulthood is understood as a period of the life course distinct from adolescence and young adulthood that occurs during the late teens and early twenties (Arnett, 2000). The nature of emerging adulthood has changed over time, and the transitional period to young adulthood has become extended as people of this age remain dependent on their families for longer and opt for later marriage and child rearing than previous generations (Arnett, 2000; Berzin and De Marco, 2021). Because the period of dependence is extended, the late teens and early twenties have become less about adjusting to adult roles and more about “change and exploration” for young people beginning to come into their own (Arnett, 2000). For LGBTQ emerging adults in particular, decisions and timelines for marriage and children may be further complicated by LGBTQ identity. The period where LGBTQ emerging adults are still reliant on their families yet beginning to assert some social independence allows for rich identity exploration, especially in gender and sexuality. During emerging adulthood, “nothing is normative demographically,” but instability and change is innate (Arnett, 2000). This is especially true for LGBTQ emerging adults, who “may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing living changes as a result of social inequalities associated with the COVID-19 pandemic” (Salerno et al, 2021).

Housing situations and residential changes are complex for LGBTQ emerging adults during the pandemic. Emerging adulthood is characterized by residential change, and “emerging adults have the highest rates of residential change of any age group” (Arnett, 2000).

The rise of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted further changes in housing situations for emerging adults in particular (Salerno, 2021). Arnett says that residential changes for emerging adults “often take place at the end of one period of exploration and the beginning of another one” (Arnett, 2000). In the time of COVID, periods of exploration were disrupted for many LGBTQ emerging adults, abruptly transitioning them into an unexpected residential change or period of exploration. Movement in and out of the family home is common to this age group—“for about 40% of the current generation of emerging adults, residential changes include moving back into their parents’ home and then out again at least once in the course of their late teens and twenties” (Arnett, 2000). However, many housing changes prompted by the pandemic were previously unplanned especially for emerging adults previously living outside the family home suddenly returning. While the family home may offer security and shelter for some emerging adults during the pandemic, for LGBTQ emerging adults, “the protective role of families during COVID-19 may be complicated” (Salerno et al, 2021). LGBTQ emerging adults returning to the family home as a direct result of pandemic-related financial adversity, job loss, or school closure may experience distinct consequences different from heterosexual, cisgender emerging adults (Salerno et al, 2021). In one study, LGBTQ emerging adults who returned to the family home during the pandemic reported more changes to their “psychological distress and well-being” than others who remained in or out of a parent’s home before and during the pandemic (Salerno et al, 2021). Their mental health experience was more likely to be negative if being in the family home barred them from accessing supportive communities or resources during the pandemic (Salerno et al, 2021).

The period of emerging adulthood encompasses the traditional age of attending college, and college may offer emerging adults a period of “semi-autonomy,” especially if it prompts

them to temporarily leave the family home (Arnett, 2000). Attending college as an emerging adult influences one's likelihood of living in the family home, and college-educated young people are less likely to live with parents, especially if they are married, employed, or have children as well (Ho and Park, 2019). When it comes to researching emerging adults, those who are enrolled in college are overrepresented (Arnett, 2000). It is much easier for academic researchers to gain access to college students than emerging adults who have already graduated or did not go to college, resulting in an underrepresentation of emerging adults who do not attend college (Arnett, 2000).

### *Latinx and Black Emerging Adults*

While all LGBTQ emerging adults tend to prefer preserving the family bond despite conflict or rejection, Latinx and Black LGBTQ folks place a greater importance on maintaining family bonds (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). In Latinx and Black families, “intergenerational kinship” tends to outweigh internal family conflict “in the face of institutional and interpersonal racism” (Ho and Park, 2019; Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). When it comes to emerging adults distancing themselves from family, Latinx young people are found to attribute the greatest importance to living near family after leaving the family home (Ho and Park, 2019). In Latinx families in particular, emerging adults may experience *familisimo*, where they value closeness with family members and the needs of the family over their own personal needs (Cortés-García et al., 2021). Between the dynamics of *familisimo* and a sense of racial solidarity within the family, racialized LGBTQ emerging adults of color are especially willing to preserve the intergenerational bond despite tension or conflict over their identity. For emerging adults, there are also racialized patterns in the timeline of leaving the family home. For Black and Latino

emerging adults, lower rates of college enrollment than white and Asian emerging adults contributes to a later average age of leaving the family home for the first time and a higher likelihood of returning to live in the family home again (Ho and Park, 2019).

### *Class*

Socioeconomic class is also a factor in home-leaving and developmental patterns for emerging adults. While Arnett defines emerging adulthood as a transitional period of identity exploration rather than an adoption of adult roles, the ability of people of this age range to have an extended period of dependence fluctuates with class (Arnett, 2000; Berzin and De Marco, 2021). Young people who live in poverty may developmentally skip over the emerging adulthood period because their economic status does not allow them to fully engage with a period of identity exploration (Berzin and De Marco, 2021). 18% of emerging adults live in poverty, which can force an earlier shift into adult roles than young people with greater financial stability (Berzin and De Marco, 2021). Poor emerging adults may not experience the delayed adulthood wealthier emerging adults enjoy by going to college or not immediately entering the workforce (Berzin and De Marco, 2021). Home leaving patterns deviate from the average for poor emerging adults; poor emerging adults are more likely than non-poor emerging adults to move out of the family home before age 18, while they have less education, work experience, and economic resources (Berzin and De Marco, 2021). Emerging adults who leave the home so early are forced to adjust to adult roles more quickly at the expense of an extended developmental period (Arnett, 2000; Berzin and De Marco, 2021). Simultaneously, poor emerging adults are also more likely to leave the family home later than average due to limited economic resources— for non-poor emerging adults, 70% leave home by 20 and 90% leave by 22, but poor emerging

adults do not leave at the same rates until age 21 and 24 (Berzin and De Marco, 2021). Emerging adults with more educated parents are also more likely to retain residential independence from their families earlier (Ho and Park, 2019). In emerging adult literature, Arnett frames emerging adults as often working jobs that begin to build the foundation of their career, but that was not often the case for this study. Most of the emerging adults in the workforce held fast food or minimum wage jobs during the pandemic. Food industry and customer service work that requires working in-person during the pandemic is particularly dangerous, but often the only option available for young workers at this time.

### **Conflict Work**

During the pandemic, the particular ways LGBTQ emerging adults navigate relationships with their family members could have been magnified, especially if they found themselves suddenly staying in close quarters. In 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States necessitated a lock down that closed businesses, schools, and transportation across the country. Colleges and K-12 schools closed their doors and transitioned to online, remote learning, which resulted in many students spending extended time in the family home. For LGBTQ emerging adults in high conflict situations with their families, distance can be a coping mechanism, but for many, the pandemic made it more difficult to limit contact if participants were stuck at home. Their experience at home depends on the strength of their family support systems; complicated or fragile family relationships can make [LGBTQ emerging adults] vulnerable to a sequence of mental health challenges associated with the pandemic" (Salerno et al, 2021). In general, extended contact with parents is challenging during the transitional period of emerging adulthood:

For American emerging adults in their early twenties, physical proximity to parents has been found to be *inversely* related to the quality of their relationships with them. Emerging adults with the most frequent contact with parents, especially emerging adults still living at home, tend to be the least close to their parents and have the poorest psychological adjustment (Arnett, 2000).

The LGBTQ experience with family tends to be higher conflict than the heterosexual experience, especially during emerging adulthood when young people are still deeply dependent on their families despite asserting independence in some ways (Salerno et al 2021; Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2021). Conflict is especially intense for queer folks whose families are disapproving of their identities, prompting LGBTQ emerging adults to adopt strategies to cope with conflict, such as seeking distance. However, the presence of conflict does not typically indicate a desire to sever contact with family for LGBTQ emerging adults. A study of LGBTQ adults found that “despite almost everyone indicating that their parents reject their LGBTQ identity to some extent, almost all participants indicated a desire to stay in relationship with their parents” (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). When parents are disapproving or rejecting of LGBTQ identity, it is often because they view it as a “threat to respectability or normalcy” (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). Socially stigmatized identity creates increased potential family conflict for LGBTQ emerging adults when dealing with family:

LGBTQ identity is a key point of difference, not similarity, between generations, making this type of conflict often more damaging and long-lasting than other forms of intergenerational conflict. (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021).

In order to maintain family ties in the face of rejection and conflict, LGBTQ emerging adults and their families must engage in conflict work to promote family functioning (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021).

Family work and conflict work theorize that family functioning requires conscious

effort from family members, especially in higher conflict families navigating LGBTQ identities (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). When conflict arises, LGBTQ emerging adults can implement conflict avoidance, where they remain engaged with their families by avoiding discussion of their LGBTQ identity or attempts to acknowledge or address family conflict (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). Avoidance can take place even when a family is already aware of their child's LGBTQ identity, but still opts for a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to limit further discussion of identity (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). In conflict avoidance work, management of family relationships is an ongoing process especially intricate for LGBTQ folks to navigate (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). Another potential strategy is conflict acceptance, where LGBTQ emerging adults are able to acknowledge the strain and damage the family relationship undergoes, but they willingly sacrifice their own well-being to stay engaged in rejecting or disapproving family relationships (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). LGBTQ emerging adults who face family rejection yet still desire connectedness in their families practice conflict acceptance, though it may be a painful process (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). Since families of color tend to highly value family connectedness, LGBTQ people of color tend to opt for acceptance approaches more often than white LGBTQ folks (Ho and Park, 2019; Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021).

For some emerging adults, successful conflict work cannot be achieved through acceptance or avoidance. When the family relationship becomes too painful or damaging as it is, some LGBTQ emerging adults must resort to boundary work to protect themselves from further emotional and relational damage:

When the cost of other types of conflict work become too high for the LGBTQ adult, boundary work is used to reset the borders of the parent-child relationship to preserve the self; adult children in this theme gain distance from parents to heal from a painful response to disclosure [of their identity] (Reczek and



Bosley-Smith, 2021).

Conflict boundary work entails LGBTQ emerging adults setting significant boundaries to manage family rejection while still staying bonded to the family (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). For some, this may mean leaving the family home or limited family contact in order to manage difficult relationships (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). Even though LGBTQ folks experience higher levels of family conflict, the majority still want to maintain their family relationships even in the face of hostility and rejection (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). For many LGBTQ folks, navigating family relationships is a “trade-off between individual needs and family functioning” when they face family rejection over their gender identity or sexuality (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). Many LGBTQ folks will engage in self-sacrificing behavior, prioritizing the needs of the family over their own and believing they must personally learn to cope with rejection from parents in a “painful bargain” (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021)

## **METHODS**

The Texas Queer Youth and COVID Study is a longitudinal study consisting of qualitative interviews with a racially and gender diverse sample of LGBTQ+ youth ages 16-21 at the time of recruitment. Participants were recruited from a 2019 online survey that targeted the broader LGBTQ community in South Texas. Survey participants within this age group could provide their contact information to be contacted for future studies. From this group, the research team conducted 26 initial interviews in the summer of 2020 and 17 follow up interviews in the summer of 2021. Interviews took place over Zoom, lasting between 30 to 120 minutes. Participants were offered a \$40 Amazon gift card to compensate them for participating. Between the first and second interviews, participants were sent monthly online

surveys about notable life events and tracking changes in their relationships with family members.

The average age of participants was 18. The sample was gender diverse; the 26 youth identify as a woman (n=12), a man (n=1), a transgender or gender-fluid man (n=4), as non-binary (n=6), as gender fluid (n=1), as agender (n=1), or as non-binary and agender (n=1). Half the youth identified as bisexual or pansexual, and seven youth identified as queer. The remainder of youth identified as lesbian (n=5), gay (n=2), or asexual (n=1).

Figure 1: Demographics of Interviewees

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Sex. Orient.</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>
Sasha (she/her)	18	Latinx	Bisexual	Woman	HS Diploma/ GED
Julieta (she/her)	17	Latinx	Queer	Woman	Some College
Angel (they/them)	16	Latinx	Bisexual	Non-Binary	HS student
Awena (she/he)	21	Am. Indian, Asian	Bisexual	Non-Binary	Some college
Martin (he/him)	18	White	Gay, Queer	Trans, Man	HS Diploma/ GED
Azul (they/them)	18	Latinx	Bisexual	Non-Binary	HS Diploma/ GED
Claude (they/them)	17	Latinx	Lesbian	Non-Binary	HS Diploma/ GED
Troy (he/him)	17	Black, Latinx	Bisexual	Trans, Man	HS student
Catalina (she/her)	17	Latinx	Asexual	Woman	HS student
Costanza (she/her)	17	Latinx	Bisexual	Woman	HS student
Natalia (she/her)	16	Latinx, White	Lesbian	Woman	HS student
Emily (she/her)	19	White	Lesbian	Woman	HS Diploma/GED
Ginez (they/them)	19	Latinx	Pansexual	Non-binary, agender	College student
Tim (he/him)	18	White	Gay	Trans, Man	HS student
Nancy (she/her)	18	White	Bisexual, Pansexual	Women	College student
Fernanda (she/her)	18	Latinx	Pansexual	Woman	College student

Jaylin (they/them)	18	Black	Queer	Genderfluid	College student
Dani (they/them)	21	Latinx	Queer	Agender	College degree
Imani (she/her)	18	Black, Latinx	Bisexual	Woman	College student
Elia (they/them)	21	Latinx, White	Queer	Non-binary	College student
Ximena (she/her)	20	Am Indian, Latinx, White	Lesbian, Queer	Woman	Some college
Michael (he/him)	20	White	Bisexual	Man	Some high school
Jon (he/any)	21	White	Bisexual	Man, gender fluid	College student
Castel (they/them)	19	Latinx	Queer	Non-binary	Some college
Anna (she/her)	21	White	Lesbian	Woman	College degree
Madison (she/her)	21	White	Bisexual	Women	College degree

Interviews from 2020 were transcribed by the undergraduate research team, and the 2021 interviews were coded by a doctoral student. Interviews were coded using flexible coding (Deterding and Waters, 2018). We used the nodes Current Events, Environment, Identity, Institutions, Precarity and Exclusion, Relationships, Supportive and Unsupportive, and Wellness to organize the experiences of LGBTQ emerging adults in our study. In the transcripts, names and identifying information were anonymized while staying true to the cultures participants' names originated from.

### *Previous Work*

For two years, I have been an undergraduate research assistant collecting and analyzing the data of this study. I personally conducted 11 of the qualitative interviews, wrote the 2021 interview guide, and contacted the study participants to schedule their interviews. I heavily edited the Zoom-generated audio transcripts following the interviews both summers, and I coded a large portion of the interview transcripts from 2020. I was also responsible for sending out the

\$40 gift cards as compensation to participants at the completion of each interview. I have presented the findings of the Texas Queer Youth COVID Study twice at the Trinity University Summer Research Symposium in 2020 and 2021, as well as a Mellon Initiative presentation in 2021. In April 2022, I presented the progress of LGBTQ Emerging Adults and COVID-19 in a round table at the Sociologists for Women in Society winter conference. Over the course of the past four semesters, I have been enrolled in Dr. Stone's research lab, where I have coded interview data, proposed paper ideas, and co-authored an article using data from the wider interview study. I have been closely involved with this data collection since the start of the Youth Interview Study, granting me an intimate knowledge of the participants and their stories. Completing this senior thesis is an opportunity for me to bring this project full circle before I graduate.

### *Reflexivity*

I have engaged deeply with qualitative research while completing my degree, and I was initially drawn to this research in spring 2020 because of a desire to be involved in an interview study. Prior to the pandemic, the study was intended to focus on LGBTQ young people and family relationships, which was already a topic close to my own life. As a queer emerging adult experiencing disruptions to my own life course due to COVID, I have a personal stake in this research. I was in a unique position to interview respondents due to our similar life stages and sometimes overlapping identities. My queer identity was usually understood by participants without them asking me directly, and it was likely a factor in their willingness to share in the interviews. In the first and second round of interviews, some participants expressed gratitude and relief that they had someone to talk to about their experiences with LGBTQ identity and the

pandemic. Particularly in 2020 when quarantine was new and a time of extreme uncertainty, these interviews over Zoom provided an opportunity for queer social interaction for the participants and I. Because our undergraduate research team was composed almost entirely by LGBTQ emerging adults at the onset of the pandemic, we were navigating our own complex living situations, social networks, and school lives while conducting this research. In many ways, I identify closely with the LGBTQ emerging adults whose voices appear in this paper, and I am dedicated to properly representing their nuanced experiences. The longitudinal nature of this study also reaffirmed my investment in the lives and wellbeing of the LGBTQ emerging adults whose interviews I had conducted or stories I had read while coding interviews. With this particular research background and personal background, I am in a unique position to conduct this research and complete my thesis using Texas Queer Youth COVID Study data.

## **FINDINGS**

In this paper, I examine two spheres of LGBTQ emerging adults' lives: housing/family and school/friends. These themes are useful to understanding the LGBTQ emerging adult experience with the COVID-19 pandemic because they are particularly complicated by LGBTQ identity. Housing is especially unstable for LGBTQ young people who face family rejection, and the pandemic caused residential disruption for young people in particular the past two years (Fish et al, 2020). For LGBTQ emerging adults, social networks were often disrupted by the pandemic, and identity-affirming relationships were not always available inside the family home. Lastly, many participants were enrolled in high school or college at the time of these interviews, and their school experiences were greatly impacted by the pandemic in an unprecedented way. For many LGBTQ young people, the switch to virtual school entailed extended exposure to family

members and isolation from affirming networks at school. Furthermore, returning home from college stunted some LGBTQ emerging adults' sense of independence from their families and altered their ability to perform boundary work in the family. Together, these themes paint a picture of queer emerging adulthood in the time of COVID as an especially intense, transitional period.

### **Housing and Family**

Emerging adults experience “the highest rates of residential change of any age group,” and the onset of COVID-19 initiated increased residential change for people in this age group since 2020 (Arnett, 2000; Fish et al, 2020). Some emerging adults in our sample had been living away from their family home before the pandemic, either away at college or living elsewhere, while others were living in their family homes. For emerging adults who moved back home, we saw several different themes play out. Some participants described great difficulty readjusting to the family home, while others had positive experiences.

#### *Positive Experiences*

Some emerging adults had positive, supportive, or affirming experiences at home during the pandemic. While much of the scholarship on LGBTQ mental health and LGBTQ emerging adults focuses on the negative effects of typically unsupportive family relationships, our study revealed several cases where emerging adults were content or even better off living with their family (Berzin and Bosley-Smith, 2021; Fish et al, 2020). For Martin, a white gay trans man, his home life became the most stable and supportive it had been in a long time shortly before

the pandemic began. At the time of both interviews, Martin was living at home in a rural county with his biological mother, grandma, and boyfriend after spending years with his father and stepmother. Martin's father's side of the family was not supportive of Martin's identity, and Martin ended up running away from home when he was sixteen. By nineteen, Martin lived with his biological mother because of the pandemic, and their homelife was supportive and secure. Despite living in a rural county that is often hostile toward Martin and his boyfriend's identities, Martin felt safe at home throughout the pandemic and spoke about his experience cheerfully.

Interviewer: How's that been? In the house together during the pandemic?

Martin: Honestly, of course there's paranoia. My grandmother's older, so no people over at the house— I stopped having my friends over, stopped going out— out of respect for her and everyone else, of course. It was stressful at first, but we got through it.

Even when [my mom] doesn't understand or know how to help, she's always there for me, and she's always trying. That's the biggest thing for me, having a parent try. Because some parents, they don't want to try it all, they don't even want to hear it. But she's always trying to help me out, and that's really sweet. I wish everyone had that from a parent.

Interviewer: Can you give me some examples of ways that you can tell your mom is trying?

Martin: Just by listening, or just by talking to me. She'll come to me and ask me what's going on, or if she sees me visibly stressed, she will ask. And I can tell her. Even if she doesn't always have something to say about it, she always lets me talk and ramble and vent and whatever, and she won't ever say anything rude or disrespectful. She never tries to hurt my feelings ever. Even when she wants to be honest with me, she's always trying to be nice about it. So that's really, really awesome to me. I lived with my dad most of my life, and he was the opposite. He did not want to hear anything, or he just didn't want to help. But she really does try, she's sweet.

Since his grandma lived in the family home, Martin's social life had been greatly limited while his household took COVID precautions to keep her healthy and safe. Fortunately, Martin's isolation in the family home was not a negative experience since he trusted his family to

emotionally support him and work together to avoid contracting COVID. The parent-child relationship with his father had broken down due to anti-LGBTQ attitudes to the point that Martin was forced to sever the tie; conflict avoidance was impossible, forcing Martin to resort to extreme boundary work to protect himself from hostility (Reczek et al, 2021). Meanwhile, his mom was open to learning more whenever she did not understand something about Martin's identity, thereby preserving and maintaining the parent-child bond (Reczek et al, 2021).

On the younger end of the sample, one respondent, Angel, was still in high school and living at home for both interviews. Angel, a Latinx non-binary person, was comfortable at home, where their parents "asked respectful questions," and at their "super liberal charter school."

Interviewer: Has your family been respectful of your pronouns?

Angel: It depends on the day. I mean, it's not that they're disrespectful, but they can struggle with it sometimes. It's not like [my mom] has any problem with them, I think it's just a matter of habit. I don't think she really struggles with my name anymore, I haven't heard her call me by my birth name in a long time. So that's not really a problem, if anything it's just the pronouns occasionally that she'll misuse. But I don't really have any problem with that.

Angel felt supported in both of these spheres before and during the pandemic, either by parents who tried their best or a school administration that made an effort to be affirming, even if their attempts were sometimes corny or silly. Because of the support they received, living at home was tolerable during the pandemic while all their family members abruptly began spending much more time in close quarters. For Martin and Angel, family members that were willing to actively work to preserve the parent-child bond were instrumental in maintaining their well-being while stuck at home during the pandemic. Both participants implemented education tactics with their parents when misunderstandings arose, and their parents' willingness to learn and support greatly benefited their relationships with their LGBTQ emerging adult children (Reczek et al, 2021). In



these cases, the close family contact forced by the pandemic was not detrimental to the well-being of participants who could engage with their family to resolve conflict. While many emerging adults lacked such supportive family ties, the “stuck at home” with unsupportive parents narrative was not universal for LGBTQ emerging adults in this study.

Two LGBTQ emerging adults who lived with family in rural counties described secure, supportive family relationships. For Martin, living in a rural, conservative community, his family home was like a bubble of support amidst a more hostile environment for queer folks. Though he felt he had found a safe niche in his community and workplace, he described dangerous situations he and his boyfriend had found themselves in, motivated by homophobia and transphobia. Despite the hostility of his home town, family ties were strong enough to keep him rooted at home for the time being:

Interviewer: The town that you're in, do you feel like it's very queer-accepting?

Martin: We all hide here. There's a lot of us, we just hide. But no, not really. It's very conservative, it's a rich older people tourist spot, vacation spot. So it's a lot of older, very conservative or right-leaning people... Even my boyfriend had to quit his job at the gas station because he almost got hate-crimed. Someone called him the F slur, swung at his face, and they did nothing about it. This was on camera in front of witnesses, and they still made him seem like he was the one at fault, like it was his fault for working there. So not really, but it's still safe if you've already been in places like this and you know how to blend in a little bit, I guess.

Interviewer: What makes it feel like home for you if it's not a place that's very queer-accepting?

Martin: My family, that's the only thing. My grandma and my mom. Like I said, if we could take this whole house and them and move it somewhere else, I totally would. But it's not that simple. They just ended up here, and that's where I plan to stay a little longer. But I always think about other states and areas that might be a little easier on us. But it's also equally as scary to move, because I'm familiar with this place: I know the people who I can talk to, I know the areas I can go to, I know this town. So it's hard to think about moving at the same time. But for safety, yeah.

Meanwhile, Catalina, a Latinx cis woman and the only asexual respondent in this study, felt at

home in Medina county with an extensive family network. She told her family she was not interested in dating, and they accepted her preferences without issue. Much more than she discussed identity, Catalina spoke in depth about how close knit her family was and how much love she felt for them and from them. Much of her family bonding surrounded shared responsibilities like baling hay and caring for livestock. Despite living in rural communities, neither Martin nor Catalina felt isolated from other queer folks. Martin had his boyfriend at home as well as queer relatives and friends he could communicate with online while quarantining at home. Likewise, Catalina's vast family network and close group of friends included queer folks she interacted with regularly. For some emerging adults, living at home does not mean an inability to access other queer folks. For many living at home, the camaraderie of queer siblings in the family home provided internal support even if parents disapproved of emerging adults' LGBTQ identities.

### *Reverting as an Emerging Adult*

Some youth who had experienced living outside their parents' homes prior to the pandemic described feeling like they had "reverted" since returning home. Nancy, a white bisexual cis woman, was distressed by the changes she saw in herself living at home during the pandemic to the point that it prompted her to move back out once she was able:

Emotionally, [moving out] has been a lot better, like significantly. I've visited my parents back in San Antonio a couple times, and every single time that I visited, it's been just horrendous for my mental health and I need like a week of recharge time. And I usually see myself as pretty extroverted, but I find myself kind of crawling back into my shell because I used to be very quiet and introverted in high school when I lived with my parents. Then going into college, I got really out of my shell and all that, and I realized I wasn't really introverted, I just could not be myself around my parents at all. I just visited for Father's Day, and I got really sick and stuff, and it was like I felt myself almost like retracting into this shell of myself, and it sucks a lot. But I like living by myself a lot more. Not just

like, “I can do whatever I want”, but also just like, exist in peace as a queer person without being constantly stared at or questioned, you know?

Leaving the family home a second time and returning to independent living at college improved Nancy’s quality of life and returned her to a stage of emerging adulthood similar to where she had left off when the pandemic disrupted her path. For college students in particular, the abrupt move home imposed by the pandemic altered LGBTQ emerging adults’ self-perception of their life stage. Another respondent, Elia, a 21 year old Latinx and white queer non-binary person, described a similar change in herself since the pandemic began:

Interviewer: How do you cope with or handle [living at home during COVID]?

Elia: I don't know, it kinda sucks. I feel like I've had to revert back kind of to, like, how I was in high school for a lot of it. It's like, I learned how to live with [my dad] peacefully then, and since being separate-- not living together for three years, two and a half years-- it's not like I've forgotten how to, but I just haven't had to keep that relationship the same. You know, we've kind of grown past it and into, like, super... I don't know, adults. Adults, father, kid. And it's been nice, but I feel like I have had to kind of revert back to just being a “yes man”, you know? Just doing whatever to keep the peace.

However, Elia described their relationship with their dad differently a year later. At this life stage, their relationship is evolving past the parent-child relationship familiar from highschool.

Now, living through COVID, [my dad’s] become more of a roommate, you know? I’d describe him as a roommate who sometimes tells me to do the dishes. He's able to make me do that, but other than that, it's pretty pretty roommate-y. And I think that that has kind of helped him get better with the with the “gay stuff.” as we like to say.

As an emerging adult, Elia can return to living with their dad but grow into a new role where they can interact with their dad adult-to-adult. While this change may come partly with age, the limitations of COVID forced them into a situation that fostered growth for their relationship. While Elia may still receive ambiguous support in some ways, their relationship has been strengthened.

Elia found themselves in a very new living situation with their girlfriend at the start of the pandemic:

Oh goodness, we got together in January, the pandemic hit in March, and we shackled up at my house two months after knowing each other... There were some family and friends, basically, that needed a place to stay, so they were living with us. Because I was living at school, my dad had a girlfriend and he pretty much started living [at her house], and was kind of renting [the family] our house, because it was just the two... Then I moved back, and it was a full family, there were seven of them. Because of them, I wasn't going to be able to see [my girlfriend] since they're appropriately worried about COVID and didn't want outside fraternizing, especially in the beginning, so we made the decision for her to move in with us, and it was good.

For Elia, living at home with their dad at the start of COVID resulted in a lot of “tension” because the family was “cooped up together all day” with six other people who did not normally live in the household. In 2020, one of them was their girlfriend of six months, whose strained relationship with Elia’s dad caused them stress:

I know how to play the game with him. But, like I said, my girlfriend's living here, and we've only been together for, like, six months, and three of them have been cohabitating during COVID, so it all kind of happened very quickly. She does not yet know how to play the game with him, which is unfortunate because she is very, very political, and very left, like radical.

Although tense disagreements between Elia’s dad and girlfriend are stressful, the way COVID pushed the three of them together under one roof prompted Elia to work past some of their “non-confrontational” inclinations:

Confrontation is necessary. So I have taken this time to work on being more up front and straightforward, and more confrontational-- not in, like, a bad way, but in an appropriate way. And I feel like I have gotten a lot better at telling people when I think they're wrong, you know? We'll be talking, and it kind of starts going south, and I have gotten to where I can tell whoever is at fault for it what happened, you know? Like right then I will tell my dad, like, "hey, that was kind of harsh," like "you should just think about what you said." And he does, like, he'll think about it and he'll say "you are right, that was harsh, I'm sorry" and apologize to my girlfriend or me. So I feel like it has helped me grow. You know, it sucks that it has to be because of two people who I love arguing. But I have

been given this opportunity to grow and change this aspect of myself that definitely needed to change.

Prior to the pandemic, Elia took more of an avoidant approach to family conflict, resulting in limited resolution of tension (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). After a pandemic-induced residential change, Elia's emotional development during emerging adulthood prompted them to engage in more direct conflict work to resolve disagreements and lack of understanding with their father, resulting in an improved relationship quality despite close quarters. Even though the relationship between Elia, their girlfriend, and their dad improved, Elia's girlfriend had moved out into her own apartment by 2021. For Elia, being able to go back and forth between home and their girlfriend's apartment was a positive change because it provided "a kind of safe place away from home." While Elia did not move out themselves, having a girlfriend who lives independently from family represents a stage of emerging adulthood where Elia still depends on the family but gets to experience aspects of an adult romantic relationship with a partner asserting residential independence.

### *Negative Experiences*

While some LGBTQ emerging adults had positive experiences at home, that was not the case for every respondent. Some emerging adults experienced negative mental health effects from returning to or staying in their family home during the pandemic. Nancy returned home at the start of the pandemic, but her living situation with her parents soon became intolerable. She observed a resurgence of symptoms for her insomnia, depression, and other mental health disorders while under the environmental stressors of living uncomfortably at home. Nancy's mother was passively aggressively homophobic, her father was belligerent with political opinions Nancy fundamentally disagreed with, and both parents were skeptical of her mental health

conditions. Nancy found it difficult to transition from a life more independent from her parents she had at college to the parental home again, especially due to her family's attitude towards

LGBTQ identity and mental health:

I do have depression and anxiety, and it's like... Having to come back home because of quarantine, because [my college] kicked us out right when spring break started. And it was like, all the things that made me struggle so much in high school—I was thrown back into them. So honestly, it's been really, really hard.

I've honestly felt the worst I've ever felt because of COVID right now. Just because I'm holed up, and I feel like my mom's kind of getting more angry sometimes. Yeah, it's very difficult because, like, what usually cheers me up is going out and seeing friends and stuff.

Combined with the stress and uncertainty of what the pandemic meant for her college life, Nancy was unhappy being forced to move home, even though her parents enthusiastically allowed her to stay. At the time of the second interview, Nancy had taken the opportunity to move out of her family home and back to an apartment in her college's town for the Fall 2020 semester, where she saw significant improvements to her mental health once being separated from her parents. Nancy's experience aligns with Arnett's observation of an inverse relationship between physical proximity to parents and the quality of the parent-child relationship (Arnett, 2000). What was already a tenuous relationship devolved following Nancy's prolonged exposure to her parents after returning home, but improved once she was able to reassert her independence through physical distance.

For Claude, a Latinx non-binary person who had recently graduated high school in 2020, living at home was tolerable at the start of the pandemic, but soon grew contentious. Even though their parents do not use Claude's correct pronouns and had discouraged Claude's attraction to women in the past, Claude still considered their mom to be generally supportive of

their identity. In 2021, they had entered into a new relationship, and conflict arose when Claude wanted to visit their boyfriend more often than their parents wanted to allow. During the early months of the pandemic, Claude's parents took precautions to minimize the family's exposure to COVID and did not want Claude visiting their boyfriend, even though Claude's parents approved of him. Frustrated, Claude left their family home and moved in with their boyfriend, describing the parental home environment as "toxic" and viewing the move as a very positive change for their mental health:

Interviewer: So can you tell me more about the change that you felt in your mental health between back in February living at home to now?

Claude: It's actually a positive change. I don't think I'm ugly like I thought it was before, and I'm not constantly wanting to hurt myself... that was just a constant. And I don't feel like that anymore... so that's a really great feeling. I feel confident about myself to go out in crop tops now and wear two-pieces without feeling gross about myself. That's one of the really good changes.

Interviewer: I'm really happy for you! Did your mental health fluctuate throughout the pandemic, did that have any effect on it?

Claude: Oh yeah definitely. Just being at home, I was kind of stir crazy, I guess. And then my confidence, too. I don't know, just being inside, and you know, I gained weight because nobody was going anywhere. So it didn't really help, but I'm fine about it now.

Claude's decision to move out was heavily influenced by the events of the pandemic. While they had reached the age that many emerging adults begin to move out, Claude had been mostly content in the family home with their siblings until disagreements about COVID precautions arose (Arnett, 2000). Despite the mental health challenges Claude faced in the family home, it wasn't enough to prompt them to move out; the pandemic was the catalyst that gave them a reason to leave home. Like Nancy, Claude's parent-child relationship improved slowly after the move. Though their parents were angry with Claude's choice, they learned to deal with the

distance, and the physical buffer was a positive change for Claude. Unfortunately, the distance had a negative impact on their relationship with their siblings, but even though it was painful for Claude, their own mental health came first.

### *Moving Out, Making Boundaries*

For Nancy and Claude, unsuccessful conflict work in the family home led them to resort to boundary work within the parent-child relationship to preserve their own wellbeing (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). Moving back out of the family home, or out for the first time, provided increased independence from the family for Nancy and Claude that improved their mental health and quality of life. While both described their parents directly inviting them to live at home for free, Nancy and Claude opted for distance from their families over the financial and residential security they were offering. Meanwhile, even though Nancy and Claude lived separately from their families and asserted their independence through housing, they were both still dependent on their families in some ways. Nancy's financial aid came from the VA via her father's military status, and Claude's parents still paid their phone bill. While they were willing to forgo more comprehensive financial security available in the family home, they had not yet reached the full financial independence that they may arrive at in young adulthood. And, even though Nancy and Claude had parents who expressed disapproval of their LGBTQ identities, their parents were still willing to provide financial and residential support. Nancy and Claude still expressed a willingness or desire to maintain a relationship with their parents despite ambiguous support, but the relationships required active conflict and boundary work to maintain.

For some LGBTQ emerging adults, the pandemic offered a new opportunity to manage how often they interacted with their relatives or limit the time spent around certain relatives.



After Claude moved away from home, their parents repeatedly urged them to return or break up with their boyfriend. Their parents used Claude's younger siblings to guilt Claude about leaving them behind, severely damaging their sibling relationships in the process:

Interviewer: Have you been in contact with your siblings?

Claude: Yeah, my siblings... I don't know, I feel like my mom just turned them against me since I left, because they were sad that I left. So she kind of turned them against me to get me to come home. My little sister is always talking crap to me and, like, trying to tell me to stay home.

Interviewer: Last summer when we talked, you said that your sister was really supportive of you and that you felt like you were close. Do you still feel that way?

Claude: No, right now she just has resentment towards me because I left. She's always talking badly about my boyfriend and talking badly about me, like how I'm such a bad person because I left them behind. So before, yes. But now, she's just kind of an aggressor.

Interviewer: How does that affect you?

Claude: It hurt, just because she's my little sister, and you know, a few months ago she kind of followed me everywhere. Now she doesn't really want anything to do with me. So it hurt.

Since extended exposure to their family was difficult for Claude, they turned to boundary work to manage their relationship (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021). In order to manage this ambiguous and tenuous relationship, Claude imposes strict boundaries with their parents; the location of their new apartment is secret, and they meet in neutral locations or Claude visits home. Their parents still push these boundaries; Claude's dad showed up at their work unannounced and uninvited:

Claude: So I was at work, and he showed up in the line, and I got surprised because I didn't want [my parents] to know where I lived because I knew that they were going to come cause trouble. And so I hadn't been talking to them at all, or my dad at all, and I look up and he's right there. It just kind of freaked me out, like "Oh, how did you know where I work?" It was super uncomfortable.

Interviewer: How do you think he figured that out?

Claude: I don't know. I can easily say my mom, she could have found out where I live because she could be able to view my bank statements, because we're a joint account. So she could have told him where I lived. I don't know how she found out where I work, though.

Despite Claude's efforts to implement boundary work to manage their strained family relationships, their parents were still able to force their way into Claude's life to a certain extent. Part of the reason was the state of quasi-independence Claude was in as an emerging adult; while they were able to assert residential independence and financial independence to a certain extent, a connected bank account allowed Claude's parents to still access their personal information against their will. Even though Claude's parents transgressed some boundaries Claude set, their relationship did improve over time with distance (Arnett, 2000). While their parents may not approve of Claude's identity or attempts to assert their independence, Claude said they "just kind of accepted that I have my own life now," lessening the relationship strain in the family.

During the pandemic, Imani, an 18 year old bisexual Black and Latino cis woman, and her boyfriend had to move out of their old apartment due to serious maintenance issues, and since moved into a more expensive townhome. The process of moving was very costly since they were temporarily making payments on two separate places. While money was a stressor for Imani in 2021, she also received a promotion at work. Since Imani's parents are not fully supportive of her living with her boyfriend, Imani chose not to tell her parents that their original lease was ending or the address of their new townhome. However, Imani felt that her privacy was violated when her mom found her new address from their Amazon account and then sent Imani a package to that address:

She sent me a screenshot from the Amazon app, and it said the townhome's address where we were at that I never shared with her. And it made me really uncomfortable... Later that week when we visited them, I told my mom how I was really confused and scared when they knew where I was without me telling them, and she said that she knows that it was making me scared and that's why she wasn't responding to my text. They were so busy laughing at me being scared about that. um. She said this, and it made me just feel like, "Okay, well now I don't really trust you."

Like Claude, Imani felt that her parents violated the boundaries they set in an attempt to assert her residential independence and distance herself from their family to manage conflict. As the pandemic progressed, Imani began to see her parents less due to her father's health issues. Imani mentioned feeling an increased sense of security from COVID since her family chose to wear masks and get vaccinated. However, Imani's behavior in regards to pandemic safety was shaped by the health status of her boyfriend:

I'm sure if he didn't have health issues, we probably would have been more careless. But now, since I knew that if something happened to him, it would be really expensive and he'd probably lose his job, and we are in such a bad situation, it just wasn't worth it.

Imani believed there was a risk of "not surviving" COVID if one was infected since she referenced some relatives in Texas who had died from the ventilator shortage.

It was really scary because it just made me think. I don't know what I would do if, you know, my parents or my boyfriend, God forbid, [got sick] because of me. And that [made me] really nervous about going to work, but I felt like as long as I do everything I can do, I'm sure it will be fine.

While Imani was frustrated with her complicated relationship with her parents, she was not willing to fully distance herself from family. While her parents cause her stress and violate the boundaries Imani creates, the process of breaking off contact would involve "jumping through hoops," and moving away from them would be "expensive." Like most LGBTQ emerging adults,

the family conflict Imani experiences is detrimental to her own well-being, but it is not enough to fully alienate her from her parents.

### *Family Dynamics and Ambiguity*

For some LGBTQ emerging adults, the pandemic caused changes to social dynamics within their homes. In 2020, Jaylin, an 18 year old Black queer genderfluid person, described a change in their family dynamic where their mom was trying to isolate herself from other family members within the household as a COVID precaution:

Interviewer: Has COVID impacted your relationship with your family at all?

Jaylin: Yes. My sister, because she is considered an essential worker, she has to go outside and everything. My mom's kind of like blocked off– we're kind of, like, quarantining all the time when she comes back. So we don't have much contact, we still talk and everything, but we're not, we're never in close proximity anymore. Like, we don't hug or anything anymore, because she's worried about germs and everything, which I understand. She has to wear a mask around my house now. Which is weird, but yeah.

Especially in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic posed an extreme threat to the health of essential workers and their families since they did not have the luxury of working remotely and risked increased exposure to infection. While Jaylin may have been troubled by the increased physical distance they experienced from their mom and sister in the family home, it was likely a protective measure motivated by a desire to protect the family by preserving their health. In this way, ambiguous behavior from family can still be an indirect act of support for LGBTQ emerging adults.

Within the family, LGBTQ emerging adults often experience ambiguous attitudes toward their identities that are difficult or confusing to navigate (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021; Salerno et al, 2021). Ambiguous attitudes from loved ones can be painful for LGBTQ folks just

like outright hostility and rejection, but it is unclear how to address or cope with family relationships that operate this way. When parents exhibit simultaneously supportive and disapproving behavior, it is particularly difficult for LGBTQ emerging adults to respond. In Elia's case, their dad's behavior was complex and ambiguous:

Interviewer: So what do you mean about your dad being supportive and conservative?

Elia: He thinks that because he doesn't *not* allow me to do these things that I want to do, like start testosterone-- that's one of the bigger ones-- and when I first cut my hair short, that kind of thing-- Whenever he doesn't *stop* me from doing that, he thinks that that is, like, being supportive of me. But there's some things, like, he'll pick up my testosterone from the pharmacy, he'll pick it up and pay for it... He did my first shot, but he doesn't use my pronouns. It's like, he's been supportive, but he also has called my gender "the flavor of the day." He was like, "it doesn't matter what your flavor of the day is," hurtful things like that. But I know that in a lot of ways... I guess it's like, I know that I have it so much better than a lot of others, especially [being] non-binary. I know non-binary is always harder for people to understand, right? Especially for a lot of non-binary people, I have it a lot better than them, so it's like, I don't want to say that I don't have support. Like, I do. I have a lot of support, but still, I don't in some ways. Everyone wants all the support. So that's what I mean.

Elia was hurt by their dad's disdainful comments towards their gender identity; however, their dad also funded Elia's gender-affirming hormone therapy, which is a major act of financial and identity support. The contradictory nature of Elia's dad's words and actions was troubling for them, but they were very grateful for the support they did receive from him. For Elia, it was difficult to distinguish between their dad's ambivalent attitudes towards queer folks and Elia's own identities:

See, he doesn't care that I'm gay, but he told me-- I remember, this will always be in my brain-- whenever he found out, he was like, "You know, I don't care if you're gay, but I don't want you to become one of those dyke lesbains." You know? And it's like, it's okay if I'm gay, but "you can't be like those gays."

While Elia's dad expressed support for Elia's own identity, he also exhibited concern for respectability and Elia's potential deviance "like *those* gays" (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021).

Regardless, Elia's dad was a positive presence in their life during the pandemic:

[My dad] kind of helped ground me in myself... He has kind of helped me to accept that I don't have control over what other people do or over how they see me or whatever. And that's okay. Like, being trans and also really being a people pleaser, he knows that, and he helps me navigate that because it's hard. I think he sees me in different ways, like, he definitely still refers to me as his daughter.

Elia's relationship with their father illustrates the reasons most LGBTQ folks choose to maintain the family bond despite strained or painful relationships (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2021).

Fortunately for Elia, their dad's supportive behavior typically outweighed the ambiguous and disapproving attitudes Elia sensed. While an education approach to conflict was not always effective with Elia's dad, who misused Elia's pronouns, his willingness to financially support Elia's living situation and hormone therapy was a direct act of support that should not be overlooked. Their family bond benefited from open communication and conflict work surrounding Elia's identity and transition towards greater independence in a way that may not have happened if Elia had not unexpectedly moved home due to the pandemic. Their relationship may still be a work in progress, but that is part of the active work maintaining the family bond entails.

### *Independence and Dependence*

The period of emerging adulthood is characterized by increased identity exploration and assertion of independence while still remaining reliant on the family in many ways (Arnett, 2000). Some emerging adults may be beginning to step into adult roles in some spheres of their life while still being dependent on families to meet other needs. For LGBTQ emerging adults in

particular, increased family conflict may result in distance from parents but greater reliance on other extended family members. Awena, a 21 year old American Indian and Asian bisexual non-binary person (who uses she/her and he/him pronouns), is in a stage where she is still reliant on family connections for assistance and a living situation, but she is also responsible for family matters like caring for her grandma. While Awena lives in his grandma's house after his mother moved out, he is also responsible for helping his grandma take her medicines, manage her health, and make insurance payments. Awena had to enlist help from her uncle to file her grandma's taxes in the past year. As an emerging adult, Awena is simultaneously of the age to take on a caretaker role in his family while still receiving financial support and housing – his mom also helps pay for groceries and bills. Because Awena is still a student and works part time, she is still in need of financial help from their family. While Awena is already a part of the family web that ensures she and her grandma stay healthy and cared for, that network broadened further when her mom caught COVID. Since her mom's role was to deliver groceries so that Awena and their grandma would not have to risk exposure to COVID, other family members were added to the equation while she was out of commission. Awena assumed grocery responsibilities, and her dad and cousins stepped in to help care for grandma and manage the household. Similarly, Ginez, a 19 year old Latinx pansexual non-binary person, moved into an apartment pre-pandemic with their sister. In 2020, they were renting a house from their grandmother. While they are at the emerging adult age where they can live in and care for their own space, they are still dependent on family for help. LGBTQ emerging adults like Imani, Awena, and Ginez are in a state of quasi-independence where they live outside the surveillance of the parental home, but still depend on family for housing. Simultaneously, they are of the age where the family entrusts them with more adult family duties or taking care of the home. Under

the stressors of the pandemic, they have extended family they can rely on to help them navigate this turbulent life stage, despite family conflict surrounding LGBTQ identity.

### **School and Friends**

Many emerging adults in this study were in the process of completing high school or a college degree when the pandemic began, forcing them to transition to online schooling. While virtual school was detrimental to the learning and mental health of some LGBTQ emerging adults, their experience was not negative across the board. LGBTQ emerging adult students may have particularly complicated experiences with the dissolution of in-person school between 2020 and 2021 since their support networks may be located on their campuses.

For some LGBTQ emerging adults, their school life improved during the pandemic. Angel, a 17 year old living at home with their parents, talked about becoming a “straight A student” since the start of the pandemic. Last year, Angel was diagnosed with ADHD, and their diagnosis allowed them to take medication and receive accommodations from their teachers. These changes led to significant improvement in Angel’s grades and experience at school. In 2021, Angel was attending classes in person and interacting with friends at their small, close-knit school. Angel was even able to use school as an outlet for identity exploration; in their AP Art class, they created a portfolio surrounding the topic of gender. Similarly, Awena previously completed an online Associate degree pre-pandemic and planned to take in person classes at a new school in 2020:

I was really excited to be starting University and potentially living on campus, getting that real college experience. But [the pandemic] happened, so I canceled my dorm. I'm probably going to switch my classes all to online. Yeah. I'm still excited because I'm reaching out on social media to students.



Awena's experience with school and the pandemic was affected by their chronic illness. Awena described accommodating professors and an advisor that advocated for them, in part because many faculty they interacted with also had a chronic illness. Their chronic illness previously limited their ability to attend school in person, so the switch to entirely online school during the pandemic improved their ability to work towards their degree:

Interviewer: You said it was easier for you this year because there were online classes?

Awena: Yeah, yeah, I was online. I had tried to in-person when I was getting my Associates, but at that point, like, it just made me feel even worse, so I had to drop out for a little bit or skip a year. So being online just definitely helps me overall.

Angel and Awena both had improved experiences with online school as students receiving accommodations. Awena attending class from home where they could more easily manage their symptoms and Angel going on medication for their ADHD made school less difficult in the past year. Another student whose school life and grades improved since the pandemic is Emily, a 19 year old white lesbian cis woman, after quitting her fast food job. Since Emily struggles with social anxiety, Zoom college classes have sometimes been helpful to getting her to engage in class.

For some youth, school was a place to be out with a supportive social network. Castel, a 19 year old Latinx queer non-binary person, was a sophomore in college in 2020 feeling like their peers were understanding of their identity. After the pandemic sent college students home, Castel was geographically separated from the friends and community they had established at college:

I don't get to see the people that I saw in Corpus daily. Those people were my... foundation... They kept me very sturdy throughout the year. And I got to see them almost daily. We all lived within like five minutes to each other. We all live

in dorms. And so, not being able to have those people accessible was a little bit of a shock because I had gotten so comfortable with them. And in that new space, and I, I didn't really plan on coming back to San Antonio anytime soon. Staying in San Antonio really threw that out the window. And so, like, I've just been kind of doing a lot of recovery throughout this last year, and it felt like it was all pulled back the second that I got in San Antonio, and I had to stay there, especially with the people that like I had left for a reason, you know?

Interviewer: Would you call all of your friends from college your main support system?

Castel: Definitely. It definitely became that way over a period of time... All of us were from out of the city, all of us were freshmen, and so we also kind of just had similar problems. And so to have that foundation in each other... We're there for each other... Definitely helped ease my anxiety moving into college.

For Castel, moving back home was difficult because it meant leaving their support system behind. For some youth, however, coming home abruptly from school also meant entering into an unsupportive environment. Nancy felt herself falling into negative habits and patterns at home while trying to cope with the sudden change and navigate relationships with her family. Her environment affected her habits, she said: “Me personally, being thrown back into my high school environment, I’ve fallen back into my high school sleep schedule and stuff. Where like, I’ll stay up— like, I went to bed at 10am today because I started watching Avatar the Last Airbender and got sucked into it.” Nancy attributed some of her anxiety and distress to being back at home: “I feel like if I was on campus right now, I would be a lot more comfortable. Because I would feel more supported in that. And like, feel like I could provide more support.”

Some youth described increased difficulty or anxiety around school since the pandemic began. Jon, a 21 year old white bisexual cis man, graduated from college in 2021 while taking Zoom classes. He described extreme difficulty getting through his final semesters, but cut his losses and managed to get out in one piece:

Interviewer: How was this year of school for you, dealing with the pandemic and everything else at the same time?

Jon: It was dog shit, but I knew it was going to be dog shit. I remember that first spring semester, the pandemic had just hit, so everybody switched to online classes. But the administration— they were kind of forced to do this— but they were like, “Oh, every class can be pass-fail,” and so I did that. And then I suffered, but was able to pass, partly on pity. Almost entirely on pity. And then it's like, “oh, the next semester is going to be the same, but without those measures in place.” ... I passed everything, a good part [out of] pity. I got a D and public speaking...I'm glad to be done with that. I stumbled across the finish line, but it doesn't matter.

Jon was grateful to have graduated and no longer “have something constantly hanging over [him].” Jon claimed to have benefited from COVID policy and generosity from administration at the beginning of the pandemic, but as those affordances dried up and his performance didn't improve, his grades suffered:

I guess the main way [the pandemic] has affected my life is just that it forced school to be online and therefore made it terrible. I guess in terms of that, I didn't really cope too well, I just sort of survived.

Though he was struggling, Jon did not seek any mental health services, partly because when he tried to take advantage of counseling services at his university prior to COVID, he left with the impression that his “problems weren't big enough” to receive help regularly. Attending school or completing a degree during the time of the pandemic is particularly difficult due to the new stressors and obstacles for students, including threats to both mental and physical health.

The past semester of school was also difficult for Imani, who described receiving inadequate support and understanding from some of her professors:

I had a class that was really stressful, and the Professor didn't really understand or make exceptions for the snow storm that was happening in February or the pandemic, so my grades were really low with that class, and I didn't want him to think that I was slacking when it was really a bigger issue. It's kind of hard to feel

like, “Okay, this class is difficult because of these situations,” [when] to him, he'll see it as you're not trying.

For students who described academic success during the pandemic, support and accommodations from educators was of the utmost importance. For Imani, having a professor who failed to make accommodations for dangerous, life-disrupting events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the Texas winter storm in 2021 was detrimental to her academic performance and mental health. Even though Imani does not live with any family members, she is still in contact with her parents, though their relationship is often strained. For Imani, her anxiety around performance at school is exacerbated by a complicated relationship with her dad, who has high expectations for Imani's grades and has all her life. Her mom used to act as a mediator between Imani and their dad, but Imani feels less supported through their anxiety by her mom these days:

Interviewer: So, you're still having some intensive conflict with your dad?

Imani: Yes, um, it's really stressful... I sometimes get really frustrated and I don't really like visiting [my parents] very much. I always tell my boyfriend, like, I feel like I don't really have a choice. Because if I don't visit them, I get texts and calls, and it's really nerve wracking when I'm not doing anything wrong and I'm just minding my business here, working or whatever. But it will still be there in the back of my head, like, “what grade did you get this semester?” or like, “what classes are you taking next semester?” It was really tough this past semester.

For Imani, virtual school made extracurriculars and group work difficult. While working on her school newspaper, sometimes the other students Imani was supposed to share the workload with would disappear without fulfilling their responsibilities due to lower accountability over Zoom. Imani hoped that the return of in-person classes would make group work more enjoyable again. In this case, the COVID-19 pandemic and its disruption of school life made college more challenging for Imani in a way she had not experienced prior to the pandemic.

Another emerging adult, Elia, also found virtual school to be more difficult at first, but learned to cope with it:

I have ADHD, and I feel like making myself do stuff at home is kind of difficult, but overall I have adjusted pretty well to the online stuff... I like having everything on my computer and getting to see everyone. It's like, I still feel just as in touch with people in class. But I think especially, like, my classes for school— I am a music and music education major— so those are two very small departments. So everyone who I had a class with I have known since my freshman year, so those kinds of relationships were already there... A lot of my classes this past semester were very discussion based, so we were able to talk the whole time. Just being a part of those smaller departments has helped us.

For most emerging adult students, attending virtual school was new territory with a steep learning curve. Not only did the pandemic force students to adapt to new styles of virtual learning that were more accessible for some students and less accessible for others— it also necessitated that they find new methods to socialize. For Elia, though the pandemic sent them home from communal college living, they were still able to socialize with their school friends over Zoom classes. However, the abrupt move home experienced by some college students was also a shock. Households with more than one student attending virtual classes from home had to negotiate factors like noise and space to make the new arrangements work. For example, Jaylin was attending college out of state when the pandemic hit and had to be brought back home by their mom:

Jaylin: Honestly, it's been kinda crazy. I was in school when it started, my school closed. So I had to come back, but we couldn't fly by plane, so my mom drove all the way up to Chicago and all the way back, it was a very long ride, I had a lot of time to spend with her because we hadn't seen each other since Christmas. But now being home, we're really isolated. The fact that I haven't really left the house since then ... my sister is still working so she has to leave, and I was doing things like schooling and stuff here online. That's been kind of stressful. At first, both of my siblings and I were both doing online work and class, so we had to be in separate rooms, all the time because of all the internet problems and everything, and then my mom doesn't really understand all the Internet stuff. So it was a little frustrating at times.

Especially during the early days of the pandemic, being “stuck at home” in an affirming environment was a common experience for LGBTQ young people (Fish et al, 2020; Salerno et al, 2021). Confinement to the family home could have detrimental effects on LGBTQ emerging adults who lost access to community support they would have received through school or social avenues outside the family home (Salerno et al, 2021). However, the loss of support systems for LGBTQ emerging adults at home was not a universal experience; some LGBTQ emerging adults lived with other supportive queer folks or allies in the family home, and many accessed social groups online when in-person socializing was not possible. For example, Elia connected virtually with friends regularly:

Some of my friends organize, like, group brunches, a group facetime brunch. I love doing that kind of stuff because I just get to be there, but you know, just listening. I just prefer to do that, I think, in groups.

Simultaneously, virtual socializing was not always easy for Elia, especially in relationships whose geographic element was disrupted by the pandemic:

I think I'm bad at staying in contact with people. So many relationships are relationships of convenience, right? Especially living on campus, I just have friends who I've literally lived with for three years, and I think we still talk sometimes, and the love and feelings are still there for my friends, but we just don't really actively talk that much anymore... I'm fine with meetings and such, but I hate socially Facetiming, I don't like it. I feel like my hearing is not very good, and it's just annoying, I just don't like it. So that has not helped keeping in contact, so I think that there's a lot of school friends who kind of have been negatively impacted [since] I just haven't gotten to see them as much.

Even though Elia had virtual access to supportive friends who were “all gay”, socializing during the pandemic was sometimes too draining to be worth the effort, and some of Elia’s relationships suffered as a result. Still, Elia was supported in their home by their girlfriend, who was affirming of Elia’s identity and helped Elia with their testosterone shots:

I literally only stabbed myself a handful of times, most of the time in the last year I got everything ready and then [my girlfriend] stabs me and then I inject it. I just

can't do it, so it's just so nice that she's able to do that for me consistently, and supporting, like, everything I do like in my job. We do a lot of healthy relationship stuff, so it's like, I know my shit is on lock, right? I know my shit is good. And so we just are super awesome for each other, and it's just really good.

While other social relationships in Elia's life were harder to navigate, Elia spoke with pride about the security of their romantic partnership throughout the pandemic.

For LGBTQ emerging adults, school and friends were often intimately connected due to the geographic element particularly experienced by college students living on campus or away from home in their college's town. The sudden inability to attend high school or college in person was shocking for many students, and it required adapting to forms of learning most students had never experienced before. For some LGBTQ emerging adults, the pandemic and virtual school actually helped their grades, especially students with disabilities who had more freedom to manage their classes from home. But for many, the pandemic disrupted school, and by extension, the social connections LGBTQ emerging adults had previously fostered on campus.

### **DISCUSSION: Navigating Independence**

For emerging adults, the pandemic has disrupted life course events, particularly in the spheres of housing, school, and social networks. LGBTQ identifying emerging adults have been uniquely impacted by COVID due to their strategies for managing relationships – some of which they already practiced, and some which they developed during the pandemic. The emerging adult experience during the pandemic is a story of increased independence from the adolescence phase, yet continued dependence on family support while they have not yet reached young adulthood. Because of LGBTQ identity, some emerging adults may have complicated or strained relationships with their parents that lead them to seek or receive more support from non-parent

relatives, such as siblings or grandparents. In cases where at least one parent is unsupportive of the LGBTQ emerging adult's identity, they may rely on a more supportive parent or other relative for financial, residential, or emotional support. While some LGBTQ emerging adults were living in a state of growing independence afforded to them by college enrollment prior to the pandemic, many returned to the home of a parent or other relative during lockdown. This unexpected transition forced them to revert to a state of greater dependence on family and extended contact with family members in the home. Emerging adulthood is a tumultuous time, and the stressors of the pandemic exacerbated and disrupted the social transition emerging adults experienced the past two years. The effects of the pandemic created cumulative complications for emerging adults based on sexuality and gender identity, race, class, and age. Even in cases where LGBTQ emerging adults faced hostility and rejection from their families, they very rarely expressed a desire to fully sever ties with family, especially for Latinx LGBTQ emerging adults. In Latinx families in particular, the great importance of intergenerational family relationships tended to outweigh the challenges of family conflict on the basis of LGBTQ identity. While LGBTQ emerging adults were not likely to cut off communication with their families to the point of estrangement, some did use the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to adopt greater agency over when and how their family has access to them, especially when managing distance from family is a coping strategy when dealing with family disapproval or hostility.

### *Limitations*

These findings are from a small pool of participants from San Antonio, TX and surrounding rural counties. The difficulty of this analysis is determining which events in LGBTQ emerging adults' lives are COVID-specific or what this period of their lives may



have looked like had the pandemic not occurred. This study included predominantly Latinx LGBTQ emerging adults, but Black, Indigenous, and Asian experiences were underrepresented in the pool of participants. Additionally, while 26 LGBTQ emerging adults participated in the first round of interviews, only 17 agreed to be interviewed again in the second round.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is no singular track of experience for LGBTQ emerging adults during the time of COVID. The pandemic is a time of extreme uncertainty, and its effects are often not easily predictable. Some LGBTQ emerging adults did experience total disruption of their lives, but not everyone was equally affected. While most scholarship emphasizes the “stuck at home” narrative of LGBTQ young people isolated in unsupportive households, not all participants had such negative experiences of the pandemic. In fact, some LGBTQ emerging adults gained independence or greater agency over the way they manage their family relationships during the pandemic, resulting in decreased family conflict and relationship strain through family work or boundary work. Some LGBTQ emerging adults living at home did find themselves driven to move out into an independent living situation due to stressors exacerbated by the pandemic. For emerging LGBTQ adults who were experiencing a state of quasi-independence prior to the pandemic, the initial lockdown may have prompted a return to the family home that reverted them into a state of increased dependence on the family once again. For people in college in particular, the change in dependence could be distressing, and the pandemic stunted the creation of new communities and networks for many people— especially relationships that were geographically based.

This research was conducted over the first year of the pandemic, but the pandemic is ongoing, and it is too early to pinpoint the long term effects of COVID-19 on the development of LGBTQ emerging adults at this time. While daily life has returned to “normal” for many people, participants in this study are still living through a period of deep uncertainty and instability while coming of age in a society that stigmatizes their identities.

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