

# COVID SEX LIVES

## Survey 1 Report 2021

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With thanks to



### The Covid Sex Lives project

This report presents initial findings from the first survey of Covid Sex Lives project. Public health measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 are translated into media messaging by organisations that target the health of different groups. This research studies the experiences of Men who have Sex with Men (MSM), during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom. Our focus is on uses of dating and hook up apps, sexual activity and how this has changed during the pandemic as restrictions such as social distancing and lockdowns have been introduced. We are conducting this research with a view to help improve policy and practice around MSM sexual wellbeing and public health messaging, shed light on what to look for where MSM are concerned, and provide learning about COVID public health messaging that will benefit MSM and the general population. The research is funded by a UKRI and AHRC grant, and it is a collaboration between the University of Salford, Newcastle University, King's College London, and Birmingham City University. You can find out more here: <https://blogs.salford.ac.uk/digi-sex-and-gender/projects/covid-sex-lives/>

### About the survey

240 U.K. participants who broadly identified as men who have sex with men (MSM) took part in the first survey from the project, answering a series of closed and open-ended questions about their lives from 18 May 2021 - 18 June 2021. Their responses will inform our next survey.

The majority of the respondents were located within England (85%), followed by Scotland (9%), Northern Ireland (3%), and Wales (3%). In terms of ethnicity, respondents identified as white (88%), followed by mixed or multiple (4%), Asian/ Asian British (3%), other (3%). Respondents' ages ranged from 17-78.

### Findings





# Reliance on Digital Media in the Pandemic

A wide range of digital technologies are being used to chat, date and engage in online sex during the pandemic. A majority of respondents (79%) used **dating/hook up apps** during the pandemic, with Grindr (71%), Tinder (33%), and Scruff (26%) cited as the ones most used. The majority of respondents used apps centred on dating and relationships, compared to the minority whom used fetish apps.

With regard to **other digital technologies**, participants revealed sophisticated multi app usage for communication. When asked “please tell us about what other forms of digital technology you have used, how and why” (94 responses), the most popular platform was Whatsapp messaging and video calls. Responses show that people often mobilised pre-existing contacts (exes, friends, fuck-buddies) to fulfil sexual desires in the context of nation-wide restrictions. However not all contacts were sexual. The same hook-up apps, platforms and messaging services were also used for non-sexual connections and to reduce loneliness and isolation. Technologies were used both in place of in-person hook-ups and as a means to facilitate in-person hook ups.

## New uses

There is evidence that existing technologies were used in novel ways during the pandemic, such as the use of Instagram messaging to flirt and exchange explicit videos, Whatsapp for sexual video calls, or Zoom to host online sex parties. Some used the lockdown to explore new sexual practices via technologies they had previously not used. As one participant expressed, *“My partner and I also did some sex parties like Hard On through Zoom, which brought out the exhibitionist side of our relationship. It was fun - but of course not quite the same as a sweaty sex dungeon.”*

## Motivations for using dating apps/hook up apps during the pandemic

When asked about why they used dating/hook up apps during the pandemic (150 responses), participants expressed a range of reasons; chatting and avoiding breaching lockdown rules, hooking up for sex (digitally or in person), the hope of potential relationships and the possibility of friendships or preserving friendships. Some respondents indicated they were using apps to prepare for the end of lockdowns by setting up potential dates. Respondents indicated that they were experiencing loneliness, and the use of apps presented the possibility to combat the isolation and disconnection they were experiencing.

## Those who did not use dating/hook up apps

The majority of the 51 respondents who stated that they have not used dating/hook up apps during the pandemic cited their current relationship status (whether that be serious, casual, monogamous or non-monogamous) as the reason. Safety and reducing risk were also frequently mentioned as reasons.



**“I have decided to focus mainly on one partner and our existing contacts, rather than meet strangers through the apps. This was to keep us and our friends/family safe.**

**As much as I'd love an anonymous hookup, we made the decision to limit the risk to ourselves and those around us.”**



# Hooking Up during a Pandemic

## Changed Practices

Most participants agreed that their sex lives changed because of the pandemic (75%), with the majority noting that they hooked up or had sex much less than before it. Some respondents cited safety concerns: *“I was keeping myself safe as I could not afford time off work sick.”* Some abstained from sex completely, whereas others engaged in risk reduction strategies such as reducing numbers of partners. Several mentioned having increased digitally mediated hookups via apps, sexting or video. A small minority felt positive changes to their sex life had arisen from the pandemic, such as a respondent who identified that their sex life with their partner had become more intimate.

## Attitudes about hooking up during the pandemic

When elaborating on their views about hooking up in-person during the pandemic, two main attitudes underpinned responses. One perspective was that it is not okay to hook up during the pandemic as it risked harming others: *“Covid is a threat to everyone and abiding by the rules/law is important for lessening the spread and keeping people safe.”*

The other view was that this is unrealistic - “delusional” - and it should be up to the individual to make their own assessment, especially given considerations of mental health, isolation and loneliness. As one person said, *“it's up to each person to decide what's best for themselves and those around them. For those in good health and self-isolating, hookups are key for their mental health. We all lose our minds without intimacy and human touch. The orgasm is just the icing on the cake.”*

Many felt that the government guidelines had ignored the importance of intimacy and dating for the mental health of single people, and they **criticised government regulations and restrictions** for

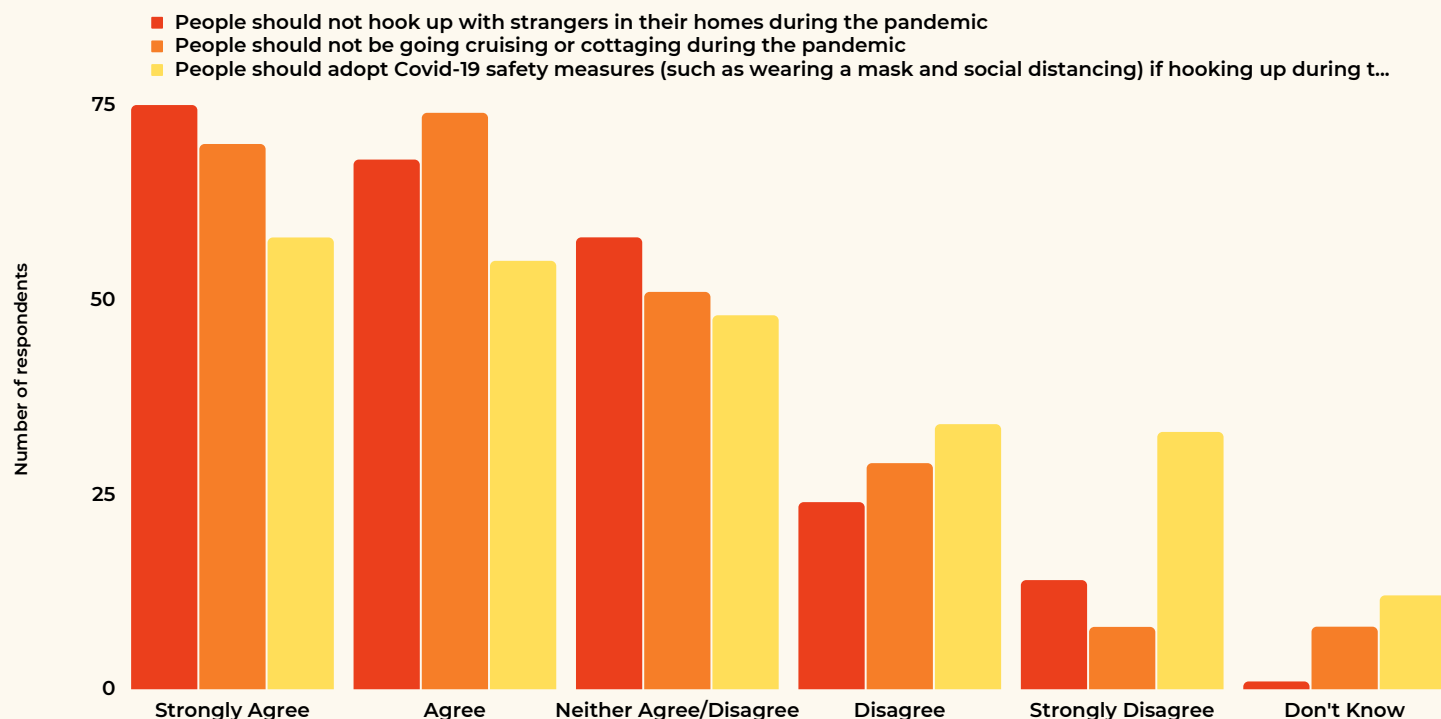
the way they focused on the nuclear family household, disregarding the needs of single people or those with non-normative relationship patterns.

Participants also acknowledged that the risks of hooking up over the course of the pandemic have changed and depend to some degree on context. Many expressed refraining from judgement of the actions of others, even if they themselves did not choose to hook up.



**The government's response to the pandemic was to implicitly codify monogamy and nuclear families into the law. We were not permitted legal pleasure unless we had a partner we lived with or had a stable family unit. I found this unfair.**

## Attitudes were measured in the following scenarios (240 responses):



The most common sentiment expressed in response to question three was that those hooking up should follow COVID-19 safety measures, though there was also a large amount of negative sentiment on this topic with respondents noting it was not possible, practical, or realistic to follow covid-safety measures when engaged in a physically intimate act.



## Public Health Messages Online

There was only limited engagement with targeted messaging among the participant cohort. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (65%) stated that they had not noticed online advertisements aimed at MSM during the pandemic.



### Types of targeted public health messages and adverts online

Of the 35% (84 people) that did notice online advertisements aimed at MSM during the pandemic, most indicated that they saw ads specifying Covid-19 sexual health advice by promoting masturbation and video calls as substitutes for meeting in-person. Participants also reported the prominence of in-app adverts promoting the “stay home and stay safe” public health messaging encouraged by the government, with additional messaging indicating nationwide responsibility to protect the NHS. For some, this messaging brought feelings of guilt. However, one participant pointed to how helpful it was to see practical advice about hooking up rather than shaming advice when he saw *“something by a prep charity, about useful tips on how to hook up during the pandemic. I saw it on a charity website, I think. I liked it, it felt like practical advice. I didn't feel as bad about myself, compared to the reminders of COVID restrictions.”*

In terms of non-Covid public health messaging, many who recalled online adverts remembered seeing HIV/STI prevention adverts and social media posts from sexual health organisations including The Terrence Higgins Trust, The Trevor Project and PrEPster. There was increased visibility of health messaging around campaigns such as National HIV Testing Week as well as the release of It's A Sin on Channel 4 in January 2021. In terms of the content, many respondents cited HIV/STI prevention messaging through home-testing and PrEP linked to the Breaking the Chain campaign led by THT and 56 Dean St.

## Lack of active engagement with public health ads on apps

When asked if they clicked on ads (84 responses), those who did click on them (27 people) said they did so out of interest and to get more information. Those who did not click (57 people) stated their rationale for not clicking in-app adverts was due to the general feeling that they already knew the COVID-19 rules hence they felt they were adequately informed. Some stated that the advert display provided enough content that they did not need to click further.

Many responses to the in-app adverts indicated they viewed adverts generally as spam or pop-ups, hence the lower likelihood of actively engaging with the content through a click. They felt that the presence of the ads interrupted their experience of the technology platform.

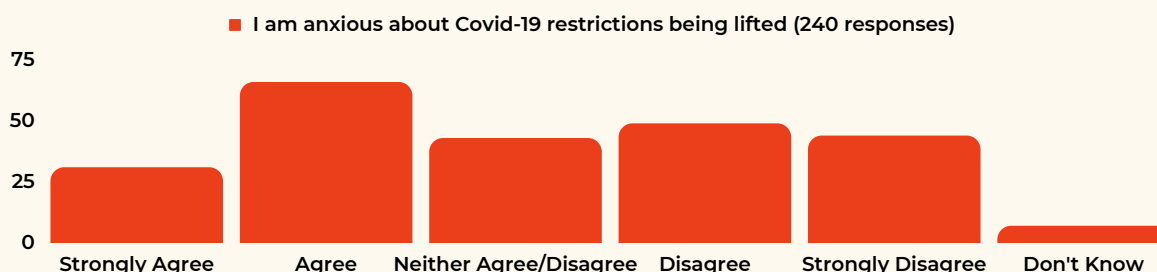
“When I'm on a hookup app I'm not looking for information about covid so I just pass it over.”

## HIV/AIDS pandemic and Covid-19

When asked 'What do you think of how sex has been talked about during the pandemic we are currently living with as compared to the HIV/AIDS pandemic?' (34 responses), 12 respondents expressed that discussion of sex had been absent or less prevalent than during the HIV/AIDS pandemic. However, another 12 responses highlighted that there were major differences that made it challenging or unfair to draw comparisons between the pandemics. Participants noted that the HIV/AIDS pandemic carried a lot of stigma and homophobia, which they felt was absent during this pandemic.



## The Future



Many respondents expressed that they were excited to get back to life as normal. However, a large number of people had anxieties relating to the easing of restrictions. The most common concern expressed in 22 responses was that people would be careless, thereby causing another lockdown. 17 individuals identified anxieties about adjusting back to regular life after so long, with comments

such as “My anxiety has got worse during the pandemic and I struggle to go out.” Those who were not anxious about the lifting of restrictions justified their attitudes by mentioning that they trusted the vaccines, that they felt the restrictions were being lifted at the right time, that the virus was under control in the UK, or that they were not nervous as they were taking their own precautions.

Mental health was cited as an important factor determining some people’s attitudes on both sides. As one person expressed: “Not being able to see my friends has really fucked with me mentally. I’ve gotten so depressed, frustrated and angry. When people say they’re kind of glad we’re not out of it yet, it really annoys me.”

## Conclusion

Risk measurement, morality and judgement, and mental health are emergent issues with regard to attitudes and practices around using technologies to facilitate various intimacies, arrange sex, and hook up.



### Public health messages online

In terms of public health messaging, many respondents criticised government regulations and restrictions for the way they focused on the nuclear family household, disregarding the needs of single people or those with non-normative relationship patterns.

### Reliance on digital media

Digital media were crucial for meeting social and sexual needs. Apps were not always viewed as the places to receive public health messaging, but there were respondents who clicked on the adverts or remembered seeing them. This reinforced their knowledge of the rules.



### Hooking up during the pandemic

Mental health and loneliness were raised as serious concerns which informed participants’ attitudes about their own level of risk-taking, as well as the sexual behaviours of others who chose to hook up in-person during the pandemic.

This report’s findings call for alternative approaches to public health and sexual wellbeing in future pandemics that still allow for intimate contact, such as by considering how to minimize harm rather than restricting all in-person interactions.