Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic
Conversations with 30 queer, trans and non-binary youth from across BC

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Acknowledgements
Introduction

We had the opportunity to interview 30 queer, trans and non-binary youth (17-29 years old) from across BC to hear about your experiences navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated public health measures. Interviews were carried out virtually between July 2020 and June 2021, and generally lasted about 1-1.5 hours.

We asked about how you navigated lockdown periods, shifting guidelines, emerging science and the ‘new normal’.

We asked about your mental health, relationships, substance use, accessing health and social services, education, work and financial support, all in the context of the pandemic.
To those who took time to participate, we are so grateful to each of you for engaging with us and sharing your thoughts. Thank you.

We heard about the **new opportunities** that emerged during these exceptional times, as well as the struggles you faced. You also told us about the **innovative solutions** you came up with as you learned to cope with these new challenges.

We have grouped participant stories based on prominent themes that arose in the data. For each theme, we offer some themes and related quotes that we saw reflected in many of your interviews. We use pseudonyms for all participants.
Snapshot of Participants

**Sexuality**

- Bisexual: 18
- Queer: 9
- Gay: 4
- Lesbian: 2
- Pansexual: 1
- Questioning: 1
- Asexual: 1
- Ciswoman: 12
- Cisman: 10

**Gender**

- Transmasculine: 1
- Ciswoman: 12
- Non-binary: 5
- Transgender: 3
- Agender: 1
- Gender fluid: 1
- Cisman: 10

*Some participants selected more than one gender, and/or sexual identity.*
Snapshot of Participants

Education

Graduate education: 4
Secondary school: 10
Postsecondary school: 14
Primary school: 2

Ethnocultural Identity

South Asian: 1
South East Asian: 1
Indigenous (non-status): 1
White: 19
Chinese: 4
Filipina: 1
White/Japanese: 2
White/Indigenous: 2
Snapshot of Participants

Pronouns

- She/her/hers: 12
- They/them: 3
- Hey/they: 1
- He/him/his: 1
- It/its and he/his: 1
Cannabis Consumption Frequency

- Daily
- Often (3-5 times/week)
- Bi-weekly (2 times/week)
- Weekly (3-5 times/month)
- Rarely (1-2 times/month)
- Never (0 times/month)

Alcohol Consumption Frequency

- Daily
- Often (3-5 times/week)
- Bi-weekly (2 times/week)
- Weekly (3-5 times/month)
- Rarely (1-2 times/month)
- Never (0 times/month)
Many of you reported that isolation felt temporary and found online solutions to help manage feelings of loneliness and the loss of in-person experiences. Humour and online platforms featured in your descriptions of the initial lockdown period and continued to play key roles in your coping strategies through each wave. You also told us about finding new supports as the migration of folks online helped to make geographic barriers obsolete.

Things were absolutely amazing in the online world at the very beginning of the pandemic. Everybody was on Houseparty every night. [...] You could see people you haven’t talked to in literally forever, just by coincidence. And that was really great.

– Fiona (20 years old, Cisgender woman (she/her/hers), Lesbian)

I found an online support group that was specifically for youth who were queer, who were survivors of like sexual assault [through] this counsellor on Zoom and then they were like, “Oh, yeah, and I’m doing this like queer support group for young survivors.” And I’m like, “Oh, here’s a thing that I fit all of the boxes for.”

– Ruby (25 years old, Cisgender woman (she/her/hers), Bisexual)
Virtual Spaces and Self-Discovery

A number of participants spoke about a freedom they felt in not having to physically go out into the world, but instead being able to spend time in reflection and in safe, curated, online communities. The algorithms employed by social media platforms, and especially TikTok, were spoken about as being key technological tools in this process of self-discovery, as well as in the creation of supportive communities that gave you room to explore and grow.

I think probably the biggest thing to start is that I actually sort of came out and came to terms with my sexuality at the beginning of COVID. I think because COVID forced me to sort of like pause for a second [laughs] and like – like come to terms with it. And so a lot of my COVID experience has been shaped by that.
– Alisha (21 years old, Cisgender woman (She/her/hers), Queer)

It gave me the opportunity and the time to really reflect on my own sense of self and identity without the constant pressure of performing for the outside world, and it gave me the opportunity to really look in different identities and genders, and I found one. [...] And I guess that’s the kind of cool thing about non-binary, is everything’s sort of simultaneously super gay and not gay at the same time.
– Shy (21 years old, Transgender/Non-binary (they/he/she), Bisexual)
I’d say that I’m on TikTok a lot and I think that having sort of that community available, the algorithm works very well. It connected me with lots of people who realized that they were gay during the pandemic, and I think that that sort of helped me realize, like, “Oh, this is my experience as well. We relate and I’m gay.”

– Fiona (20 years old, Cisgender woman (she/her/hers), Lesbian)
Healthcare Seen as a Limited Resource

When speaking about access to health services, we heard from some of you that you balanced your own health care needs against the needs you thought that people around you might have. For some of you, it seemed as though you worried that your needs would be brushed off as unimportant by healthcare providers, or that you might be taking resources from people who need it more. In case you need to hear it, you always deserve access to healthcare.

I think if I can find somewhere that I can just go get a blood pressure reading, hopefully that would allow me to get more than just a three-month prescription [for birth control] via one of the online apps. Or I think even just going to a walk-in clinic, but I think part of me, it’s that guilty feeling, like I’m taking up the space of someone that, you know, might need this appointment more than I do.

– Allison (27 years old, Cisgender woman (she, her, hers), Bisexual/Queer)

When I talk to the guy I’m seeing, who has been, you know, using cannabis for a very long time, he just basically like told me it’s not a big deal. Like cannabis isn’t addictive. Like you can’t be addicted, you don’t have a substance use problem. So that made me feel like I was just, you know, making it [cannabis use] into a big deal when it wasn’t, and so I shouldn’t, you know, take access to resources, when other people probably need it more. [...] I’m worried that I’ll go there, and they’ll say, “Oh, no. You don’t. You haven’t been using for long enough, or it’s not affecting your life in a negative enough way,” or like, “Stop wasting my time,” basically.

– Richelle (23 years old, Cisgender woman (she, her, hers), Bisexual)
Finding Ways to Cope with Uncertainty

You also told us about how you continued to find novel ways to manage your mental health, while also reflecting honestly on what was missing. You spoke about key strategies you used to actively support your mental health through this period, such as connecting with others through online social networks, or working on a project or achieving a set goal.

I learned how to knit. I started doing like YouTube workouts. I always hated like the idea of doing a regimented workout, and before COVID I would just do a lot of different physical activities, which I couldn’t do anymore. But I decided it’s been too long since I’ve been active, so I would just do the YouTube thing. And it turns out, it actually is really nice.

– Emma (25 years old, Cisgender woman (she, her, hers), Pansexual)

I remember I was constantly trying to think of like new things to do with [my boyfriend], despite social distancing. [...] We had a discussion one day after a fight. We just told each other, “Okay, let’s figure out how we can make this pandemic more bearable for us.” So, we sat down, and we made up lists of things that we could do at home, when we’re not outside.

– Tom (28 years old, Cisgender man (he/him/his), Bisexual)
Many of you told us about the ways that you navigated your sexual and romantic relationships amid the uncertainty of COVID. For some, the pandemic acted as a catalyst to move relationships into monogamous territory more quickly than you might have otherwise; while others adjusted their online dating screening processes to include COVID risk factors. If and how to meet new people, or how to handle break-ups, involved careful considerations for personal and community health as it became clear that the pandemic was not going to end soon.

I maybe would have met up with a few people so far, but with COVID it’s just kind of up in the air with everything right now, and I don’t want to expose myself unnecessarily, so I haven’t really been hanging out with anybody new lately.
– John (29 years old, Cisgender man (he/him/his), Bisexual)

I’ll tell them – like I have it in my Grindr profile, that I’m only looking for COVID-safe hookups, and specifically either outdoor with masks or through the glory hole.
– Adrian (25 years old, Transgender/Non-binary (he/him/his), Gay/Bisexual/Queer)
Because of the lockdown, and the fact that I take this responsibly, it’s been [months since] I’ve done anything, which is sad. At one point I was kidding that the pandemic stole my ability to have a rebound relationship, which I thought was funny. [...] But yeah, just in terms of the timing, and honestly, like as much as that was incredibly [Laughs] sad, and then incredibly sad to be like, “Oh, my God. I am alone, and also like, I am really alone, because [Laughs] there’s a fucking lockdown,” was also really good timing to not be trapped in an emotionally abusive relationship during a lockdown [Laughs], which would have been way worse.
– Ruby (25 years old, Cisgender woman (she/her/hers), Bisexual)
As public health guidelines shifted and many of you found yourselves isolating again, you told us about how your substance use patterns were often a direct result of the uncertainty and loneliness you felt with social isolation. In an absence of ‘normal’, you found novel and thoughtful ways to check in with your own substance use while also using substances as a way to provide structure to your day or help you cope.

But then in COVID-19, it kind of peaked, like using [cannabis] every single day, using it a lot – a lot. [...] I think [my partner and I] had just both been smoking obscene amounts in the day, and we had just been talking about like, “Hey, how many tokes do we actually have in a day?” So, then we thought up the idea, “Well, why don’t we just write down every single time we do it?” and that first day we had written down 28 tokes each, and we were just like, “Holy crap. That needs to get cut down.” So, within a week we cut that in half, so that was really nice.

– Marty (22 years old, Cisgender man (he/him/his), Bisexual)
I’ve been reflecting a lot on like, “Okay, am I becoming dependent on [cannabis] in any way, or is this just a calming down thing, or just a thing I like to do?” But I usually only smoke or eat an edible super late at night too, and then I usually just eat and go to sleep. And it’s been really helpful, and my anxiety, sometimes I get really anxious at nighttime, and I can’t sleep, so then I’ll have an edible, and it’ll put me to sleep. But at this point in my life, I don’t think I’m dependent on it in any way because I just really enjoy it, and I think I’m allowed to have something I enjoy.

– Lara (21 years old, Cisgender woman (she/her/hers), Bisexual)
I definitely think it’s been more difficult for queer people. I think basically in the sense that like straight people, straight society, if you want to call it that, like those things are regulated. Those things are understood. […] I think queer lives have been regulated way more by the COVID regulations than straight lives […] I would say that like at the beginning I did very much follow all the regulations, like in the first few months, because of course we just didn’t know about COVID, it was so unknown. But when things started to become a little more known, like I definitely made my own decisions based on my understanding of the science.

– Jamie (27 years old, Cisgender man (he/him/his), Gay)
I made my bubble small, and was hanging out with the same people, and spending a lot of time outside going on walks. [...] I was also being very cautious because I live with my nana. And so, I was trying to balance. I was quizzing people before I would hang out with them.
– Mary (24 years old, Cisgender woman (she/her/hers), Pansexual)

I think that there’s – especially with transness, there’s a way that being embodied is such a fundamental part of that connection. Like seeing ourselves, and existing together, sort of has that connection of survival queerness that I think is really hard to replicate online. I think there’s something about being in the room with someone who is living a life that you’re living, and that sense of shared connection and community in the face of people not wanting you to exist the way that you exist. I think it’s really hard to find that online.
– Shane (29 years old, Agender/Transmasculine (it/its and he/his), Queer)
And I absolutely love, and I will not stop saying this to everybody, virtual doctors’ appointments. How did it take till 2020? We’ve had the Internet for so long. How did it take till April of 2020 to have accessible primary physician healthcare appointments online, when I need to refill a prescription or I’m feeling super ill? It’s [Laughs] – yeah, it’s great.

– Gabrielle (23, Cisgender woman (she/her/hers), Lesbian/Queer)

Um, so I’ve never accessed gender-affirming care in person, so I don’t know about that, but the thing that I really like about accessing healthcare virtually is not having to wait for hours at a walk-in clinic. [Laughs] It is really nice to just be like, “You can call me at eleven,” and then have the doctor call you in your house. – Shane (29 years old, Agender/Transmasculine (it/its and he/his), Queer)

Many of you spoke about the shift to virtual or voice-only doctor’s appointments. This pandemic-era shift was celebrated by many of you for both decreasing wait times and increasing accessibility.
Self-Reflection and Hope

You told us about past struggles with mental health, and how those earlier experiences informed the ways you coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. For some of you, the helpful coping mechanisms that you had in place were directly related to seeking mental health care earlier in your lives. Despite the hardships posed by the pandemic, we heard many stories of hope for better individual and shared futures.

I am definitely hoping for not just a re-emergence, but sort of a rejuvenation of the world. Because I feel that a lot of people share the experience of being aware, of where they’re able to, during COVID, step away from the societal pressures and understand themselves. So, there’s going to be sort of a boom of baby trans people, where they’re, fresh in their new identity that they’ve bravely chosen to wear out either in small settings or publicly, fully.
– Shy (21 years old, Transgender/Non-binary (they/he/she), Bisexual)

Yeah, it’s been – it’s been weird, because I think for me as a teenager I really struggled with depression and suicidal ideation. [...] When I felt sick [with COVID], I was like, I just want to get through this. So, it’s been a really interesting experience to be on the other side of that, because I think that it’s changed the way I look at life and living, which has been interesting.
– Aaron (24, Cisgender man (he/him/his), Bisexual/Queer)
Our takeaways

During the pandemic, everyone in BC was asked to make changes in their lives to support the overall health of our communities. For many of you, these changes coincided with important life decisions around school, work, travel and living situations.

You told us about the ways that you had implemented profound changes in your lives, using technology in adaptive and creative ways to meet your physical, social and emotional needs.

The context of COVID-19 and decreased socialization resulted in a shift in many patterns, including patterns of substance use. We heard that substance use was less likely to be about having fun, and that you were less likely to consume drugs associated with partying and celebration.

Many of you continued to use substances socially, although the social contexts had often shifted online to group chats and video calls. While most of you had implemented creative technological solutions to isolation out of necessity, there was excitement around returning to a ‘normal’ where you could once again share physical spaces with people.

Some of you told us about how the skills you had learned earlier in your lives, through access to high quality mental health care, helped you through the different phases of the pandemic. You told us about how much you appreciated the relative ease of access to mental health resources that were rolled out during the early phases of the pandemic. We learned more about how investing in high quality mental health resources in early life can provide queer, trans and non-binary youth with life-long skills that can be applied individually in resourceful ways even as contexts shift dramatically.
The idea of **limited resources in the context of a publicly-funded health care system** under increased stress came out in your stories. We wanted to point this out to participants and to let you know that **you always deserve access to healthcare**, including mental healthcare. We also will bring this finding forward to service providers and policy makers so that they know when a youth approaches a clinician for help, that youth has already carefully weighed their needs.

We heard that **you want to see policy-level changes** that acknowledge both the difficulties you have been through, as well as your capacity to contribute in inspired ways to solutions that take into account the realities of being a young queer, trans and/or non-binary person in the current context.

We so appreciated your willingness to sit down with us and share your experiences with navigating all of the ups and downs of the COVID-19 pandemic. Your thoughtful and engaged responses to our questions are so appreciated. Thank you.

We always want to hear from you! If you have any comments, please reach out to Rod Knight.

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