

# AGE *In Focus*

## Key Points in this report

**1 Elevated Covid-19 risk among those over age 50**

**2 HIV and those over age 50**

**3 Young people and what they have missed out on**

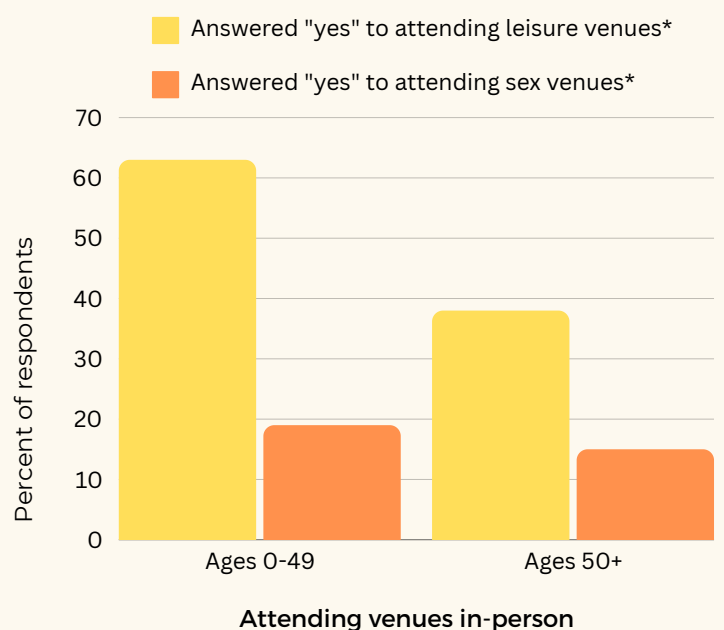
Age was an important factor that shaped the experiences of men who have sex with men (MSM) in the United Kingdom during the pandemic. This Covid Sex Lives In Focus Report delves deeper into social aspects that emerged from our findings. The Covid Sex Lives project, funded by UKRI/AHRC, involved methods of surveys, discourse analysis, and media walkthroughs. It was conducted across 4 surveys from 2021-2022, with 1409 total participants.

**19%** of participants were over age 50

## Sexual ethics

In line with the rest of the survey cohort, those under and over 50 were both very likely to say that **their sex lives had changed as a result of the pandemic**. (67% of under 50s overall, 73% of over 50s overall). For many, their sexual ethics may have been impacted by the pandemic as the ability to meet new people for sex or social reasons was more risky in terms of health.

Age-related ethics about pandemic behaviours were captured by examining



\*asked in surveys 3 and 4

## About Covid Sex Lives Project

Covid Sex Lives is an UKRI/AHRC funded project conducted to better understand digital intimacies among MSM in the UK during the pandemic.

## More Information:

<https://blogs.salford.ac.uk/digi-sex-and-gender>

practices around **attending in-person venues for social and sexual purposes**, as well as practices around **dating app use** during the pandemic. Young people were more likely to attend leisure venues like pubs and nightclubs once legal to do so, with 63% of those aged 0-49 answering “yes” to attending compared to 38% of those aged 50 and over. However, both age groups were much less likely to go to commercial sex venues like saunas to hook up, with only 19% of those aged 0-49 and 15% of those aged 50 and over answering “yes” to attending such venues. This reflects much of the qualitative answers participants provided about practical steps they were taking to reduce the spread of Covid-19 in their own personal sex lives, with many stating that they were reducing their number of sexual partners.

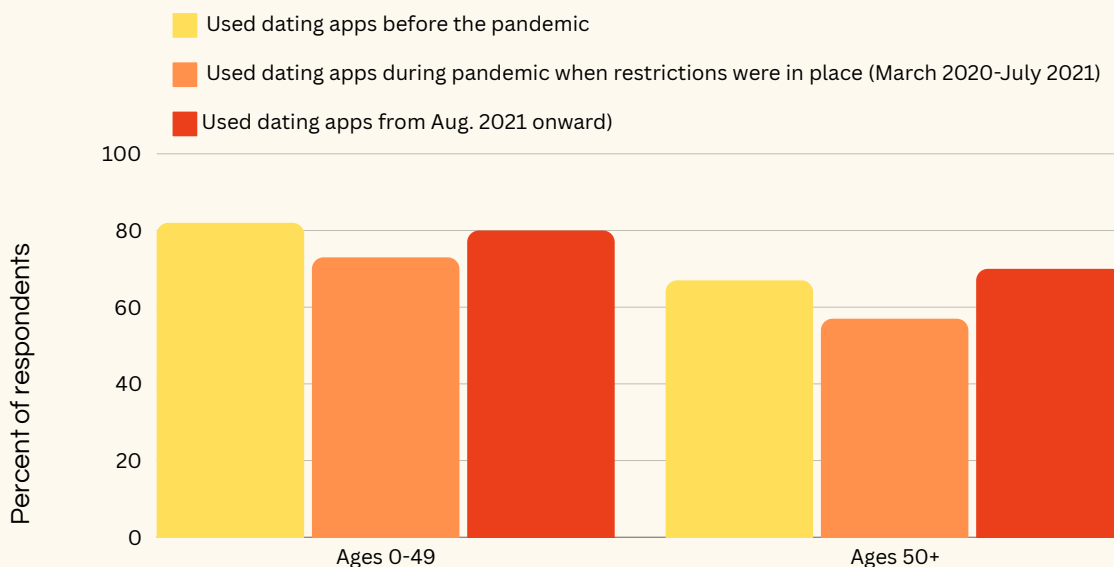
In terms of **dating apps**, those under age 50 were slightly more likely to use dating apps at all stages of the pandemic. This averaged as 82% before the pandemic, 73% during the restriction period of March 2020-July 2021, and 80% after August 2021. For those over age 50, these averages were 67% before the pandemic, 57% during restriction period, and 70% after lifting of restrictions.

Participants’ patterns of dating app use followed a similar pattern despite different ages. For both those over and under 50, dating app use dropped slightly during pandemic restrictions.



After many restrictions were eased, dating app use returned to near-pandemic levels.

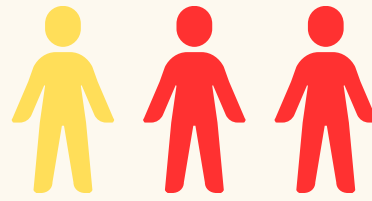
Dating apps were used more for in-person arrangements, rather than virtual dates (e.g. more likely to arrange in-person date or hookup compared to virtual date or hookup). However, participants relied on dating apps for multiple reasons. Even in our last survey, conducted in December 2021, many reported using dating apps for general chatting (73% of those over 50, 65% of those under 50), and combatting loneliness and isolation (43% of those under 50 and 32% of those over 50). Taking into account the varied responses across the surveys, it is evident that while pursuing a sex life was an important aspect of people’s wellbeing, it was done consciously and with caution during the pandemic.



Dating App Use Throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic

## Elevated Covid-19 risk among those aged 50+

We know age affected Covid vulnerability, which in turn also determined the phasing of the Covid-19 vaccine rollout in the UK. However, **the majority of over 50s did not seem to consider themselves as especially vulnerable to Covid-19** when asked, with only 35% (averaged across all surveys) of those over age 50 answering that yes, they did consider themselves to be especially at risk if they were to contract Covid-19. In comparison, 16% of those aged 17-49 identified as high risk to Covid-19 (averaged across all surveys). These surprising findings were fairly consistent across the different time periods of the surveys, and the numbers did not go down with the availability of vaccines. We do not know why this is the case, as there are a host of potential



*Approximately 1 in 3 participants aged over 50 identified as especially vulnerable to Covid*

reasons. More research is needed on why people felt more vulnerable or not. Some starting points might be looking at research about younger people living in shared accommodation vs. older people, feelings of resilience after having lived through the HIV pandemic, and efficacy of health messaging around age and Covid-19 vulnerability.

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## HIV and those aged 50+

For some who participated in the project, Covid-19 was not the only pandemic they had endured. Across all surveys, 71% of those aged over 50 said they were sexually active during the HIV pandemic in the 1980s/90s. During the Covid-19 pandemic, access to healthcare was limited and vaccines were rolled out based on a combination of age and medical

vulnerability. There was discourse among health charities like BHIVA debating whether HIV status should be considered, as well as the challenges of communicating the need for shielding at home without disclosing one's HIV status – and potentially, sexuality – to employers.

In light of this social landscape, we asked participants about how they thought sex has been talked about during the Covid-19 pandemic compared to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Some reflected on the continued trauma of the HIV pandemic, saying that Covid-19 has been discussed “much more openly and with less stigma. It did bring back some bad memories though.”

**71%**

**of participants aged over 50 said they were sexually active during the 1980s/90s HIV pandemic**

### Cite as:

Garwood-Cross, L. R., Katz, R., Light, B., and Moore, K. (2023). Covid Sex Lives In Focus Report: Age. University of Salford.

Others found the two pandemics could not be compared. As one respondent who had lived through the pandemic put it, “Not comparable. Sex was death in the 80s. (Still had it). Now people = death.” Participants also critiqued the absence of sex among Covid-19 public health messages despite sex being a mode of coronavirus transmission. The lack of discussion about sex during Covid-19 plays into a history of silence, shame, and trauma around men who have sex with men during the HIV pandemic.

*What do you think of how sex has been talked about during the Covid-19 pandemic compared to the HIV/AIDS pandemic?*

***“Sex has generally been absent as far as I can see. Interesting as it's a key mode of transmission!”***

## Young people

**63%**  
of those  
aged 0-49

were attending pubs  
and restaurants  
compared to

**38%** of those  
aged 50+

Pandemic restrictions hit young people hard. In qualitative answers to our surveys, respondents discussed wanting their lives to return to normal, and that they felt they had missed out on seeing dating and seeing friends. Unsurprisingly then, young people were far more likely to be attending leisure venues once the most severe lockdown restrictions had been lifted. Across the surveys, 63% of those aged 0-49 answered that they were attending leisure venues like pubs and nightclubs, compared to 38% of those aged over 50.

We also looked at how **living situations** were shaped by age, as living situations arguably affected experiences of the pandemic. Young people were far more likely to live in a house or apartment shared with people who were not family or friends, or with their parents. Our discourse analysis indicates that this may be a particular struggle for queer young people, and some LGBT+ health charities aimed their public health messaging at young queer people at home who could not freely be themselves.

## Conclusion

There continues to be a need for addressing pandemic traumas, particularly among MSM and the stigmatizing of sex. Age was relevant for some, but there were still many similarities between the groups in terms of patterns of dating app use throughout the pandemic and the pandemic's impact on sex lives.

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