How COVID-19 is (and is not) changing the way we talk about sex and dating: A critical analysis of sex advice during the pandemic

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Abstract
In this article, we applied a ‘sex critical’ lens to discursively analyse online sex advice available to Australian readers in the first 3 months of ‘lockdown’ during the COVID-19 pandemic (March–June 2020). We explored how sex and intimacy were being talked about within the pandemic context, examining if and how this was different to pre-pandemic sex advice. We found both the perpetuation of dominant discourses that limit understandings of sex and sexual practices, and challenges to these which open exciting possibilities for new sexual intimacies.

Keywords
Australia, COVID-19, discourse analysis, mediated intimacy, sex advice

Introduction
The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, declared in March 2020, has had a massive impact on the way that we conduct our lives at local, national and global levels. For many people, the

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pandemic has changed the way that we move through the world and (physically) relate to one another, including within romantic and sexual relationships. Early evidence indicates that the ways in which people engage in and experience sex and intimacy changed in response to structural, social and health impacts of the pandemic in countries around the world (e.g. Gondwal et al., 2020; Lehmiller et al., 2020; Panzeri et al., 2020). An Australian survey exploring sexual activity and practices during the first 3 months of the pandemic – during which time Australians experienced state and nationally directed social distancing restrictions, or ‘lockdown’ – indicated that people were having less in-person sex overall compared with 2019 (though people in cohabiting relationships were more likely to report having the same or more sex: Coombe et al., 2020). Among those reporting decreased in-person sex, solo masturbation and sex-toy use had increased. The way that people used dating apps also changed, including more online chatting and video dates compared with 2019 (Coombe et al., 2020). Overall, the pandemic presented a range of changes and challenges in relation to sex, intimacy and dating.

Sex, intimacy and dating within the pandemic and consequent lockdown(s) were being discussed widely in the media and online during 2020 (e.g. Döring, 2020). This included advice on how to ‘maintain’ sex and relationships, whilst simultaneously managing COVID-19 transmission risk. Particularly for those who were single or with non-cohabiting partners there were anxieties around what – if any – (in-person) intimacy they could engage in (Döring, 2020). As Rubin (1984) argues, although sex and sexuality may seem trivial in times of more critical problems, this is precisely the time when sexual values are most disputed because they can become a vehicle for displacing social anxieties. We see this with the (ongoing) HIV/AIDS epidemic, for example, where groups are stigmatised using an identity-based logic. Gay men in particular have been positioned as risky, with this risk being linked to their ‘imagined identities and lifestyles, characterised by heteronormative notions of promiscuity and communal irresponsibility’ (Scott, 2020: 187). This displaces social anxieties about the virus onto gay men and ‘gay sex’, rather than disease prevention. However, as Scott (2020) argues the HIV/AIDS epidemic also facilitated the development of new (sub)cultural norms around sexual interactions, with safe sex practices becoming widespread within these stigmatised communities.

Rubin (1984: 143) argues that due to the symbolic weight that sexual values can carry, ‘sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress’. The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly been a time of great social stress globally, due in part to heightened anxieties around transmission of the virus and how this impacts opportunities for social connection, sex and intimacy. Prior to the development of effective vaccines, behavioural measures were the primary method of preventing transmission. The measures implemented around the globe varied considerably from strict lockdowns and legally enforceable movement restrictions to minimal restrictions but an emphasis on ‘personal responsibility’ for keeping oneself and others safe (Nkengasong et al., 2020). In Australia, the responses differed between states and territories, as well as changing over time (often rapidly) within states and territories depending on the perceived public health threat. Some states also gave increased police powers to issue fines and detain people in breach of public health orders (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). Public health orders in some countries became highly politicised (Stroebe et al.,
and in Australia the differing lockdown orders between states led to politically divisive media coverage (Muller, 2021). Considering the increased social anxieties, varied messaging around virus transmission responsibility and the politicisation of public health orders, it is important to pay attention to the way that sex and intimacy is/was being framed during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the media.

Mass media and sex advice literature are important sources of information about intimacy, health and normalcy. From a social constructionist perspective, these do not simply reflect people’s experiences and the world, but rather contribute to (re)producing collective knowledge about intimacy, sex, health, illness and (dys)function that provide frameworks for making sense of and acting in the world (e.g. see Gill, 2018; Farvid and Braun, 2014; Weedon, 1997). What is understood as ‘normal’ sex and sexuality has been constructed within narrow bounds through mainstream psychiatric, sexological and bioscientific institutions invested in maintaining a heteronormative status quo through, for example, pathologising sexual ‘dysfunction’ or non-normative sexualities as ‘disorders’ (Barker et al., 2018; Foucault, 1980). This has (re)produced pervasive heteronormative discourses that are continually drawn upon by mass media and sex advice literature, constraining possible ‘solutions’ to sexual problems (Barker et al., 2018). Some key pervasive discourses include firstly, mononormativity: The assumed naturalness and normality of monogamy (Barker et al., 2018). Secondly, the ‘coital imperative’: That it is unthinkable to imagine heterosexual sex without intercourse (penis-in-vagina (PIV) penetration: McPhillips et al., 2001). Lastly, the ‘sexual imperative’: That ‘normal’ people experience sexual attraction and consistently desire sex, and deviations from this are a problem requiring attention (Barker et al., 2018). As Barker et al. (2018) have identified, these discourses continue to be (re)produced in sex advice literature, constructing narrow and limiting discourses on what constitutes ‘normal’ sex.

Discourses of sex and sexuality are not static, however, they change over time including in response to significant collective events like a global pandemic (Foucault, 1980; Rubin, 1984; Weedon, 1997). In a commentary on media and academic narratives relating to sexuality and the COVID-19 pandemic, Döring (2020) mapped a range of emerging narratives including the apparent sudden normalisation of technology-mediated sexual practices ‘to such a degree that they are even officially recommended by the media and health authorities as health prevention behaviors’ (p. 10). Despite this, the global research relating to sexuality, sex and dating during the pandemic has focused on people’s reported sexual practices or on biomedical indicators of sexual and reproductive health. Considering the significant role that media plays in shaping how people understand and make sense of their (sexual) experiences, it is important to examine how sex and dating are represented in the media and other online sources during the pandemic (Döring, 2020).

The analysis presented in this article critically examines the way that discourses of sex and sexuality were (re)produced during the first 3 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when community anxieties around the spread of the virus were especially high and social distancing was recommended or legally enforced in many countries including Australia. Our analysis sits in conversation with Barker et al.’s (2018) important book ‘Mediated Intimacy’ which analyses the vast landscape of discourses in media and popular sex advice that in-part constitute our everyday understandings of sex and intimacy. Although
sex advice in the popular media is often viewed as ‘entertainment’ and can be narrow in scope (Attwood et al., 2015), the internet has facilitated the diversification of the type of sex advice available including advice extending beyond heteronormative, couple-focused, STI risk-prevention education (Barker et al., 2018: 47). People are increasingly turning to online media to learn about sex – it is quick, easy, accessible and anonymous – and research suggests this is becoming a key source of information (e.g. Simon and Daneback, 2013). Our analysis examines online sex advice from various sources including online news media, online magazines, government websites and community and health organisation websites. We use Barker et al.’s (2018) formative text as a site of comparison to analyse how online sex advice has (and has not) changed to accommodate social distancing and public health measures. Adopting the same ‘sex critical’ approach to analysing sex advice media as Barker et al. (2018), we aim to interrogate the normative ideologies that these texts may uphold or subvert and consider the ways that texts may both open up and/or close down particular sexual and intimate possibilities.

**Methods**

**Generating the dataset**

We analysed online advice about sex, dating and relationships available to Australian audiences during the first period of social distancing restrictions in Australia (henceforth ‘lockdown’). Lockdown measures were handled differently across Australian states and jurisdictions throughout 2020, but a National Cabinet formed on 13 March to implement nation-wide restrictions on public gatherings and activities. These began on 16 March, becoming increasingly strict until 29 March when all Australians were advised to stay home except for essential outings. There were some differences across jurisdictions in how restrictions were enforced, including in relation to non-cohabitating intimate partnerships (see Coombe et al., 2020). Considering these restrictions, we collected our data over a 3-month period in 2020, from 15 March until data collection occurring 16–22 June. At this time, social distancing measures were being gradually relaxed in many states, except Naarm/Melbourne which had re-entered strict lockdown.

We generated the dataset through six queries on Google.com: ‘sex’, ‘dating’ and ‘relationships’ each paired with both ‘covid OR coronavirus OR advice’ and ‘isolation’. Terms were selected through discussion, initial pilot searches, an analytic interest in dominant narratives likely to be encountered by online audiences, and the need to generate a feasible sample size. The search region was set to Australia, with ‘private results’ turned off. For each query, the first 10 relevant webpages that appeared in our search results were collected (regardless of author type or location), as we considered these available to the Australian public. Webpages or articles were considered relevant if they discussed sex, intimacy or dating in any capacity; webpages that discussed the pandemic without any reference to these topics, or discussed a different topic entirely, were not collected or counted. Additionally, we only collected freely available textual data. We both performed all six queries due to returning slightly different results on our
respective computers. Webpages were saved as PDF files and we then removed all duplicates.

The final dataset contained 65 items (Appendix: Table 1), all from Australian-based sources, published between 24 March and 17 June 2020. They were from a range of media sources including: 40 from mass media such as news or entertainment; 13 from specialist non-government organisations including relationship, counselling, LGBTIQ+ and sexual health organisations; 2 from university publications; 2 from government/council websites and 8 from miscellaneous websites. We considered our data to be a mixture of ‘mainstream’ media as well as ‘alternative’ media sources (see Barker et al., 2018: 2).

Methodology and analysis

To analyse this data set, we used discourse analysis (Gill, 2018), drawing on the critical discourse analytic tradition (Xie, 2018) and poststructural feminist understandings of language as constructing, rather than reflecting, social realities (Farvid and Braun, 2014). We were concerned with exploring power relations and ideological associations within and across texts. That is, exploring how constructions of sex, dating and intimacy in the articles we analysed are connected to broader gendered, heteronormative and neoliberal discourses and power relations. Our analysis was also grounded in a Foucauldian approach by looking historically at discourses and how understandings of sex and sexuality are constituted through multiple mediated sites (with sex advice media being one primary source: Gill, 2018). This includes examining how discourses have changed across time and in different spaces, and how/whether they ‘open up and close down possibilities’ for experiencing and acting in the world (Barker et al., 2018: 28). This approach also allowed us to be attentive to what was not said in articles, and connect these silences to broader social, cultural and political discourses of the time (Gill, 2018). In developing the analysis, we focused on identifying objects within the texts and the subjectivities and social positions afforded to these via the discourses embedded in the texts. This discourse analytic approach allowed us to explore how existing dominant discourses in relation to sex, intimacy and dating were reinforced, challenged or changed within this pandemic context and analyse the potential consequences of this going forward.

We both read all data items and noted initial themes, and this formed the basis of our preliminary analytic codes. We then developed a set of eight codes to organise the data, through consideration of our research questions as well as drawing from the existing literature. Whilst inter-coder reliability is not necessarily relevant within discourse analytic approaches, due to our different disciplinary backgrounds (criminology and psychology), we randomly selected six data items to each code in NVivo. We then compared this coding to ensure that we were approaching the analysis similarly (we were). We divided the remaining data items and coded these independently in NVivo before combining and reading through all the coded data and associated memos, noting themes or patterns. Through discussion, we refined our foci for the next stages of the analysis: based on our specific interests and expertise, we focused on two themes each to develop further, and divided the codes accordingly. The focus of our four themes were as
follows: isolation affecting desire; risk and responsibilisation; exploring new things/ expanding sex and intimacy; and consent and communication.

By selecting thoughtful search terms and through careful sampling, we believe we generated a representative sample of articles that allow us to analyse discourses available through online searches for sex and relationship advice during the first 3 months of lockdown in Australia. We do not claim that it is representative of discourses circulating in other geographical, cultural or lingual contexts, or during other time periods. Other media sources including print media, television and social media are also not captured in our dataset. However, the aim of our analysis was to look specifically at Australian online sex advice during a unique period. While we do reflect on the broader implications of our findings, we acknowledge that this analysis is set in a particular time and space.

 Reflexive statement

In this analysis, we sought to acknowledge and orient to the many social and economic complexities within the broader socio-political context that contributed/s to peoples’ experience of lockdown, including their difficulty in complying with various measures and restrictions. We too are living through the pandemic and experienced (and supported) lockdowns in Australia. However, our positionality means that we do not experience the pandemic and social distancing restrictions in the same way as many others. For example, we both had relative financial and housing security, making our experience very different to thousands of people (just in Australia) who lost their jobs, did not have a permanent address or lived in a crowded or dangerous household. We were both cohabiting with a partner and not engaging in online dating or tech-sex during lockdown, and likely not feeling lonely or seeking intimacy and pleasure online in the same way many others were. These experiences will impact how this analysis was formed. Our identity positions as queer and white also impact how we read and respond to texts. We reflexively attended to these various identities and experiences through regular conversation and actively reflecting on these points during analysis and writing.

 Analysis and discussion

In this section, we present and discuss the four primary overarching themes we developed in the analysis of our dataset. First, we explore how the articles represented (changed) sexual desire within the context of the pandemic and social isolation. Second, we examine how responsibility for managing the risk of virus transmission was framed. Third, we identify the kinds of possibilities for sex and pleasure during lockdown that were presented and discuss how these were represented in relation to ‘normative’ sexual practices. Finally, we demonstrate how discussions of sexual consent were (not) intergrated into the sex advice we analysed.
‘Sending our sex drive into a spin’: Changed sexual desire as a ‘normal’ experience during lockdown

Seven articles in our dataset presented a focused discussion on sexual desire and how this had been impacted during the pandemic. These focused primarily on cohabiting relationships and therefore on in-person partnered sex, although single people’s sexual desire was sometimes discussed. Overall, people were represented as desiring – and having – either more or less sex compared with pre-pandemic life, with very little space or discussion for unchanged sexual desire and activity. Although the direction of change was not fixed across the data, there was a strong focus on decreased sexual desire or activity. This collective experience of decreased sexual desire during lockdown was often positioned as surprising by juxtaposing it against an inferred pre-lockdown expectation of increased ‘horniness’ and (hetero-)sex during lockdown.

Pre-self-isolation we all cracked jokes about the amount of sex we would or wouldn’t be having during iso. If you were a couple it was all about how much WFH [working from home] sex you’d be having between Zoom meetings, and if you were single it was how many times you’d masturbate out of boredom […] the corona-baby boom we all laughed about seemed like a very real possibility back then, before we all knew just how much this novel virus would impact our lives. (Source 17)

Changes to sexual desire and activity were understood as being caused by lockdown or the pandemic more broadly. Both increased and decreased sexual desires were ‘caused’ by features of the pandemic including stress, fear, (more/less) time and (more/less) privacy. Some aspects or experiences of lockdown were only positioned as decreasing sexual desire, however, such as a reduced sense of embodied ‘sexiness’ and the presence of relationship conflict.

“I actually have the time and energy to have sex. And been actually getting into it. [My boyfriend’s] never been happier.” — Lucy* (Source 17)

[…] Susie Tuckwell, a Sydney therapist [says] "It can intensify pre-existing tensions in a relationship because there is nowhere to escape to, and more time to ruminate,” she says. “Some couples have described a feeling of flatness and loss of libido. It’s also harder for parents to have private time with kids at home.” (Source 6)

This consistent linking of changed – and especially decreased – sexual desire to the broader pandemic context functioned to position this change as a ‘normal’ experience within a very abnormal context: ‘Melbourne sexologist Kassandra Mourikis says it is normal in times of uncertainty to experience a change in libido’ (Source 49). Popular sex advice tends to construct sexual difficulties or dysfunction, including ‘low libido’, as a problem or pathology that is located within the individual (Barker et al., 2018). Within our dataset, however, the pandemic itself was presented as the ultimate source of changed sexual desire, and so this was not represented as an individual fault, flaw or abnormality.
Aligned with this, changed sexual desire was not medicalised, for example, readers were not advised to diagnose or treat their experience of changed sexual desire as a problem that was located within themselves.

Despite this focus on context, some articles offered readers ‘tips to help you through this tricky time’ and ‘fix’ their reduced sex drive (Source 49). So, although individuals were not being positioned as broken, the pandemic became an obstacle to ‘normal’ sexual desire that could nevertheless be overcome by individuals. This indicates a continued reinforcement of the sexual imperative that is common in popular sex advice (Barker et al., 2018). Given that decreased sexual desire was discussed mostly within the context of cohabiting relationships, encouraging people to ‘overcome’ this also reinforces the common idea that sex and sexual intimacy are required within relationships (Barker et al., 2018). One article that offered tips to increase sexual desire did concede the possibility that a person’s desire cannot be ‘saved’ during lockdown; however, the alternative to regaining ‘normal’ sexual desire – communicating with a partner – was still positioned in relation to facilitating sex:

“No stress if you’re still not feeling it though - in fact, it’s pretty understandable. Try talking it out with your SO [significant other], after all, the best sex starts with quality connection.”
(Source 5)

Although discussions about changed (especially reduced) sexual desire were not restricted to cohabiting relationships, this was the dominant way in which sex and intimacy were discussed within the context of cohabiting relationships across the data. At least 20 additional articles within our dataset discussed the challenges or opportunities that lockdown presented for cohesion and connection within the context of cohabiting relationships (often nuclear family units) without mentioning sexual desire or intimacy改变了 or otherwise. It could be argued that this provides representation of intimate relationships where sex is not a central requirement (certainly, we think this would be a very positive message). Interpreted within the broader dataset, however, the absence of any discussion about sexual desire and intimacy within cohabiting relationships except where there was a change may also work to reinforce the idea that sex within this (presumably monogamous) context is easy, natural and necessary – since sexual intimacy within this context was only discussed in relation to change, and changed sexual desire tended to be positioned as a problem to be solved or overcome (see Barker et al., 2018), even during a pandemic and associated lockdown.

Our finding that changed sexual desire was positioned as a consequence of the broader context, and not reduced to individual physiology or failure, is a very positive one. This will perhaps provide a blueprint for mainstream sex advice and popular media to broaden understandings of decreased or ‘low’ sexual desire more generally. Despite this, invocations to correct or ‘fix’ (decreased) sexual desire by overcoming pandemic-related challenges remained. Overall, sex remained an important goal or achievement during lockdown within this dataset – particularly within cohabiting relationships – rather than something that might not be a priority for everyone during the pandemic.
'Just not worth it': Risky sex and safe sex during the pandemic

Within the pandemic context, in-person dating and partnered sex with anyone outside the household were consistently positioned as an inherent risk to be avoided or managed. While articles often reassured readers that COVID-19 is not a sexually transmitted infection, they quickly reiterated the near impossibility of having in-person sex without risking COVID-19 transmission: ‘Nookie, in all of its in-person forms, carries some risk’ (Source 53). Many articles provided readers with education and advice about making responsible choices in relation to sex and dating during lockdown. This was commonly done through authoritative expert voices including health officials, government bodies and ‘leading’ experts or medical professionals. Articles authored by or directly quoting official health bodies also tended to provide explanations or behavioural scripts for performing the safest behaviours and mitigating risk. Educational advice primarily positioned individuals as ultimately responsible for identifying and weighing risk and acting accordingly:

*if you’re going to take the punt [and have casual sex], the first thing to consider is whether you or the person you’re canoodling with lives in a community where transmission rates are high. [...] If community transmission rates are low [...] that’s not to say the risk is totally eliminated* (Source 52)

What counted as the most responsible, correct or safe choice was not fixed across the dataset. We identified slippage across articles between advice to avoid risk (e.g. complete abstinence from in-person sex); manage risk (sex with cohabitants or close contacts only) and minimise risk (taking certain measures when engaging in in-person dating or sex). These contradictions occurred despite reliance on expert opinion to construct or bolster boundaries around responsible choices. Although the specific advice provided did depend somewhat on source-type and date of publication, much of this advice was available concurrently. The instability of this advice is therefore contrary to claims made both within news sources and by official government sources that the advice was ‘straightforward’ (Source 25) and ‘common sense’ (Sources 25, 64).

*“Professor Mc Laws says it’s probably okay for anyone not in mandatory self-isolation to have their [non-cohabiting] partner over for sex.”* (Source 25)

*The latest advice from the federal health department is that it is OK to visit your partner as long as you [...] stand at least 1.5 metres apart from each other.* (Source 11)

*“doctors are warning that sex acts of any kind, whether with a live-in partner or not, could increase a person’s risk of getting the virus.”* (Source 35)

Readers were tasked throughout this sex advice with identifying and weighing the risks associated with their choices; and simultaneously informed that in-person sex and dating were ultimately ‘just not worth the risk’ (Source 27). So, despite suggestions that people could make any choice according to their own risk assessment, only one choice was...
consistently presented as ‘the correct decision’ (Source 55) or ‘the right thing’ to do (Source 17).

*Learn everything you can about COVID-19’s symptoms and how to prevent it. First and foremost, evaluate your own risk levels. [...] While we should absolutely be self-isolating for as long as it’s recommended, people are still going to meet up if they really want to. [...] The key is to make the right choices to protect ourselves and others.* (Source 53)

This dominant focus on individual responsibility to identify, assess and manage risk in relation to sex and dating during the pandemic echoes existing public health and epidemiological discourses of safe sex in relation to HIV/AIDS (see Scott, 2020) and broader pre-COVID-19 sexual health messaging. Existing safe sex discourses tend to focus on individual responsibility for ‘planning and decision making’ in relation to biomedical safety (Barker et al., 2018: p. 161), with little acknowledgement of the broader socio-cultural and structural context in which sex occurs (see Grant and Nash, 2018). Within these discourses, sex is commonly understood as penis-in-vagina or -anus intercourse that, outside of monogamous contexts, poses an inherent risk of infection and unplanned pregnancy (over and above an opportunity for pleasure and intimacy, for example). Accordingly, condom-use is positioned as the epitome of safe – and responsible – sex, followed by the choice to instead engage in ‘safer’ non-penetrative sexual activities (e.g. see Barker et al., 2018). Our analysis found that, in the context of COVID-19, inherently ‘risky sex’ now expanded beyond penetrative sex to any in-person partnered sexual activity outside of cohabiting relationships. Accordingly, sexual safety was best achieved through physically distanced, technology-facilitated sex. Tech-sex was presented as the ‘new condoms’ within the pandemic context: Imperative for anyone who was responsibly engaging in non-monogamous or non-cohabiting sex.

*Part of that responsibility [for having safe sex] is examining your own behaviour. If you’ve started to develop COVID-19 symptoms [...] transition your meetup online or over the phone.* (Source 52)

Safe (i.e. tech-) sex was also presented in an overly simplified way. The dominant idea that in-person partnered sex (and dating) outside of cohabiting contexts was ‘just not worth it’ focused primarily on the biomedical, viral dimension of the pandemic and not on the social, emotional and embodied experience of lockdown. ‘Rule breakers’ (Source 46) were positioned as irresponsible, selfish and reckless, without consideration of the broader context(s) in which they made choices about sex and dating. This positioned ‘safe sex’ and ‘rule breaking’ as matters simply of individual responsibility or recklessness, limiting the subjectivities enabled by this discourse to those of ir/responsible person; and excluding, for example, financially privileged person, lonely person or person without sufficient access to technology or internet to facilitate techsex or virtual dating. Such individual positions may obstruct ‘responsible’ choices, and none were discussed within our dataset.
Current health recommendations mean that for some people, safety in their sex life will involve physical separation from sex partner/s that they don’t live with. […] This can be tough but ultimately it comes down to safety and respect for you, your sex partner/s and the wider community. (Source 51)

This risk discourse worked to displace the responsibility for mitigating transmission of COVID-19 from broader social and political structures onto the (ir)responsible individual (Lupton, 1993) who was single or may have otherwise desired romantic or sexual intimacy outside their household. This positioned individuals within this group as responsible for containing COVID-19 and, pre-emptively, as posing a risk of ‘a second wave of infections’ when they returned to in-person dating and sex (Source 15). Decontextualisation of individual choices regarding sexual and intimate safety during lockdown worked to position ‘responsible’ choices as ‘straightforward’ and universally achievable; but structural inequalities mean that we were/are not ‘all in this together’ as was commonly proclaimed in early-pandemic media narratives (Bowleg, 2020). This responsibilising discourse therefore makes potential scapegoats not (only) of ‘singles’ broadly, but of particular groups of people who are single and economically and politically disenfranchised. This finding reinforces the need for sex advice to better consider individuals’ positionality and sociocultural context.

‘A historical re-jigging of our understanding of romance, intimacy and sex’: Expanding possibilities for sex and pleasure

As the previous section demonstrated, in-person and casual sex was positioned as risky throughout articles. Rather than simply telling people not to have sex, however, tech-sex and socially distanced forms of sex were now positioned as the safest, most responsible way to have sex during this time. Aligned with this, a whole suite of safe(r) sexual practices were presented to readers throughout articles including virtual sex; sexting; phone sex; chaturbate; sexy snapchats; self-pleasure (masturbation); sex toys; mutual masturbation; watching porn; reading erotica; and accessing sex work through selling/paying for online or phone sex (Source 27) or through ‘services that reduce contact’ such as ‘standing behind the client to bring them to climax’ (Source 48). These practices were positioned differently between articles, however, and the level to which these could replace or be as pleasurable as in-person sex and intimacy was debated. Some articles explicitly assured readers that these acts are still sex, actively working to expand what counts as sex beyond in-person, heteronormative, penetrative sex. In contrast, other articles positioned these acts as simply ‘ways to maintain sexual closeness in a safe way’ during the pandemic (Source 63), without necessarily assuring readers that these count as sex.

Not all sex need be penetrative, Amy explains, and not all intimacy is sexual and reliant on touch. It’s 2020 after all, and there are more ways of being saucy than simply meeting face-to-face (Source 52)
A few articles specifically positioned these acts as not ‘real’ sex, reinforcing heteronormative understandings that sex is penetrative, and usually between a cis-gender man and woman (i.e. PIV intercourse: Barker et al., 2018). For example, the below extract at once states that any kind of sex is risky and then suggests replacing sex with masturbation and phone sex, consequently positioning those acts as not ‘real’ sex.

sex of any kind could increase a person’s COVID-19 risk, according to a Friday letter from three doctors and public-health experts. They said people should consider masturbation and phone sex (Source 35)

Other articles, whilst suggesting or acknowledging alternatives to in-person and penetrative sex, simultaneously positioned these activities as place-holders until the ‘real’ sex could happen again. This actively worked to position these alternatives as less satisfying forms of sex with a non-cohabiting partner, but ‘better than not seeing them at all’ (Source 11).

But this can’t make up for the lack of skin-to-skin contact, and if they’re missing it now, what’s it going to be like in several months’ time? (Source 6)

Whilst articles expressed differing views on the legitimacy of these alternative avenues for sex, the widespread inclusion and recommendation of tech-sex, sex toys, masturbation and porn in online sex advice is, in many ways, unprecedented and unique. Barker et al.’s (2018) pre-pandemic analysis of sex advice literature found that these alternative sexual practices were often understood as ‘spicy sex’ and discussed only to ‘save’ couples’ stale sex lives. Sex was otherwise taken to mean PIV intercourse, reinforcing the coital imperative. They argue that the boundaries between ‘normal’ or ‘real’ sex and ‘spicy’ (or supposedly inferior) forms of sex are tightly policed, where ‘spicy’ acts can be added to ‘real’ sex but are not viable alternatives. With in-person and/or skin-to-skin sex now posing a risk to public health, however, our analysis found that alternative sexual practices not only become viable options, but broadly recommended, actively encouraged and in some cases reinforced as ‘real’ sex.

Our analysis also found that sex advice was primarily directed at people who are single and were dating or having casual sex before lockdown. While this was likely due to the public health risk posed by casual sex during lockdown, it differs from previous analyses which found sex advice has primarily been directed towards married people or couples in long-term relationships. For example, Barker et al. (2018) found that sex was constructed as ‘the crucial “glue” that holds a marriage/relationship together’ (pg. 89), and thus advice sought about sex was to improve or save a relationship, not for other potential motivations for and benefits of sex such as experiencing multiple and different types of pleasures or social and psychological reasons (Barker and Hancock, 2017). Sex advice has also been gendered in problematic ways, with women’s participation in sex positioned largely to please men and maintain their (hetero) relationships (Farvid and Braun, 2014). However, sex and intimacy was given a much wider remit than this within our dataset, with one article even stating that ‘intimacy is part of health, and it deserves to be discussed’ (Source 53).
Many articles in our dataset oriented towards intimacy and sexual pleasure as important for individual wellbeing, expanding the importance of sex well beyond relationship maintenance. There was also a particular focus on self-pleasure and masturbation in articles directed towards women, including pleasure beyond genital stimulation.

“This is time for self-pleasure and spending time with yourself and understanding your body. "Have a ‘love session’ with yourself." She recommends touching parts of your body, not just your genitals, as well as using your imagination. (Source 49)

Some articles, however, presented conflicting moral overtones about sex, intimacy and what it means to meet people or engage in sex virtually. Two articles suggested that virtual dating was an opportunity to ‘slow things down and get to know each other on a deeper level’ (Source 61) ‘before heading straight to the sheets’ (Source 34). While this was possibly an attempt to frame COVID-19 disruptions positively, it reinforced the heteronormative notions that ‘good’ sex occurs within committed/monogamous relationships and that fewer sexual partners over a lifetime are best. In contrast, some articles warned readers against becoming too intimate or too close with someone online because it may not ‘necessarily translate into real world chemistry’ (Source 46). Across the data, there was tension between the ‘safer’ way to have sex and form intimate relationships during lockdown, and heteronormative notions that slow and monogamous connections or relationships are the best context for sex (not fast or casual), and that ‘real’ sex is face-to-face (not virtual).

Overall, whilst we still identified pervasive heteronormativity within the data, we found an expanding discourse around what counts as sex (to varying degrees). Acts other than PIV intercourse were now viable alternatives for pleasure and intimacy. Social distancing requirements saw pleasure and intimacy acknowledged as important aspects of individual wellbeing, not just for relationship maintenance. Encouraging new and creative ways to be intimate expands sexual intimacies beyond heteronormative sex whilst also being a protective measure from virus transmission. Like the HIV/AIDS epidemic, those who are positioned as ‘risky’ will find new and safer ways to be intimate, rather than becoming abstinent from sex, and this flexibility and creativity becomes a protective mechanism for those communities (Scott, 2020). However, unlike the HIV/AIDS epidemic, COVID-19 is not a risk imagined to be contained to an identity-based subgroup (although exposure to this risk is indeed related to a range of structural and economic inequalities: see Bowleg, 2020). Therefore these creative and protective sex measures are recommended in sex advice media to a much wider audience, creating exciting possibilities for new sexual intimacies and repertoires going forward.

‘Keep digital consent mutual’: Consent important for tech-sex, but still largely absent

Recent social movements such as #MeToo have seen increased discussion in mainstream media around sexual violence, sexual coercion and the problematic gendered norms regarding the negotiation of sexual consent (Hindes and Fileborn, 2019). In consideration
of this, we decided it was important to analyse whether sexual consent and ensuring that relationships were free from violence and coercion was a priority in circulating sex advice during the pandemic. Barker et al. (2018) found there was a notable absence of sexual consent in sex advice literature. Our analysis disappointingly found that this was overwhelmingly still the case with only seven of 65 articles explicitly talking about the importance of negotiating sexual consent. The sources of these seven articles are also important to note, with the majority from organisations who already have sexual consent at the forefront of their conversations about sex. Three were from Australian sexual health organisations who have long recognised affirmative consent as an important part of healthy sexuality. Two were from university publications with sexual consent also being at the forefront of many Australian university policies, workshops and discussions about sex in recent years (End Rape on Campus, 2017). It is therefore unsurprising – if not expected – that articles from these organisations would stress the importance of negotiating sexual consent in any of their sex advice. This then leaves only 2 articles from more mainstream sources that mention sexual consent at all.

Sexual consent was also primarily discussed in relation to ‘new’ or ‘non-normative’ types of sex. Six of the seven articles talk about negotiating consent in relation to virtual and phone sex, and one article talks about consent in relation to kink and open relationships.

And exploring these things [kink and open relationships] online while self-isolating is the perfect time to learn more. Approaching this with honesty and affirmative consent can help make the decision to move forward a positive experience (Source 53).

Past studies have found that sexual consent is talked about in sex advice more frequently and explicitly in relation to sex that is considered non-normative or kinky. Hassinoff (2016) argues that practices that are considered non-normative are held to a higher standard of consent, particularly practices that are done online due to the inability to read non-verbal and implicit consent cues. Barker et al. (2018) similarly found that mainstream sex advice only mentioned consent in relation to BDSM or ‘kinky’ sex. They argue that consent then becomes another way to delineate ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ sex, where ‘abnormal’ sex is dangerous and requires consent as opposed to ‘normal’ sex which does not. Whilst our analysis found sexual consent was primarily included in relation to ‘non-normative’ types of sex, we suggest that this is due to the sources being more alternative or sex-critical, rather than these types of sex being positioned as inherently riskier. In fact, one source even says ‘consent still applies to any kind of phone sex or sexting’ (Source 33), making the point that consent is important on and offline. This was a positive finding to see sexual consent included not just to protect from risky ‘abnormal’ sexual practices but reinforced as an important aspect of all sexual negotiation.

Whilst these few positive examples were found in our dataset, there was overwhelmingly a striking absence of discussion on consent for both online/alternative and normative (face-to-face, coupled) sex. As the previous section demonstrated, new and novel practices were being suggested by a significant amount of our sources, yet the majority of these do not mention consent at all. Whilst tech-sex and dating were heralded
as the safest way to be intimate during lockdown, safety largely appears to be in regard to
not spreading the virus, rather than safety meaning sex and relationships are consensual
and free of violence. This absence was concerning not just for people potentially engaging
in tech-sex, but also for cohabiting couples who were now in lockdown together. Whilst a
significant amount of our sources were directed towards cohabiting couples with advice
on how to maintain healthy relationships, only two addressed the importance of commu-
nicating about sexual needs and negotiating sexual consent in these relationships.
Again, these were from progressive, sexual health focused sources, who importantly state:

*For people who live with their sexual partner/s [...] Talking about consent, sexual needs and
wants, expectations around the use of condoms and contraception are all necessary parts of
any kind of ‘quarantango’ that might happen. (Source 51)*

As the first section of this analysis demonstrated, seven articles presented discussion on
sexual drives and desires being in flux for cohabiting couples. However, only two articles
then discussed the importance of negotiating sexual consent during this time. Whilst a
proportion of our articles that focused on cohabiting couples stressed the need for
communication during this time, this imperative to communicate was always in reference
to negotiating domestic tasks, childcare and personal space rather than negotiating
differences in sexual needs and desires. This reflects Barker et al.’s (2018: 179) finding
that sex between adults in relationships tends to be represented in media and sex advice
literature as easy and natural and, most often, assumed to be consensual.

While consent is always important within sex advice literature (and commonly absent:
Barker et al., 2018), it is especially relevant at a time when sexual and intimate needs,
desires and possibilities are/were in flux. The absence of sexual consent within our dataset
is particularly alarming given that, beyond the occasional provision of information for
domestic violence hotlines at the bottom of an article, we also found no acknowledgement
of the potential for increased incidence of sexual and domestic violence for cohabiting
couples in lockdown (Döring, 2020). This absence of discussions about violence within
domestic settings may be related to the broader focus on online (i.e. non-cohabiting) sex
and dating within our dataset. Nonetheless, the broader absence of consent in our data is a
missed opportunity to include sexual consent in mainstream advice about sex, particularly
after recent movements such as #MeToo have made readily apparent the urgent need to
educate on consent, sexual assault and coercion, including in the media (see: Hindes and
Fileborn, 2019).

**Concluding notes**

We applied a ‘sex critical’ lens to discursively analyse online sex advice available to
Australian readers in the first 3 months of ‘lockdown’ (March–June 2020) during the
COVID-19 pandemic. The advice throughout the articles on managing the risk of
transmitting COVID-19 when engaging in sex and intimacy was not fixed across the
dataset, with advice ranging from avoiding, managing or minimising risk. Despite this,
there was a primary focus on individual responsibility related to risk, without a
consideration of the ways in which people’s positionality and broader sociocultural context shape the kinds of choices actually available to them and, consequently, their risk-related actions. While not a particularly surprising finding, this is concerning within the broader context of an ongoing, collective experience that cannot be addressed by any individual alone. This advice may also have been confusing amidst the inconsistent and often rapidly changing public health orders across Australian states and territories. There is a clear and ongoing need for sex (and health) advice to acknowledge and orient towards not only individual but also collective responses and responsibilities. We suggest an ‘ethic of communal care’, such as the one that characterised successful queer activist responses to the early HIV/AIDS pandemic (see Scott, 2020: 188), can produce better outcomes regarding safer sex in relation to both biomedical safety and collective wellbeing.

We also found some exciting possibilities for new sexual intimacies within our dataset. This included a shift towards contextual rather than pathologising understandings of changed (and especially reduced) sexual desire, widespread recommendation of tech-sex and self-pleasure and the recognition of sex as a potentially important part of everyone’s lives – not just those in heterosexual, monogamous relationships. As Davids (2020: cited in Scott, 2020) observes, within the current pandemic many forms of queer sexual intimacy and pleasure that were previously understood as risky – including various fetishes and kinks – are now safer than everyday normative sexual practices. This in itself presents an exciting challenge to heteronormativity in relation to sexual pleasure (Scott, 2020).

However, some articles still discounted non-normative practices as viable long-term alternatives to PIV, in-person sex. This closes down possibilities for diverse sexual practices that may be suitable (and preferable) for some people. The suggestion of alternative sexual practices in sex advice is welcomed and needed but, as Barker et al. (2020) have argued, sex advice from any source should not be prescriptive and sex advice could be improved by letting readers decide the viability of these sexual practices for themselves. Whilst there was some normalisation of fluctuation of desire and how this relates to social and structural conditions, we also found that the sexual imperative was often reinforced through suggestions on how to fix or overcome these fluctuations. Based on these findings, we also suggest that sex advice should refrain from presenting changed sexual desire as a problem that always needs to be ‘solved’, rather an inevitable aspect of navigating sexuality and desire over time and place.

We also identified a range of concerning absences within Australian online sex advice during the pandemic. Readers were consistently positioned as having financial access to technology and secure housing and – beyond the pandemic itself – few barriers to engaging in ostensibly ‘normal’ sexual and dating practices. Indeed, we could find no discussion or acknowledgement of disability nor ethnic, cultural or religious diversity in our dataset, and found only occasional orientation to diverse sexualities. This suggests that online sex advice remains largely normative overall (Barker et al., 2018), drawing narrow boundaries around who is engaging in dating and sexual practices and how they are doing this. Expanded possibilities for intimacy and sex are still narrow if they are restricted to only more privileged groups. Indeed, as Bay-Cheng (2017: 344–347) has argued, there must be ‘critical analysis of the interplay between sexual well-being and social conditions’ considering the ‘incontrovertible evidence’ of a relationship between

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sexual health disparities and pervasive social inequality. International research now shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected marginalised groups both economically and in terms of the health burden (Ali et al., 2020). This further demonstrates the critical importance of addressing social inequalities in COVID-19 sex advice literature.

The data we analysed in this article was collected during the first 3 months of pandemic lockdowns in Australia. The pandemic has now been on-going for over 2 years, and social and political responses to the pandemic continue to change around the world. This is especially so in Australia where we have seen some easing of restrictions and the re-opening of international travel due to high vaccination rates, but public health orders continue to be implemented as new variants emerge and challenges continue to arise. It is therefore important to explore whether the changes and opportunities identified here and elsewhere regarding media representations of sex, intimacy and relationship practices have been sustained, or if these were bound by the particular early-pandemic context.

**Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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**Note**

1. There was just one exception to this, where sexual intimacy was presented as a tool for maintaining a good relationship and lockdown as a ‘chance to re-focus on how you like to connect with each other’ (Source 36).

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Table A1. List of sources.

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