

MARITAL QUALITY IN COHABITING COUPLES DURING THE COUPLE FORMATION PROCESS

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ABSTRACT. This study aimed to understand and describe how marital quality is expressed among cohabiting couples experiencing the couple formation process. Marital quality was examined based on the following dimensions: satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, sexuality, and affectivity. We interviewed eight heterosexual, cohabiting, childless young adult couples living in Porto Alegre and its metropolitan area. Deductive thematic analysis revealed that the assessed dimensions of marital quality feed back into each other. The couples demonstrated high-quality marriages through their desire to maintain and invest in their relationships, their shared sense of intimacy, their mutually satisfying sexual experiences, and their expressions of affection and care for their partners. Overall, the participants expressed satisfaction with their romantic relationships. Finally, this study underscores the importance of investigating marital quality during the process of forming a couple, given the repercussions of the patterns established at this stage throughout the life cycle.

Keywords: marital relations; couple dynamics; qualitative research.

A QUALIDADE CONJUGAL EM CASAIS COABITANTES NA ETAPA DE FORMAÇÃO DO CASAL

RESUMO. Este estudo teve como objetivo conhecer e descrever como a qualidade conjugal se expressa em casais que coabitam e vivenciam a etapa de formação do casal. A qualidade conjugal foi compreendida a partir das seguintes dimensões: satisfação, compromisso, intimidade, sexualidade e afetividade. Oito casais heterossexuais, em coabitação, sem filhos, adultos jovens, residentes em Porto Alegre e região metropolitana, foram entrevistados conjuntamente. A análise temática dedutiva realizada permitiu constatar que as dimensões da qualidade conjugal avaliadas se retroalimentam. Pode-se verificar que os casais manifestaram indícios de boa qualidade conjugal por meio do desejo de permanecer e investir no relacionamento, pelo senso de intimidade compartilhado, pela vivência mutuamente satisfatória da sexualidade e a partir das expressões de afeto e cuidado com o parceiro. De modo geral, os participantes demonstraram estar satisfeitos com seus relacionamentos amorosos. Evidencia-se, por fim, a importância de investigar a qualidade conjugal durante a etapa de formação do casal, dada a repercussão dos padrões que se estabelecem nesta fase ao longo do ciclo vital.

Palavras-chave: relações conjugais; dinâmica de casal; pesquisa qualitativa.

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LA CALIDAD CONYUGAL EN PAREJAS EN COHABITACIÓN EN LA ETAPA DE FORMACIÓN DE PAREJAS

RESUMEN. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo conocer y describir cómo se expresa la calidad conyugal en parejas que cohabitan y están en la etapa de formación de la pareja. La calidad conyugal se entendió desde las siguientes dimensiones: satisfacción, compromiso, intimidad, sexualidad y afectividad. Se entrevistaron de forma conjunta ocho parejas heterosexuales, en cohabitación, sin hijos, adultos jóvenes, residentes de Porto Alegre y región. El análisis temático deductivo permitió verificar que las dimensiones de la calidad conyugal evaluadas se retroalimentan. Se puede observar que las parejas mostraron evidencia de buena calidad conyugal a través del deseo de quedarse e invertir en la relación, por la experiencia mutuamente satisfactoria de la sexualidad, a través del sentido de intimidad compartida y de las expresiones de cariño y cuidado hacia la pareja. En general, los participantes estaban satisfechos con sus relaciones amorosas. Finalmente, se evidencia la importancia de investigar la calidad conyugal durante la etapa de formación de la pareja, dada la repercusión de los patrones forjados en esta fase a lo largo del ciclo vital.

Palabras-clave: relaciones conyugales; dinámica de pareja; investigación cualitativa.

Introduction

A marital relationship between two people who live together without being married is called cohabitation. There has been a significant increase in this type of relationship in recent decades, both in Brazil (Menezes & Lopes, 2007; Ramm & Salinas, 2019) and internationally (Manning, 2020; Sassler & Lichter, 2020). Among young adults, cohabitation is the most common family experience, surpassing marriage and parenthood. Since marriage is often postponed in life (Manning et al., 2019), many couples will experience the transition to cohabitation.

Forming a new couple requires several tasks and adjustments, such as establishing clear boundaries with one's family of origin, committing to the relationship, strengthening the emotional bond, and balancing individuality and conjugality (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2016; Ríos-González, 2011; Wagner & Delatorre, 2018). How couples deal with these demands will impact their marital quality. According to the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model proposed in the mid-1990s, enduring individual vulnerabilities, stressful events, and adaptive processes can explain variations in marital quality and stability over time. This theory states that adaptive processes are how couples interact with life's demands and that they influence and are influenced by marital quality (Delatorre & Wagner, 2021; Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

The development stage of a couple involves several crucial tasks for building conjugality, which can have a reciprocal impact on marital quality. In this sense, couples who achieve a perceived successful adaptation may feel relieved to be together despite the challenges they face. Conversely, couples who fail to adapt adequately may suffer even more from the accumulation of external stressors, individual difficulties brought on by each member, and relational issues. Repeated failures in adaptation may lead to a decline in marital quality and increase the likelihood of dissolution (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

International research reveals that cohabitation is more often interrupted by termination of the relationship than by transitioning to marriage (Manning, 2020). Considering the relationship between adaptive processes and marital quality (Delatorre & Wagner, 2021; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), one might assume that this tendency to dissolve cohabitation through breakups is associated with the levels of marital quality of cohabitants. While no data confirms whether cohabitations in Brazil follow the same trends as in developed countries, it is known that marital quality increasingly plays a central role in the decision to maintain or end a relationship (Røsand et al., 2014). Thus, it is important to understand the marital quality levels of Brazilian cohabitants.

Marital quality is understood as a couple's emotional and cognitive assessment of their relationship, as well as the degree to which they are engaged, close, affectionate, and sexually attracted to each other. It can be assessed through five dimensions. Intimacy consists of closeness, connection, belonging, and emotional openness between partners. Commitment refers to each partner's engagement in the relationship, including taking on responsibilities, keeping agreements, and supporting one's partner. Satisfaction involves the overall affective and cognitive assessment of the marital relationship. Displays of affection and care correspond to feelings of affection for one's partner. Finally, attraction and sex encompass physical attraction, arousal, and sexual desire toward one's partner (Delatorre & Wagner, 2022).

Several national and international studies have focused on marital quality in the early stages of a relationship. National studies show that, despite facing difficulties related to the beginning of marriage and career development (Heckler & Mosmann, 2016), couples in the couple formation stage appear to have higher levels of marital quality compared to couples in later stages (Wagner & Delatorre, 2018). In contrast, international studies published primarily in the 2000s have associated cohabiting couples with lower marital quality than married couples. A systematic review analyzed 98 international articles published between 1999 and 2008, demonstrating a trend toward higher levels of marital satisfaction and quality of life among married couples than among cohabiting couples. This difference is likely explained by the increased sense of security and stability that comes with marriage (Wainberg et al., 2010).

However, more recent studies are controversial. For example, a longitudinal study of 161 people who transitioned to cohabitation in the United States found declines in several marital quality variables after cohabitation began, except for sexual frequency (Rhoades et al., 2012). Another North American study revealed that cohabitants without the intention of marrying reported the worst levels of marital quality, compared to those who had this intention or were already married. Furthermore, women who married without previously cohabiting reported higher marital quality than those who had cohabited or were not formally married. Regarding men, the study suggests that marriage does not necessarily imply better marital quality (Brown et al., 2017).

A clinical study conducted in the United States with 197 cohabiting or married couples who sought therapy found higher levels of relationship satisfaction among cohabitants. The authors suggest that this result may be due to these couples being in an earlier stage of their relationships compared to married couples. Moreover, the authors indicate that cohabitants who seek therapy may differ from the general population and suggest a shift toward greater stability in cohabiting relationships (Shannon & Bartle-Harring, 2017).

Therefore, the findings regarding marital quality during the stage of forming a couple are inconsistent. Although some Brazilian research exists on this topic, the samples are predominantly composed of married individuals. Internationally, a greater number of specific

studies on marital quality and cohabitation exist, but they have produced divergent results. These differences may be influenced by different variables, such as cultural and contextual aspects, the growing acceptance and popularization of cohabitation in society, and the type of romantic relationship. Thus, there is a clear need for studies dedicated to understanding how marital quality develops in cohabiting couples in the Brazilian context. In light of this, the purpose of this study is to understand and describe how marital quality is expressed in couples experiencing the couple formation process through cohabitation.

Method

Design and participants

This was a qualitative, exploratory, descriptive, cross-sectional study. Participants were eight heterosexual couples living in cohabitation, residing in Porto Alegre and its metropolitan area. The couples had an average age of 27 for the women and 28 for the men. Their relationships had not been formalized through marriage or a stable union, and they had been together for at least six months and no more than three years, according to the same classification criteria for relationship length and life cycle stage used by Wagner and Delatorre (2018). Therefore, this sample was considered intentional (Fontanella et al., 2008).

Most participants self-identified as non-religious or non-practicing and had an income of up to four minimum wages, considering the current value of BRL 1,045.00 in 2020. Information regarding age, self-declared color/race, education, cohabitation time, and total length of the relationship is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Characterization of participating couples

Participant	Age, self-declared color/race, and education	Cohabitation time	Total length of the relationship
Amanda	24, white, HE	1 year and 3 months	6 years and 5 months
André	25, white, HS		
Bárbara	23, brown, HE	11 months	7 years
Bernardo	23, white, incomplete HE		
Claudia	32, white, HE	1 year and 3 months	2 years
César	31, white, HE		
Diana	24, brown, HE	6 months	1 year and 1 month
Daniel	30, white, HE		
Estela	27, branca, PG	2 years and 9 months	10 months
Erick	29, branca, ES		
Fernanda	34, white, PG	2 years and 8 months	11 months
Felipe	35, white, PG		
Gisele	25, white, PG	8 years and 2 months	2 years and 8 months
Gabriel	24, white, ES		
Helena	33, white, PG	2 years and 5 months	1 years and 8 months
Henrique	33, brown, PG		

HE = Higher education; HS = High school; PG = Postgraduate studies

Data collection procedures, instruments, and ethical aspects

Participants were recruited through the researchers' network of contacts. They were invited via email to participate in the study, which explained the research objectives and ethical aspects. After acceptance, each member of the couple received an online sociodemographic questionnaire, and a joint interview was scheduled. Six interviews were conducted in person at the participants' discretion, with all appropriate preventive measures against COVID-19 taken, while the remainder were conducted via video call using the Google Meet platform.

The interview guide was developed based on literature about processes and tasks associated with couples' development stages, transitions, and cohabitation specifics (Heckler & Mosmann, 2016; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2016; Ríos-González, 2011). Questions were asked about adapting to cohabitation, organizing household chores, managing money, leisure activities, conflicts and conflict resolution, sexuality, relationships with families of origin, experiences with the pandemic, and plans.

Signed informed consent forms were collected during the interview or received via email with digital signatures from the participants. Data was collected between June and November 2020. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Psychology at UFRGS (Opinion 4.143.492). All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. To preserve anonymity, fictitious names were used to designate participants.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 14 software. The data were subjected to deductive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). The themes and subthemes selected a priori were guided by the dimensions of the Marital Quality Scale (MQS) (Delatorre & Wagner, 2022). The MQS was chosen because it is the only marital quality instrument produced in Brazil to date, with which we are familiar. The scale has five dimensions: satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, sexuality, and affectivity, with the help of the complementary definitions presented in Delatorre and Wagner (2021). Based on these descriptions, deductive codes were developed to guide the coding stage and represent potential subthemes. To ensure the codes' internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, three authors initially coded two interviews together. Subsequently, two authors coded the remaining six interviews simultaneously and independently. The divergent codes were discussed and recoded by consensus among the three authors. During this process, the codes were revised and refined once more to achieve greater clarity and differentiation. After coding the eight interviews, all authors reviewed the excerpts categorized under each code to ensure consistency with the code as a whole. Any excerpts that did not represent their assigned code were recoded to ensure the homogeneity of the themes and subthemes.

Results

The results are organized into five themes—intimacy, commitment, satisfaction, affectivity, and sexuality—and eight subthemes that describe couples' experiences with marital quality in the early stages of cohabitation.

Intimacy

Interviewees identified intimacy as a procedural element operating in the construction of conjugality. It was analyzed through three subthemes: a sense of belonging and

closeness, emotional openness and sharing of experiences, and familiarity and mutual understanding.

Sense of belonging and closeness

The couples expressed a sense of closeness through statements indicating companionship, a desire to be together, and satisfaction with their partner's closeness: "I think the most positive thing about cohabiting is really being present with each other, you know, every day" (Daniel). Belonging, on the other hand, appears as the need for a space identified as the couple's: "Having our own little space, our things, and doing things our way" (Claudia). This space can be understood emotionally as well, as indicated by the trust between partners: "I think it's the trust we've been building as well" (Bárbara). This space can also be understood physically, as a way for the couple to organize themselves—a typical task of this phase.

Emotional openness and sharing of experiences

Emotional openness is one way couples build intimacy. Through emotional openness, partners express their emotional needs and allow themselves to be vulnerable in each other's presence. Many couples report experiencing emotional openness after conflict, during reconciliation, and when searching for mutual understanding:

Then I told Daniel how I was feeling [...] I thought I was doing something nice by cooking a special meal, but he spoke to me rudely. It was the first time that had happened. I even cried because I was fragile about the situation. Then, he explained it to me better, apologized, and we talked about it later that day (Diana).

However, emotional openness is also represented by creating a space to listen to each other's personal experiences. These moments allow couples to discuss sensitive topics and share experiences and ideas. "Now that we're living together, we talk more about our histories, what we've learned, and what happened in previous relationships" (Henrique).

Sharing weaknesses, experiences, and ideas, as well as experiences with families of origin and previous relationships, is important for couples. It allows them to address conflicts and align expectations about the relationship. This results in greater familiarity and mutual understanding.

Familiarity and mutual understanding

Living together allows couples to get to know each other more deeply, providing a more realistic view of their partner and demystifying aspects that may have initially been idealized: "You get to know someone much more when you're living together, you don't just know the surface or the good parts, you know everything" (César). This familiarity, which begins to develop during the dating stage and intensifies during cohabitation, also fosters awareness of each other's needs and emotional states, facilitating mutual support.

Participants demonstrated that a lack of familiarity can hinder understanding between couples, fostering disagreements and conflicts. Since building intimacy and familiarity is an ongoing process, this was more evident in cases where the relationship and cohabitation were shorter. One participant said: "For me, Daniel is a much more mysterious person. Today, I try to understand him, and I understand some things better, but there are still things I don't fully understand" (Diana); "It was quite surprising for me, because there was no way I could have known that you felt so shaken by these things" (Daniel). For couples who had been together longer, this process was more consolidated: First, we've been together for six

years, so we can see it in each other's faces when they're uncomfortable" (Amanda). These differences, which arise from the length of the relationship and cohabitation, illustrate the procedural nature of intimacy and the importance of familiarity in regulating the emotional climate of the couple.

Commitment

Commitment involves partners' choices to stay together and invest in the relationship. This concept was broken down into two subthemes: the decision to stay together and invest in the relationship, as well as the support and sharing of responsibilities.

Decision to stay together and invest in the relationship

Participants expressed a desire to stay together at various points, acknowledging the necessary investment to maintain a satisfying relationship: "We're together because we really want to be together. We believe in each other" (Fernanda); "People have to want to be together, because it's challenging. If both partners don't want it, it won't work. I think that's also the point, knowing he's with me, you know?" (Claudia).

Establishing cohabitation was understood as an evolution in the relationship, implying a greater commitment: "There's a much greater commitment, right? I think the security of having the other person committed in this way gives you more peace of mind [...] It gave us more security, trust, and love for each other" (César). Some participants consider themselves to be in a married relationship, despite identifying themselves as dating. This suggests that they perceive themselves as being in a long-term relationship while also highlighting that this marital configuration does not yet have a clearly defined status like dating or marriage.

Couples recognize areas for improvement and the effort required to maintain a good relationship, demonstrating a willingness to invest in it. They indicated the importance of setting aside time for each other, considering each other's feelings and thoughts when making decisions, and adopting a flexible approach to accommodate both partners, whether in everyday situations or on special occasions. They also expressed confidence in the future of their relationship and their partner. This confidence is reflected in part by their respect for each other's individuality: "We learned that we are two people. We can't be one person, you know? We are two individuals with our differences, with our similarities, and we choose to share the journey, you know?" (Gisele). Their confidence in the future of the relationship was also evident in their respect for and tolerance of the disagreements and conflicts that naturally occur at this stage:

Sometimes, feelings become apparent, and a person can feel insecure, thinking, 'Does this person want to break up with me because of this?' And I said [to Diana, in a conflict situation] 'no, not at all. The stronger our connection, the less this kind of thing (conflict) will matter.' (Daniel, emphasis added).

The wedding ritual was mentioned as a goal for the couples and a way to express confidence in the future of their relationships. Everyone indicated that they would like to have a wedding in the future. One couple is already engaged, and another couple held a housewarming party when they began living together. Several other joint projects were mentioned, such as having a child, traveling, getting a dog, and investing in a home. Some couples plan to share a savings account to help achieve these goals. The interviewees emphasized the importance of having aligned goals and clarity about what is expected of the relationship.

Support and sharing of responsibilities

This branch is concerned with providing support for daily logistics shared by partners, which demonstrates commitment to each other and to the relationship. This includes dividing household chores, organizing finances, and caring for pets. These agreements were clearly well-established among the couples, with some being more informal and others stipulated by explicit rules. The couples demonstrated a willingness to help each other and adjust their responsibilities when necessary: "Today I'm able to do more for us, but another day I might not be able to [...] Sometimes, one person ends up taking on some of the other person's responsibilities. We help each other, you know?" (Gabriel). Furthermore, they expressed satisfaction with this arrangement: "We really share everything. I don't think it's a burden on anyone" (Estela).

Satisfaction

The interviews revealed that all couples consider their relationships satisfactory: "I feel very satisfied [...] Very much so" (Estela); "I think our relationship today is very positive" (Daniel). Some couples said that their relationship improved through cohabitation: "The things we used to get along with remain the same. Now, the things that were bad and caused conflict have diminished" (Bernardo). A willingness to continue improving the relationship was also evident: "And there's room for growth, right? It's not finished. [...] It's very good; it brings many positive things" (Gabriel).

The participants' accounts demonstrate their perception of the relationship as a catalyst for growth for the couple and its members. "I think we've matured a lot, both personally and in terms of our relationship [...]. We've taken a leap forward in every sense" (Amanda). Therefore, it can be argued that marital satisfaction feeds back into marital quality, as satisfying relationships not only strengthen the bond but also foster individual growth.

Affectivity

Affectivity was expressed in different ways, predominantly demonstrated through care and concern for one's partner. This type of affection involves thoughtful gestures, such as cooking a special meal, spending time together, or giving gifts. It also involves perceiving the partner's needs and being willing to provide support or assistance: "That's when I decided: I'm on a diet now, too. So, even when we order from a restaurant, it's always one that's free of Daniel's allergens" (Diana).

Affectionate verbal expressions were also observed, such as the vocatives "my love" (Gisele) and "my little love" (Claudia). Finally, some statements indicated displays of physical affection, including touching, kissing, and hugging: "We're very carnal, you know? [...] Even though we have technology and talk every day, it's important that we're close, hugging, and loving each other" (César). Thus, cohabitation allows partners to be closer, which can encourage more displays of physical affection.

Sexuality

In general, couples approached the topic of sexuality openly. They revealed their areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction and shared their related feelings. All couples reported discussing this topic with each other, which helped them align. Although participants considered themselves satisfied with their sexuality, they recognized some areas for improvement. This theme is comprised of the subthemes desire, dialogue, and satisfaction.

Desire

After the first few months of cohabitation, a tendency toward decreased sexual frequency was noted, resulting in a change in the couple's sexual patterns: "We had a lot more sex when we weren't living together. The number of times we have sex has decreased since we started living together" (Erick). Many participants cited fatigue and stress related to work and school as factors that reduced their willingness to have sex. The context of the COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted participants' sexual desire. Some reported an increase in frequency early in the lockdown because they spent more time together. Working from home eliminated their commute time, making them more willing to have sex. However, overall, this context either contributed to making the pattern more cyclical or resulted in a decrease in sexual frequency over time.

It was also found that the sexual desires and needs of many partners differed, which generated frustration and/or conflict for some couples: "I have a greater need, and I never hid it. So, I've felt neglected because of it" (César). There were no gender differences in the desire for more frequent sexual relations; the same proportion of men and women from different couples reported wanting to have sex more often. Regarding preferences and tastes, many participants said they knew their partner's sexual preferences. "We've learned and gotten to know each other together, so we know what each other likes and dislikes" (Gisele).

Dialogue

The couples demonstrated considerable openness when discussing sexuality, appearing to feel comfortable with the topic: "We do talk openly about it" (André). This dialogue involves both expressing desires and preferences, as well as discussing differences and aspects they would like to change: "It's something we've talked about a lot, how much we like each other as a couple and how much we want to improve in this [sexual] aspect. I think that's very important for both of us" (Felipe). These conversations helped broaden their understanding of each other, fostering alignment regarding their particularities: "There came a time when he came to me and said, 'Look, I don't like that kind of thing' [...] And then we resolved it, and now we're at a level where things are more comfortable for both of us" (Diana, emphasis added).

Satisfaction

Overall, the couples expressed satisfaction with and commitment to their sex lives: "Whenever we have sex, it's good; it's never an obligation. We never do anything because we have to, you know? We do it because we really want to. And then, when it happens, it's good" (Erick). However, as observed in the subthemes 'desire' and 'dialogue,' some aspects of dissatisfaction were noted, primarily related to differences in sexual desire. These aspects appear to have been subject to negotiation and adjustment between the couples. Therefore, it can be assumed that satisfaction with one's sex life does not imply a full experience at all times. Rather, it implies satisfaction with the quality of the relationship and the possibility of understanding and dialoguing about the discrepancies experienced by the couples.

Discussion

This study aimed to describe the marital quality of eight heterosexual cohabiting couples experiencing the couple formation stage, as assessed based on the dimensions of satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, sexuality, and affectivity. Since each stage of the marital

life cycle is marked by specific processes and demands, and based on the assumption that the relational dynamics of each couple are largely influenced by the patterns formed at the beginning of the relationship (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2016; Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 1993; Ríos-González, 2011), this study sought to understand, more specifically, how marital quality is experienced and expressed during the formation stage.

First, it is important to note that our findings demonstrate an interrelationship between the assessed dimensions of marital quality, as previously noted in the literature (Delatorre & Wagner, 2021). Thus, despite conceptual differences in the components of marital quality, these dimensions influence each other. In the couple formation stage specifically, this feedback process contributes to the development and constitution of marital life and the fulfillment of the tasks of this stage of the life cycle.

The data analysis clearly shows that one of the initial tasks of conjugality is establishing intimacy. Indeed, various authors identify establishing intimacy and commitment as key challenges at this stage. Regarding intimacy specifically, two things stand out: establishing deep communication (Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 1993; Ríos-González, 2011) and creating channels of encounter (Ríos-González, 2011), which result in the construction of a shared universe between partners and the establishment of the couple's identity (Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 1993). In the present study, building intimacy plays a central role, enabling couples to get to know each other more fully and establish their own space and identity.

The participants' accounts corroborate the processual nature of creating intimacy (Espínola et al., 2017). For partners who had been in a longer relationship and had more shared experiences, cohabitation fostered recognition of their partner's previously identified characteristics. However, for those who had dated briefly before starting to cohabit, discovering previously unknown characteristics, needs, and habits of their partner was more pronounced. These experiences of discovery revealed that opening up emotionally and sharing vulnerabilities, emotions, perceptions, and stories fostered familiarity and mutual understanding. This openness was important in creating a sense of belonging and accommodating the couple in a relational model that met their practical and emotional needs (Ríos-González, 2011).

When the cumulative experience of shared experiences results in increased intimacy, such close bonds tend to reverberate into greater commitment to the relationship (Espínola et al., 2017). A sense of commitment was quite recurrent among the couples' statements. Participants cited the decision to cohabit as an important step in consolidating their relationship and said they made this decision because they were considering a future together. A North American study found that cohabitations initiated for convenience were associated with lower levels of commitment, whereas cohabitations motivated by the desire to be closer to one's partner were associated with higher marital quality (Tang et al., 2014). The participants in this study appear to be more likely to identify with the latter, as the couples exhibited signs of high marital quality and did not cite economic reasons for cohabiting.

Compared to the relationship stage without cohabitation, cohabitation differed, presenting lower interpersonal commitment and satisfaction in an American study (Rhoades et al., 2012). This contrasts with the results of the present study to some extent. This is because the participants demonstrated commitment based on their various future plans together, showing trust in their relationship and their partners. All couples stated their desire to formalize their union in the future. Having plans for marriage has been associated with higher marital quality among North American cohabitants (Brown et al., 2017). Thus, the

desire to marry may be related to greater relationship satisfaction. It may also be associated with the participants' higher level of education because formal marriage has become more common in higher-income, higher-education populations (Manning, 2020; Ramm & Salinas, 2019; Sassler & Lichter, 2020).

A North American study of married and cohabiting couples revealed greater commitment and satisfaction among cohabiting couples than among married couples. This result was attributed to cohabiting couples being in an earlier stage of their relationships (Shannon & Bartle-Harring, 2017), a finding that is corroborated to some extent by the present study. Participants expressed considerable satisfaction with their romantic relationships and commitment to their partners.

Thus, it can be concluded that satisfaction, commitment, and intimacy reinforce each other. Couples with greater intimacy may be more willing to invest in and commit to the relationship, and more committed couples may feel more secure building intimacy. Conversely, couples who are more intimate and committed may feel more satisfied, and this satisfaction motivates them to deepen their intimacy and commitment.

The findings of this study suggest that marital satisfaction not only strengthens the relationship but also relates to individual growth and maturity. The role of conjugality as a promoter of individual development supports the idea that complementarity between partners and mutual validation contribute to the construction of a shared reality and the emotional stability and social integration of couples (Willi, 1995). Furthermore, this association may reflect a growing appreciation for individuality in relationships (Borges et al., 2014) and support the idea that relationships currently tend to last only as long as they are satisfactory for both partners since dissolving a romantic bond is no longer a social taboo (Røsand et al., 2014).

The appreciation of satisfaction and individuality also appears to be related to emotional and sexual gratification (Borges et al., 2014). Although affectivity was not directly explored in the interviews, affective expressions appeared in the couples' accounts both directly and indirectly. Notably, indirect expressions of affection emerged, such as demonstrating care and concern for one's partner's well-being, consistent with findings from other studies on the subject (Delatorre & Wagner, 2021; Silva et al., 2017). These expressions also permeate other dimensions of marital quality. For instance, couples appear to consider their partners' health preferences and limitations when establishing agreements and dividing responsibilities to promote and care for the well-being of both.

In turn, the sexuality dimension is an important aspect of relationships. According to the literature, satisfaction with sexuality is reciprocally related to overall relationship satisfaction (McNulty et al., 2016). To some extent, this was corroborated by the participants in this study, as couples reported satisfaction in both areas. The reports demonstrate that the couples were invested in achieving greater sexual satisfaction. They communicated their desires and aspects they would like to change, as well as their limits. During the interviews, it was evident that they exercised care and attention to reconcile and respect the needs of both partners. This type of interaction reinforces marital intimacy, which Laszloffy (2016) indicated fosters greater connection and sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, allusions to a decrease in sexual frequency after the first months of cohabitation and during periods of confinement due to the pandemic reinforce the notion that intimacy fosters connection, yet a certain degree of distance, mystery, and novelty are essential for sustaining sexual desire (Perel, 2017).

In summary, although the couples reported high levels of marital quality, they also described challenges and difficulties, which is consistent with the stage of couple formation

(McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2016; Wagner & Delatorre, 2018). The main challenges include reconciling differences, balancing individuality and conjugality, fairly dividing household chores, and balancing personal and work life. The pandemic context in which the research was conducted contributed to the intensification of some of these challenges and the emergence of other demands and negative consequences for mental health. Therefore, this information should be considered when analyzing the presented results.

Final considerations

This study focused on couple formation experienced through cohabitation, a topic that is particularly relevant given the growing popularity of this type of relationship (Menezes & Lopes, 2007; Ramm & Salinas, 2019). Although cohabitation is becoming more common, it lacks the defined boundaries of marriage. Consequently, cohabiting couples may experience ambivalence due to the absence of established relationship models. While this may require greater emotional investment from each partner, it is not necessarily negative. It allows couples to develop a personalized form of conjugality that meets their needs and is independent of the conservative standards historically associated with marital formation through marriage (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2016).

For a long time, researchers studying conjugality shared the idea that marital quality would naturally be higher at the beginning of a relationship, with an expected decline over time due to factors such as routine and increased professional and parental responsibilities. However, recent studies have challenged this idea, demonstrating that such a decline does not occur linearly. These studies have revealed a tendency toward stability in marital quality over time, though a more pronounced decline is likely in couples who report low satisfaction early in their marriages (Karney & Bradbury, 2020; Williamson & Lavner, 2020). Thus, it is crucial to understand how marital quality is constructed and expressed during a couple's developmental stage, as this initially established pattern appears to be a relevant element in the trajectory of their relationship over the years.

In this study, all participating couples reported being satisfied with their relationships and exhibited indicators of high marital quality. Thus, the research demonstrated how marital quality is constructed and expressed in cohabiting heterosexual couples experiencing the formation of their relationship, using couples who appear to be succeeding in this process as examples. However, it is possible that this profile was biased due to the sample composition, as couples with low marital quality may have been unwilling to discuss their relationship in a research context. While the research demonstrates how marital quality is expressed in couples with good indicators of this construct, future studies are needed to understand how low marital quality develops from the beginning of a relationship.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the data in this study were restricted to young, heterosexual, middle-income, and predominantly white adult couples. Recent studies have shown that dyadic adaptive processes differ significantly between couples from middle-high and low socioeconomic backgrounds (Karney & Bradbury, 2020; Williamson & Lavner, 2020). This reinforces the need for caution when extrapolating these findings to couples from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, we suggest that future research include couples from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds and have greater representation of participants' self-reported race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. More Brazilian research is welcome, considering that most of the existing literature is from developed countries. New national studies will help us better understand the cultural differences and particularities of cohabitation among young adults in Brazil.

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Data Availability Statement:

The data supporting the findings of this study can be requested from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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