

# Covid

How the pandemic

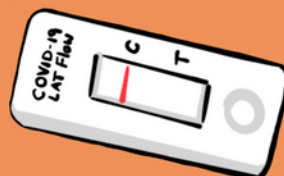
# sex

impacted the sex lives



# lives

of men who have sex with men



# About the study

During the COVID-19 pandemic, messages from the government and public health organisations aimed at stopping the spread of the coronavirus were turned into media campaigns targeting different groups. The COVID Sex Lives project sought to understand how these messages affected the experiences Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) in the United Kingdom when it came to their sex lives and using digital platforms for sexual purposes. Over the past two decades, dating and hookup apps have become popular ways for people to meet and connect, even during the pandemic, and MSM have been early adopters of these technologies for dating, hooking up, and combating loneliness.

The research project, a collaboration between the University of Salford, Newcastle University, King's College London, and Birmingham City University, was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and aimed to understand how health messages during the pandemic affected the sex lives of MSM, their sexual health and overall well-being during this challenging time.

The research team conducted four online surveys between April 2021 and January 2022 with a total of 1409 responses from MSM, as well as analysis of relevant topics in the media, on health organisation websites and on Twitter. In the surveys, participants gave brutally honest and vibrant answers about their experiences, these were sometimes hilarious and sometimes heart-breaking. This zine aims to show some of the key themes that came from the research, whilst giving space to the variety of voices of UK MSM that appeared in our data. They demonstrate the frustration, challenges, and spirit of a community navigating an unprecedented period of global uncertainty in their personal and intimate lives.



Dr Lisa Garwood-Cross  
University of Salford



Dr Jamie Hakim  
Kings College London



Kia Hinds  
University of Salford



Dr Rachel Katz  
University of Salford



Prof Ben Light  
University of Salford



Prof John Mercer  
Birmingham City University



Dr Karenza Moore  
Newcastle University



Dr Mike Upton  
Kings College London

# Meet the team

# Impact on sex lives

**The majority of our respondents felt the pandemic had impacted their sex lives. For those who did not this was often either because their sex life had not been active prior to the pandemic, or because they lived with a monogamous partner.**



**People who did not live with their regular partners or were in long distance relationships highlighted the impact on their sex lives, unable to see partners. As one person said:**  
"My partner is a big lad but his equipment doesn't reach from the Czech Republic to Scotland."

My sex life has been destroyed in the past 14 months. I depend a lot on saunas and sex club venues which haven't been open.

I no longer have sex in-person, partly because of public health guidance, but also because I now live with my parents again so cannot have hookups come over.

Only had 3 sex hook ups in past year. Before that it was over 100 in a year.

I am more cautious about engaging with strangers. I prefer regular partners, now.

I used to be able to go through 20 guys in an evening and now I feel fat, ugly and generally crap, if still pretty mechanically horny.

I've been a nun and gotten a lot of mileage out of my dildo because it's pointless to go on dates

I haven't had sex in over a year now

I am having less sex with my partner due to stress, and body image issues exasperated by the pandemic

In some respects increased when partner was off work but with stress of my work (nurse) this created fatigue and less adventurous sex

Some specifically felt the government guidelines excluded certain people

"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."

"There was no consideration of young single people. Sex was handled by the government as a taboo and physical / emotional needs for intimacy of single people were completely ignored."

# Making changes

Some participants noted that part of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their sex lives was that they had changed how they had sex, hooked up or interacted with others in the dating scene. When we asked people about covid-safe sex, we noticed that the responses we received evolved as the pandemic moved through different phases. Early on many respondents felt COVID-safe sex was 'silly', 'impractical' and 'just not realistic', although some had tried following government guidelines.

Socially distanced sex? Let's be realistic; this makes condoms for oral sound positively reasonable.

I also have done some stuff at a distance, with masks and no touching. This is very different from the type of sex I'd like or want, so has been an alternative.



However as lateral flow testing and vaccinations became widely available, and government guidelines changed we noticed that respondents were adopting a range of changes in their sex lives to reduce risks of catching or spreading COVID-19, adapting their existing 'toolkit' of sexual health practices.

How? We can't exactly keep 2m distance or wear masks... it defeats the point

I've been taking COVID precautions when hooking up

I started taking lateral flow tests before meeting and asking partners to do the same



# COVID sexual health toolkit



Washing hands



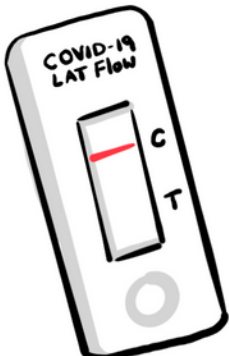
Fewer sexual partners



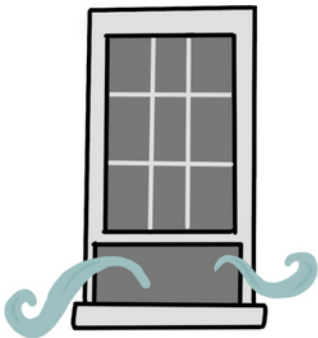
Reduced kissing



Virtual hook ups



Lateral flow testing



Using ventilated spaces



Communicating with partners



Getting vaccinated

# Let's get digital...

In our analysis of media and public health organisation narratives we noted frequent references to virtual hook-ups using digital apps and platforms as a 'creative' alternative to face-to-face sex as a way to encourage MSM to stay home and avoid hooking up. So we asked our survey respondents about their experiences.

MSM used digital tech in all sorts of ways:



cam sex

sharing nudes on Instagram stories

Zoom sex parties

sexting

watching porn

NSFW Twitter account

kinky voice notes

a WhatsApp wank



# For a variety of reasons...

Been sending sexual messages over WhatsApp to men I've met who I want to hook up with in person but who don't feel ready to meet up in person yet

Cause it's been a lonely time, I've been living on my own and technology provided the easiest way to connect with people. It tended to be a lot of zooming.

I have used social media and chat rooms to have online hookups so that I can have risk-free sexual experiences with others

My partner and I did some sex parties [...] 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

# Although some disliked digital hook-ups...

I hate video chat and can't stand video sex. Who wants to see what they look like in the corner of the screen?

I'm not a digital doll and I found most of that stuff to be super boring and not worth the effort

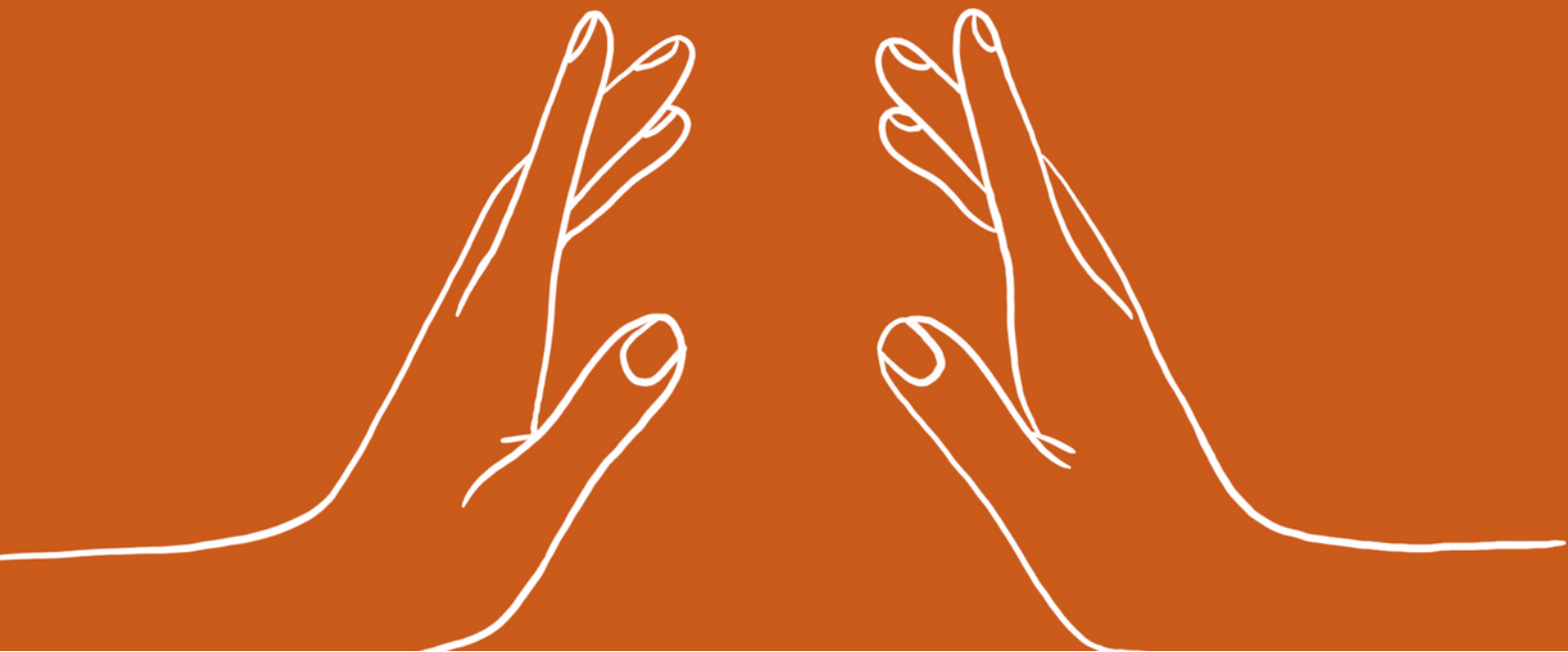
It feels cheap, no intimacy

I will not be pressed into showing my bits on camera

# Why are intimacies important?

**So why does it matter if people's sex lives and intimate relationships were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? After all, surely everyone made sacrifices to protect lives?**

**Well, the intimacies in people's lives impact their well-being and mental health. Intimacies include a broad range of ways of expressing closeness and affection and are a key part of human cultures. Sexual intimacy and expression is an important part of the community and culture of some men who have sex with men.**



# It's not just about sex ...

One thing that I did notice was that I missed and craved touch. It wasn't until restrictions lifted and I visited my family that I hugged someone, and it had been months. It's hard going months between having any contact with someone.

What no one is talking about is the reason why we do hook ups... it is all about being alone and lonely. It is not just about the sexual pleasure, what's more, it is not about this at all. It is about seeking company, a bit of compassion and to feel valued and not alone.

People should make a judgement for themselves based on the risk. Loneliness and suicide is a big thing in the community. I would rather people experienced physical touch and human connection in some way.



# Mental Health

**It is well known that the pandemic took a toll on the mental health of many people, particularly during lockdown periods. So it is unsurprising that some of our participants mentioned the toll on their mental health. We noticed that themes around the need for intimacy, loneliness, poor body image and COVID anxiety were common in relation to mental health.**



I am a depressed wreck because of the lockdown. I'm ready to be free again, even if that comes with a risk of dying.

I also ended up using a lot of porn to wank to, which I worry had a negative impact on my mental relationship with sex.

My body image and mood has declined during lockdown + moral aspects combine to lead to not seeking out sex much.

I am having less sex with my partner due to stress, and body image issues exasperated by the pandemic.

I knowingly used intimacy to help myself through the pandemic. Without the queer friendships and sexual and romantic relationships I had during the pandemic, I believe I would have turned to self harm. Romance often kept my suicide ideation at bay.

I'm afraid of meeting friends again or going outside and feeling overwhelmed in public places.

I have only had sex once in the past year, last July when cases were low. It wasn't allowed but I'm glad I did it, because I would be even more of a train wreck than I am now if I hadn't done it.



# COVID & AIDS

In the analysis of media narratives we noticed parallels being drawn with the HIV/AIDS pandemic and how MSM are already adept at managing the risks of HIV therefore COVID-19 risk management could be added to this. Because of these narratives, we were interested in finding out what MSM who had experienced both the height of HIV/AIDS pandemic and COVID-19 thought about comparisons, and how they felt sex had been talked about in both pandemics.

Here are 4 key sentiments we noticed in the responses:

↑ It is wrong to compare

"It's a disgusting comparison to make. They are not akin. The HIV pandemic was a huge mark against the lgbtq+ community and was the basis of a lot of bigotry. This has not been the same thing."

"That actually killed us. Covid gives us a runny nose. Don't compare them it's fucking insulting"

"Not comparable. Sex was death in the 80s. (Still had it) Now people == death"

## 2 Greater stigma in HIV/AIDS pandemic

**"Much more openly and with less stigma. It did bring back some bad memories though."**

**"During the AIDS/HIV pandemic there was a blame culture that isn't in place for covid."**

**"They AIDS pandemic time was full of shame. Shame if you were gay."**

**"we don't have government tv advertising showing gravestones for starters."**

## 3 Sex wasn't talked about with COVID

**"Sex isn't really talked about in regard to covid."**

**"Heard almost nothing during Covid. During AIDS you heard about sex constantly"**

**"Sex has not been talked about this time."**

**"Silence. In the late 80s and 90s gay and bi men talked endlessly about safe sex practices and acceptable risk - I rarely hear any of that now except in private conversations with gay male friends around my age."**

## 4 Differering gov/public health response

**"Aids was worse and govt were slow at responding they chose to label and isolate sufferers."**

**"The rapidity of the response and concern for the wellbeing of those who get COVID compared to the lack of concern shown for people who get HIV/AIDS. For me, the main issue is more to do with who is considered worthy of help."**

**"It's much more prolific and instantly funded. Back in the HIV crisis we proved as a community that we look after each other and care. We educated ourselves, we put safe sex message out there and funded free condoms in bars and pubs. Covid has been handled and funded very differently."**

**"There was no notable public health outcry by government in the immediate HIV/AIDS crisis of the early 1980s."**

# Conclusion

**This zine has provided a snapshot into the sex lives and intimacies of men who have sex with men during the COVID-19 pandemic. As much as possible we have included the responses of the men themselves in their own words, as no one understands their experiences better than they do.**

**The vibrant data they shared with us shows that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted many of them, affecting their sex lives, leading to changes in how they engaged sexually and for some causing difficulties with mental health.**

**We would like to thank all the men who took part in our four surveys and shared their perspectives on living, hooking up and dating through the Pandemic.**

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our research



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