

COVID SEX LIVES

Survey 2 Report 2021

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With thanks to



The Covid Sex Lives project

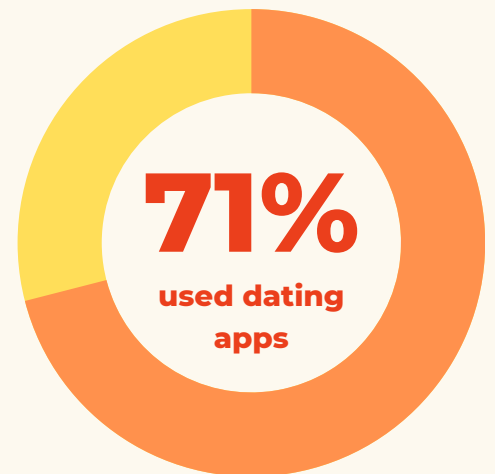
This report presents initial findings from the second survey of the Covid Sex Lives project. Public health measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 are translated into media messaging by organisations that target the health of different groups. This research studies the experiences of Men who have 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. Find out more here: <https://blogs.salford.ac.uk/digi-sex-and-gender/projects/covid-sex-lives/>

About the survey

424 U.K. participants who identified as men who have sex with men (MSM) took part in the second survey from the project, answering a series of closed and open-ended questions about their lives from 22 July - 5 September 2021.

A majority of respondents (299 people, or 71%) used dating/hook up apps during the pandemic, with Grindr (266 people), Tinder (116), and Scruff (112) cited as the ones most used. Participants reported using these technologies for a range of reasons, including combatting loneliness and isolation, chatting to both strangers and friends, arranging in-person hook-ups and dates, and sending and/or receiving pictures and videos.

85% of the respondents were located within England, followed by Scotland (8%), Wales (5%), and Northern Ireland (2%). They were in a range of living situations and relationship statuses. 25% of participants considered themselves at high risk if they were to contract Covid-19. In terms of ethnicity, 93% of respondents identified as white, followed by Asian/Asian British (2%), Black, African, or Caribbean or Black British 7 (2%) mixed/multiple 7 (2%), and other (1%). Respondents' ages ranged from 19-79.



**Most popular apps:
Grindr, Tinder, & Scruff**

Findings



Attitudes

Attitudes around vaccines and other Covid-19 safety measures when meeting others through dating apps



Practices

Practices of dating and hooking up during the Covid-19 pandemic

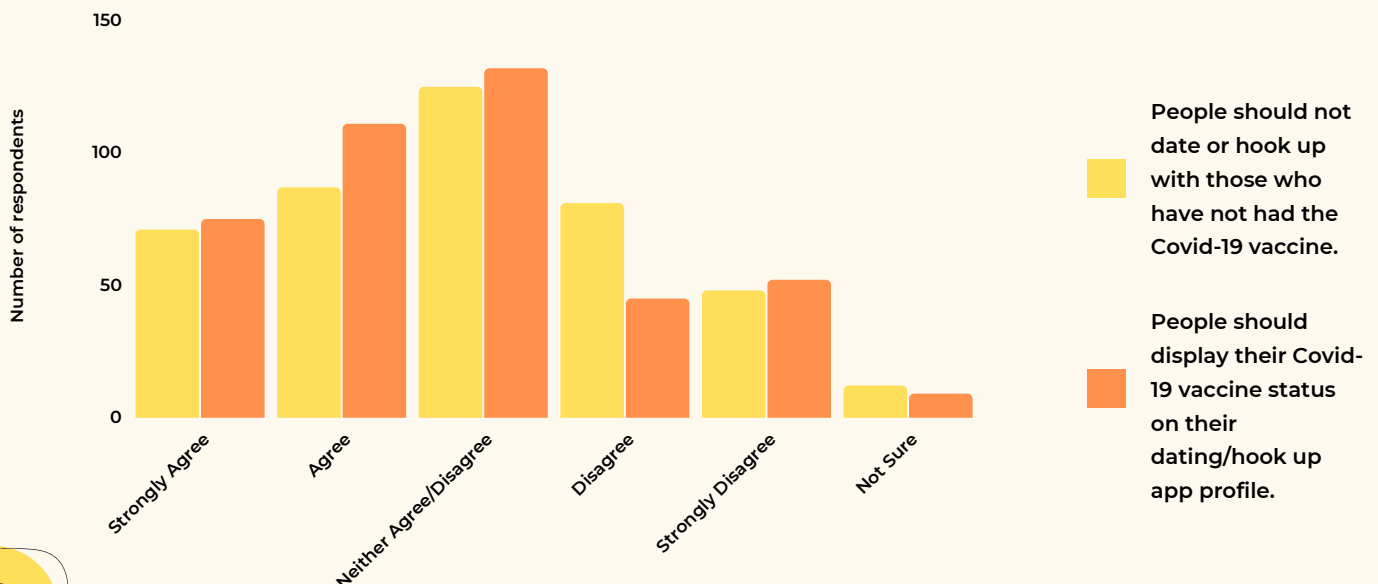
These findings build on conclusions from our first report regarding (a) reliance on digital media, (b) hooking up during the pandemic, and (c) public health messages online.



Attitudes around vaccines and other Covid-19 safety measures when meeting through dating/hookup apps

Vaccines

Participants expressed mixed feelings when it came to vaccines, hooking up, and Covid-19 in response to both quantitative and open-ended qualitative questions. The motivations behind their attitudes were similar to those found in our previous survey, but in this survey there was a marked increase in sentiments around **personal choice, freedom, and individual risk assessment** when considering vaccines and dating now that most government restrictions have been lifted. As one





I have protected myself by taking the vaccine. It's up to the other person to decide how they manage their risk. Exactly the same approach I'm using when navigating HIV status - I'm on PrEP - thus I don't care about a person's HIV status.

respondent answered in response to the question of whether people should not date or hook up with those who have not had the Covid-19 vaccine: *"Personal choice. If you are vaccinated, young and healthy then someone else's Covid vaccine status is really none of your concern. If you are health compromised then you may well be more concerned and your prospective date should respect wishes to know vaccine status."*

Some participants in this survey also emphasized **parallels between STIs/HIV risk and Covid-19 risk** when it came to individual risk-taking around hooking up with those who are not vaccinated (see left).

However, emphasis on personal choice is in conflict with another attitude motivation shared by many in both our surveys: the importance of reducing the spread for wider, more universal social benefit, expressed in one participant's response, *"Don't take chances that could affect others, especially friends and family."* This highlights divided social attitudes, captured right at the point when most lockdown restrictions in the UK have been eased.

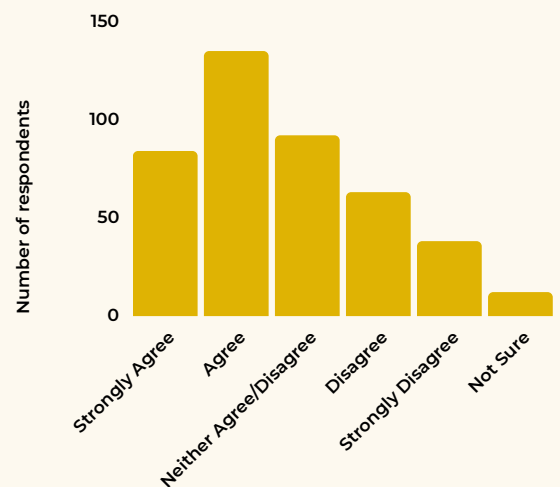
When responding to the question of whether people should display their Covid-19 vaccine status on their dating/hook up app profiles, many were in favour of discussion of vaccination status with prospective partners. However, there were strong sentiments against **forced disclosure of vaccine status**, such as in a profile badge or as a requirement to use an app, because vaccination was viewed as a private medical issue. There were also concerns about discrimination based on vaccine status due to preexisting health issues or age (at the time of data collection, not all under-30s had yet been offered two vaccine doses). This finding is interesting in light of governments' and stakeholders' considerations of potential vaccine mandates in some arenas of social life.

Other Covid-19 safety measures

Even though many agreed (52%) that "people should adopt Covid-19 safety measures when dating/hooking up," 25% neither agreed nor disagreed or weren't sure, emphasizing continued mixed feelings about life after government restrictions have been removed. Like above, personal choice and individual risk assessment were emphasized in response to the question. Some respondents were

respondents against anyone hooking up at all under the current Covid-19 circumstances. Many also emphasized the impracticality of measures such as wearing masks or keeping distance. However, they did acknowledge the social responsibility aspects and wider positive public health effects of taking Covid-19 tests and minimizing numbers of partners; what they themselves elected to do when dating is explored in the next section.

People should adopt Covid-19 safety measures when dating/hooking up.



If you are hooking up then it's almost impossible to follow restrictions.

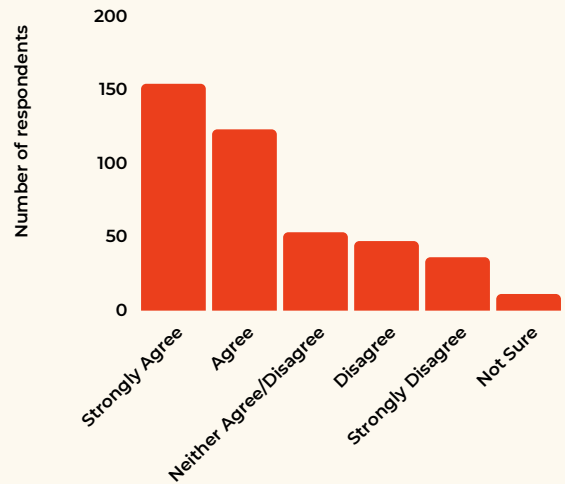


Practices of dating and hooking up during the Covid-19 pandemic

Changed Sex Lives

The majority (65%) of respondents identified that their sex lives had changed due to the pandemic, particularly through less sex, fewer partners, and refraining from hook-ups; this was the case for both single respondents and those in relationships. Many whose sex lives had not changed specified that this was due to the fact that they were not having sex before the pandemic. Some men identified that their sex lives were unchanged because they continued meeting during the pandemic or because they were in relationships.

My sex life has changed as a result of the pandemic



As in our first survey, respondents shared how Covid-19 pressures **caused breakdowns in relationships, declines in libido, and reductions in self-confidence and mental health.** Several men commented that they were concerned about an over-reliance on cybersex, pornography, and masturbation due to effects of the pandemic on their sex life. Reduced sexual activity had other knock-on effects: as one respondent identified: *“Stress of lockdown led to break up of relationship, single during last lockdown, feelings of loneliness and isolation, riskier behaviours now to almost make up for this.”* These findings indicate that there may be lasting impacts of the pandemic on the sex lives of MSM that health organizations should consider.

“
I haven’t had any sex for more than a year and as a result switched to alarming levels of pornography consumption and cybersex which I feel had messed with my sex drive and mental health”

Changed Practices

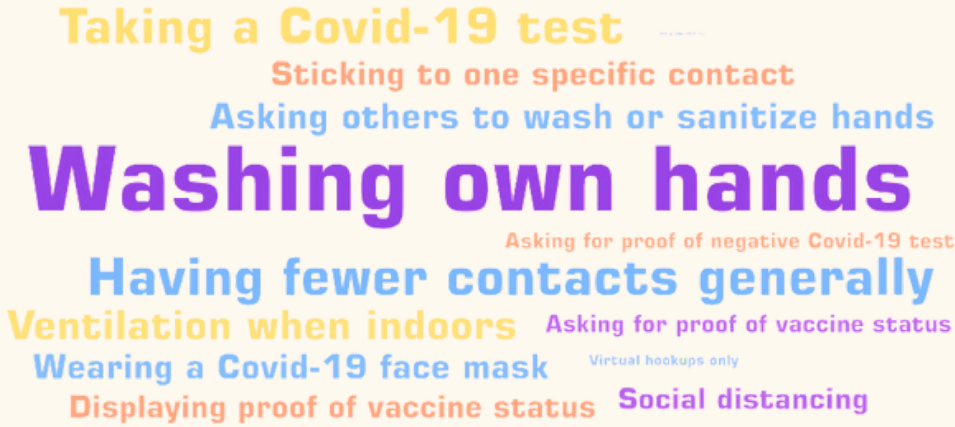
In comparison to our previous survey, this survey identified an increased return to dating and hooking up. However, many respondents were still concerned about contracting COVID-19, and they negotiated this risk individually by undertaking risk mitigation practices.

Our research has identified a **difference in attitudes versus practices.** The data indicate that many participants did take Covid-related safety precautions when offered potential safety options from a drop-down list, as opposed to a Likert scale question asking about attitudes. Yet several people expressed that they were not sure how Covid-safe sex could be achieved, and in our previous question on attitudes, many were critical of the supposed impracticality of Covid risk precautions when hooking up. The difference in opinion versus practices, in addition the content of some of

the qualitative responses from our questions, suggests that many assumed Covid-19 safety “precautions” to mean wearing a face mask or keeping social distance. This was the public health guidance that had been stressed earlier in the pandemic; wider awareness of updated public health guidance on dating is needed. Currently, with government lockdowns eased and convenient access to free lateral flow testing, there are ways to reduce Covid-19 risk when dating and hooking up. Given the emphasis on mental health by respondents in our surveys, resuming dating is

arguably an important component for our society’s attempts to create a form of post-pandemic normality.

In practice, common risk mitigation measures undertaken included hand washing, minimizing contacts, regular Covid-19 testing, and ventilation, as well as wearing a face mask and social distancing on dates (although not necessarily when hooking up).



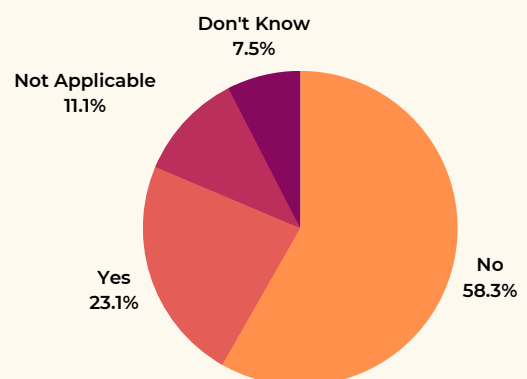
Covid measures undertaken by participants when dating/hooking up (in proportion to % of measures selected)

Attending Venues

The overwhelming majority of respondents were **not visiting venues** such as nightclubs, saunas and sex clubs to hook-up or date, either because they previously did not visit these venues or because they felt it was unsafe. 58% of participants said they did not visit these venues, whereas only 23% said yes. Discomfort with crowded spaces, feeling it was too soon, and concern over transmission rates were the most common reasons given for avoiding venues. Several respondents expressed caution over the safety of saunas given the warm, poorly ventilated conditions as “Covid could flourish there.” However, some respondents expressed intention to visit venues in the near future despite not yet attending, but they were waiting for higher vaccination rates and assessing impacts of relaxed government restrictions on the number of COVID-19 cases. Meanwhile respondents from Northern Ireland and Wales highlighted that these venues were still not allowed to open under their current restrictions.

Common reasons given for attending venues ranged from vaccination, desiring to live their lives again, or feeling they had waited long enough. One survey respondent said, “I’m double vaccinated, safe, and frankly horny;” another highlighted his trust of venues’ safety assessments. A minority of respondents also clarified that they were attending nightclubs socially but not for dating or meeting sexual partners: as one participant summarized, “I just want to boogie, not shag.”

Now that Covid-19 restrictions are lifting, I am attending venues (such as nightclubs, sex-clubs and/or saunas) for dates or to hook up.



Conclusion



Attitudes

Respondents had mixed feelings and opinions were divided. After the easing of 18 months of government restrictions, many emphasized personal choice and autonomy as the way forward, regardless of their divergent opinions on vaccine statuses and practices.

Practices

Although attitudes were sceptical about the practicality of Covid-19 safety measures when hooking up, in practice many people were taking some steps. However, these risk mitigation strategies were individualised.



Public Health Messaging

Our findings around personal choice and individualised risk assessment when it comes to dating during the pandemic are particularly interesting in light of the fact that many participants (25%) considered themselves vulnerable to Covid-19. Public health stakeholders should take note of the fact that many respondents drew parallels to Covid and STIs/HIV—it appears that there is now opportunity to include Covid-19 as part of an overall blended health approach.

In light of these attitudes and practices, public health organizations should create additional updated messaging and support around the mental and sexual wellbeing of MSM. Lateral flow testing, vaccination communication strategies, discussions of risk tolerance, ventilation, and other practices could be built into a tool-kit resource that handles Covid-safe dating and sex in a shame-free way. This would ameliorate misunderstandings of which Covid-related safety precautions are practical and easy to undertake when dating and hooking up. Respondents also repeatedly expressed concerns about the mental health impacts of the pandemic; mental health should be targeted in future public health messaging.

Moreover, concrete public health messaging informing people of the actual risk involved when dating and hooking up relative to other risky non-sexual activities, such as taking public transport or meeting friends, would also be beneficial. Such information would directly address concerns for those sceptical of others hooking up, those confused about precautions that can be undertaken, and those who feel anxious, fearful, and guilty over resuming their lives. Given that many people are living under frameworks of personal choice, autonomy, and individualised risk assessments, assisting people to make these personal choices as informed as possible offers a promising public health strategy that meets people where they are.