On the question of:
How LGBTQ2IA+ students felt in a pandemic in a virtual semester during exam season?
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When considering how to address the needs of the community and how to bring people together I thought the best way to do that would be to tell the stories we are living out.

In December 2020, the LGBTQ2IA+ Engagement Peer Helper Team launched an anonymous survey to record student experiences in the pandemic.

This had the goal of understanding students' experiences and promoting solidarity among the community. Submissions are organized into general themes that were brought up by students in their personal accounts of their experiences during the pandemic.

We hope that this document serves as a collective reflection piece of our time during the pandemic.

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summary

In total 73 people responded to the survey. When asked about their feelings participants could choose from a variety of moods as well as type their own.

Struggling with identity 45%     Affirmed 4% Proud of identity 27%

Other moods participants typed were: anxious, depressed, stressed, trapped, tired, disheartened, lonely, isolated, melancholic, scared, complacent, tense, and relaxed.

These are all represented in the word cloud. The size of the word indicates the frequency of the word. The number of times a word appears word cloud does not reflect actual frequency of responses.
"I feel more isolated from my LGBTQ2IA+ peers. I had to move back home because of the pandemic, and I miss being in a safe, positive space surrounded by people who understand my life and experiences.”

-Queer Woman, Undergrad, Psychology

"I came to terms with my identity over the pandemic but it’s been hard not to find other queer people for community. This was hard both for realizing my identity and feeling secure and accepting my identity. "

"It's difficult to be at home feeling stifled rather than away at school, surrounded by the community I choose”

"Recently identifying as bisexual, I feel hindered by the pandemic. I’m not able to meet like-minded people in the community in person. I feel that my ability to feel accepted is limited to my interaction with other people, which is minimal. I did not expect to feel alienated in a way because of this. I feel as though I am missing a large part of the coming out experience."
“I think being LGBTQ2IA+ influences my time during the pandemic as I struggle to find the queer community. I do not have LGBTQ2IA+ friends, so going to classes with queer folks, going to queer events and spaces, even seeing representation around campus and in general helped to validate my identity. While trying to quarantine and doing school and work virtually, I am not getting these similar interactions. Also not seeing my partner makes me feel more disconnected from my queer identity. I have always struggled with feeling "gay enough" and being valid in queer spaces, they help to validate my presence not only as a girlfriend but just as a queer person in my life. Throughout quarantine I have felt very disconnected from the queer community, I know the feeling will come back once Covid has passed and I am not worried about it, it just sucks right now.”
-(She/Her), Lesbian

“It influenced my time during the pandemic due to a desensitization to social isolation.”
-Queer, Non-Binary

“Lack a lot of the social supports I used to have in person. It’s isolating.”

“Honestly, no. Nothing has really changed for me in regards to my identity as a bisexual woman and the pandemic. If anything, less ability to explore my identity by meeting new people.”
-Bisexual Woman
connection

“The online meetings made me feel comfortable enough to express myself. I don't think I could do that in person. Nothing else really changed.”

“As a first year student, being part of the LGBTQ2IA+ community has accounted for almost all of the people I have met and befriended. These friends played a major role in helping me through my first semester. As a transwoman, the change to primarily online encounters has been surprisingly euphoric as my peers just recognise me as a woman, not discriminating against me for my voice or appearance.”

-Lesbian, Trans-Fem, (She/Her), Undergrad, B.Eng

“It has influenced me to feel a sense of community, even when I was isolated from others during the pandemic. Unexpected results I found was that I had a lot of support from the community when I reached out for help to fellow LGBTQ2IA+ students.”

-Bisexual, Biomed, Undergrad, (She/Her)

“I think the pandemic has reminded me to check in with my LGBTQ2IA+ friends more often.”

-Bisexual, undergrad, (She/Her)

“As a first year student, being part of the LGBTQ2IA+ community has accounted for almost all of the people I have met and befriended. These friends played a major role in helping me through my first semester. As a transwoman, the change to primarily online encounters has been surprisingly euphoric as my peers just recognise me as a woman, not discriminating against me for my voice or appearance.”

-Lesbian, Trans-Fem, (She/Her), Undergrad, B.Eng
societal navigation

“Civil rights issues can bring up a lot of feelings and stressors for BIPOC, LGBTQ2IA+, and other marginalized categories of people. For me, I have been struggling to find my identity during the pandemic as I realized I still hide from my family and cannot be completely, authentically myself. I am a POC raised to be ‘white’, and through living alone for the first few months of the pandemic, this idea has sprung a lot of internal thought and conflict within myself that may not have come up as strongly otherwise.”

-They/Them, Enby, Undergrad

“Being a member of the LGBTQ2IA+ community comes with increased risk for problems with mental health and substance use. I have noticed heightened anxiety and depression, as well as heightened substance use, among almost all of my LGBTQ2IA+ friends, and I am no exception. I have known more than one queer homeless person who has died from substance use exacerbated by the pandemic. Financial stress has also been a major issue for me throughout the pandemic. Food security has been an issue, as access to food banks has been seriously limited. I have lost access to health providers who were frustrated by my inability to function at a normal level. With all of that said, there have been some benefits to the ways that COVID-19 has influenced society. As someone with disabilities that make it difficult to leave the house regularly, the ability to attend classes and other events from home has made a major difference in my life. I hope that even after this pandemic, we will continue to offer opportunities for remote attendance.”

-Asexual Lesbian, She/They, Undergrad, English Major, Classics Minor, Creative Writing Minor

Some respondents discussed how different social factors affect LGBTQ2IA+ and BIPOC people differently.
family

Many people reported mixed relations towards their family members. Particularly, the pandemic has brought families more physically close than before.

“I only came out recently, and being alone with my own thoughts and my only somewhat supporting family has been exhausting. It's turned into another thing I just try not to worry about.”
-Pansexual

“There has been a lot more at home time. And have actually come out to my boyfriend's family as bisexual as I was having issues deciding whether I wanted to meet my dad's newly found biological family as they seemed more conservative than others.

Being more at home and spending more time with my boyfriend's family has made me more comfortable to share these experiences with them.”
-Bisexual, Animal Bio Undergrad

"I have had to move back home from Guelph due to the pandemic. I am unable to meet new people during it. It is worrying having to come out to my family since I am with them every day."
"Being an out and proud queer person was something I grew into while being at university and living away from my family...Now, I'm fortunate enough that my parents are accepting and unconcerned about my queerness so I was lucky to have them to fall back on. What was strange for me was to be the super queer person I am around the family that knew me before my growth. And now that I don't see my friends in the same capacity as we did before, I've had to become better friends with my family. It's been a growing period for all of us and one that has allowed us to get to know the real version of each other that we didn't share as much before."

- Bisexual, Undergrad

It's been a bit harder stuck inside with my family these past 10 months. They're generally very tolerant and accepting of other queer people, but I have no idea how they'd react to me being gay. I've been in the closet for years, but I spent the 2019-2020 school year (freshman year for me) living on campus and out of the closet to pretty much everyone I met at Guelph. Being forced to go home and hide myself all over again was a lot harder than it was in the past.

-Gay man, Undergrad
relationships

A lot of sapphics noted having closer relationships. Other people reported how it was harder to date in a pandemic.

“I don’t really think that being LGBTQ has influenced me during the pandemic. I have just been spending all my time with my girlfriend.”

-Leather

“I'm not sure if this was a result of the pandemic or just tik tok, but I'm seeing more people being proudly and openly queer. A lot of my friends have come out during the pandemic and I even managed to snag myself a girlfriend.”

-Pansexual, Psyc, Undergrad, She/Her

“The pandemic unfortunately prevented me from going to my first Pride, which was absolutely heartbreaking. Also, even outside of a pandemic I find it much more difficult to date as a gay person compared to my straight friends, and this has only introduced an additional obstacle.”

-Gay

"Being a lesbian during the pandemic is interesting because now more than ever people can tell that me and my girlfriend are in a relationship because we enter stores together and remain beside each other while shopping to maintain our social distance from other people. As well, the pandemic has caused me and my girlfriend to spend all of our time together and has really impacted our relationship. I don't feel that being a lesbian has affected my experience of the pandemic."
**identity**

Many people noted how their identity has been impacted due to the time spent alone during the pandemic.

**self-disclosure**

"I had a lot of time to reflect on my identity which actually resulted in a lot of peace with myself."

“My gender has been fluctuating a lot as a result of the pandemic, especially my gender expression. Without having anyone to see and not being weighed down by the fear of how others perceive me, I've felt more comfortable leaning into androgynous looks, even shaving all my hair off for the first time (hair that was once so long it came down to my waist). I'm currently letting it grow out to see how I both look and feel with it at different lengths.”

“The pandemic gave me more time to think about my identity, and find others I can relate with through social media/online.”
“Until very recently I had no idea what my sexual orientation was, but after spending months alone with myself you start thinking. I figured out that I am bisexual, and if it had not been for the pandemic I do not know when I would have figured that out. I would say that that is the biggest thing to come out of the pandemic for me, and it was definitely an unexpected result.”

-Bisexual She/Her, Enviro Sci Undergrad

“The pandemic actually was a big factor in my discovering my sexuality, as it was something I figured out during this time. Being home due to COVID and having to hide my sexuality has made things difficult.”

-Lesbian, Undergrad

**self-doubt**

“I feel like I know even less about myself now. It's really stressful. It's also much more difficult to hide my identity from people now that I'm at home all day.”

“I only came out recently, and being alone with my own thoughts and my only somewhat supporting family has been exhausting. It's turned into another thing I just try not to worry about.”

“Spending so much time in isolation, and not having anyone to perform for made me question and struggle with my sexuality and gender a lot. It’s hard to figure out what’s really me and what’s just me trying to cater to other people.”

-Queer, Non-Binary
“Yes. I've felt unsafe going to get a haircut during the pandemic. As silly as it may seem, I never realized how much my hair was tied to my identity. I haven't experienced dysphoria in 5 years but I've been experiencing it near daily the last 8 months.”

“I've had therapy and doctors appointments relating to my dysphoria postponed by the pandemic. Due to complications with my bank, I cannot even change my name on CourseLink and on GryphMail without it affecting my OSAP. Because of this, some of my profs have frequently misgendered me during lectures. Often, I am too nervous to correct them because I fear negative backlash.”

-Trans Man, French Studies

“It's been nice being able to stay inside because I don't really like being seen. I feel very dysphoric and dysmorphic about my body. I've had a lot of time alone to reflect on my identity and what I want in life.”
"The loneliness associated with the pandemic has actually allowed me to become more comfortable and confident in who I am and my sexual identity. It has allowed me to really think about why I belittled my own identity and gave me the time to change my self-deprecating ways. Being a part of this community has not had any direct impacts on my life during the pandemic as I am out to my immediate family that I live with. I greatly sympathize with those who are not in my scenario and who do not feel safe to be stuck at home with their families."

-Bisexual, Female, Accounting Undergrad

“It may be due to the isolation of where I live, or the stage of transitioning I'm in, but I've actually found this time in the pandemic to be some of the most pleasant time to be trans.”

-Lesbian, Trans-Fem, (She/Her), Undergrad, B.Eng

“I think the pandemic has strengthened my identity, just because I have had more time to sit with myself and think about these things.”
I've gotten to spend a lot of time reflecting on who I am and what I want to do in life, which was unexpected but welcome. And again, I got to come out to my family, so I feel less like I'm lying to them whenever I talk about the future, and feel much more accepted and loved at home. Though I'm not out at work, the hospital I work at began an inclusionary campaign where they have rainbow and trans pride flags posted at many locations around the building. Also, because of my isolation and the lack of LGBTQ2IA+ community where I live allowed me to discover and participate in many new online programs and supports, which I likely would not have done otherwise.

“I feel like because the rules on social gatherings are so strict I've lost some of the few places in person that were LGBT friendly/felt like safe spaces, and while we still have online rooms and stuff I do feel like a dimension is lost. As far as unexpected experiences go, it being normal to wear a mask 24/7 has helped my dysphoria about the lower half of my face lol.”

-Undergrad Trans Lesbian
"Before I respond to these questions, I should note that I am a cis ace wlw, though I most commonly identify myself as queer.

Being LGBTQ2IA+ during a pandemic: Before the pandemic began, I was still slowly getting more comfortable with my identity. I'm very proud of who I am, but I'm still trying to give myself the space to become someone new and to step away from the small-town values I grew up with and the guilt that I feel about my identity. During the pandemic, I moved back home to live with my family in the isolated small town that I grew up in because I didn't have any housing lined up in Guelph. I wasn't explicitly out to my family before I had moved home, and I had no one I felt comfortable talking to about my identity either in my hometown or from university. Being home during the pandemic has been incredibly stressful, especially with the added element of being closeted. My youngest sister (15) would continuously ask when I would find a boyfriend or a husband or have kids. Eventually I decided to come out because the stress of having to deal with constant questions and keeping a big part of who I am from my family was adversely affecting my mental health.

My sister has since asked less, though she still asks sometimes when I'll find a boyfriend and have kids without ever mentioning the possibility of having a girlfriend or wife instead. I still have not come out as ace to my family, because my parents do not understand what asexuality is and have dismissed it when I attempt to explain. It’s not all negative; I’ve gotten to spend more time with my family, whom I missed while away at school; the pandemic finally made me come out to my family as wlw, which is good; it also gave me time to reflect on myself as a member of the LGBTQ2IA+ community. But I've also been isolated from the community as well, because of where I live, and as a social person, this has been detrimental for my mental wellbeing. "
“I cannot express myself due to my close proximity to my homophobic parents and family friends. I cannot enjoy safety with speaking out about LGBTQ2IA+ issues. I do believe it comes with unique experiences, the social media community has grown quite supportive of our community and has managed to embrace the pandemic for our own self expression.”

-Bisexual

“Being LGBTQ2IA+ makes things harder than it should be. I began this semester with so much hope about a relationship I started and I was looking forward to spending time together but things went so poorly it's just strange and weird in a lot of ways. And the pressure of a pandemic that makes it harder to meet people makes everything feel like the stakes are higher than they should be. Especially because dating in a pandemic is impossible and it feels so daunting because there's just so few of us to begin with. And it does not help that as queer people we do not get the same experiences that straight cisgender people do and we don't get to explore our attraction as easily. It does not help that dating before you realize your gender identity means that it's harder to learn from that experience because you were not really authentically yourself. The plus side is that I did figure out part of my gender identity. The problem is that having so much time to think makes you realize you have problems in your brain that you really wish you did not! It would be easier to not have to think so much about yourself and your relationships. As queer people we lack the frame of reference that cisgender straight people get and that does make things harder but accepting that we can form our own ways of doing things is valuable. While the pandemic is awful in a lot of ways there is a lot to learn and accept about it which is nice in its own way.”

-Non-Binary Lesbian
conclusions

recommendations

In the summary quantitative section 87% people have said they were nervous. This could be in part due to exams and this end of semester period being a very nervous time in general. Additionally, almost every response talked about isolation in some way. There are many students who are feeling alone and community can be found online.

To stay updated, LGBTQ2IA+ students should visit the Student Experience page and subscribe to the LGBTQ2IA+ Student Connections Newsletter:
https://www.uoguelph.ca/studentexperience/LGBTQ2IA-Programs-Events.

There are available resources at the university:
Sexual and Gender Diversity Advisor
Jarred Sanchez-Cacnio (they/them)
Email: cacnioj@uoguelph.ca
U of G Student Wellness: https://wellness.uoguelph.ca/

future directions

There are multitudes of ways the pandemic has affected people. We hope that reading this document has allowed greater understanding of LGBTQ2IA+ student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We should all take the time to reflect on our experiences in the pandemic and the many ways it has affected our identities and our connections to others.