

Can you *really* get sexual connection through a screen?

After a year of very little human contact, sex tech has never been so advanced. But can it replace the real thing? Franki Cookney logs on 🤖

"...And a garlic  
pizza bread  
and some  
wedges"



## → The blow-up doll was actually pretty sexy. 🔑

Or maybe it was the woman grinding on it, running it up and down her body – and then staring to look directly at Nikki.\* But Nikki didn't lock eyes with her for too long. There was too much to take in – the lime-green body stocking clinging to another woman's curves; the writhing of the many naked bodies in front of her; the vibration of the music from the speakers filling her up. As she slipped off her robe and started to dance, the other partygoers grinned and waved at her in welcome. Everyone here, clad in leather, latex and lace masks, wanted her. She felt like she could reach out and touch them. But she couldn't. Nikki was at home, alone in her bedroom, drink in hand, dancing in front of her computer screen.

Of all the things that happened last year, casual sex being either illegal or against guidelines was up there with the weirdest. After COVID-19 hit, we were ordered to stay at home and give up all face-to-face social contact with people outside our households. Even when restrictions were lifted, social-distancing guidelines made it clear that close contact was not permitted. After six months of what amounted to state-mandated abstinence, a clause exempting those in “established relationships” from social distancing was introduced. But for single people, there was still no end in sight.

As a journalist who covers sex and relationships, I watched the impact of this unfurl throughout the year. I had people sliding into my Twitter DMs telling me how unfair it was to go without a basic human need; I've spoken to experts gravely concerned about the impact on our future relationships; and I've had countless conversations with people whose libidos have flatlined as the stress and uncertainty took their toll. But I also saw incredible innovation as we came up with ways to integrate sexual excitement into our housebound lives, and heard from people who'd tapped



into new desires. It has been a seismic shift that's bound to reverberate for a long time to come. So, a year on, what kind of impact will all this have had?

## Let's get digital

Logging onto the online orgy, wearing nothing but lace lingerie, Nikki was nervous. She didn't always feel confident about her body, but as she looked at the 200 scantily clad bodies in the grid of boxes in front of her, she realised she was having fun. "It was so hot," says Nikki, 28. "It was titillating, but not hardcore. I'd always found the idea of an IRL sex party daunting, but knowing I could shut my laptop whenever I wanted took away the anxiety."

Events like the one Nikki attended were cropping up on browsers across the UK, because when work meetings and pub quizzes moved online, so too did sex. Parties such as the kinky rave Crossbreed, female-led sex community Killing Kittens, swingers' club Le Boudoir, women-only Skirt Club and more, all switched to virtual events. A new virtual hook-up site called Cybersex Dating accrued over 30,000 users worldwide within two weeks. Dating apps such as Feeld introduced features allowing users to indicate they were up for sexting and video sex and saw user numbers increase tenfold within a week.

According to the Kinsey Institute, which researches human sexuality, one in five of us has switched up our sexual routine since the start of the pandemic. It reports increases in sexting, sending nudes, watching porn and having cybersex. Sex-toy sales skyrocketed too: within 72 hours of lockdown being announced, sales at Lovehoney were up 150% compared to the same time in 2019.

One of those picking up their phone and getting it on digitally was Robyn, 32, who spent hours sexting strangers. Robyn has a compromised immune

system, so even when restrictions were relaxed in May, they opted to keep shielding. By June they were craving some excitement and – feeling curious – decided to try out a feature on Feeld where users set their location to "Sext Bunker" (now renamed "Fantasy Bunker") instead of their hometown, indicating they want to cut the small talk and get straight to talking dirty.

Robyn would send sexy pictures to those they were chatting to and share what they fantasised about, before agreeing a time to masturbate simultaneously. Sexting with people they knew had always made Robyn feel self-conscious, but they realised that, with strangers, inhibitions went out of the window. "I felt free to be filthy," they say. "Sexting and actual sex are different things, but I definitely got off on those conversations"

For Ffion, 35, the merging of sex and technology meant signing up to an online self-pleasure workshop. "I didn't have an orgasm until I was 31, and even now I struggle," she says. "I wanted to have a better relationship with my body. This was the first time I'd had the headspace to do it." She read about a six-week self-pleasure course and signed up.

Classes would start with breathing exercises, before diving into that week's "practice." "Sometimes it would be bodily or genital touch," Ffion explains. "Then we would turn our cameras and microphones off and the facilitator would put on meditative music so we could try it out for ourselves. Afterwards, we'd report back on how we found it." Being able to do this in the privacy of her own bedroom, while also having some guidance, was something only made possible by it being virtual.

In many ways, sex going digital was a good thing. It allowed Nikki to dip her toe in the sex-party scene without feeling awkward; Robyn to explore their fantasies, and Ffion to gain more confidence in, and patience with, herself. But for others, living their sex lives through a screen wasn't enough.

## Cabin fever

Tied to her bed, moaning with pleasure as a hand was brought down onto her skin, turning her bum cheeks pink, Eve was euphoric. It had been so long since she'd had this kind of erotic physical contact. Not only that, but she was finally fulfilling her wildest BDSM fantasies – things she'd never done before.

But as she said goodbye afterwards, the weight of what Eve had done descended. Her flatmate was high-risk and, for the last eight weeks, the two of them had been shielding. But Eve had found going without sex and human contact more and more difficult, so when her flatmate went out for a walk, Eve took the chance to invite a guy she'd been talking to over. "I understood the risk to my

flatmate, but my mental health had taken a hit and I was desperate," she admits.

Even though she says that being connected to someone else again was incredible, Eve "felt really shit" after. "I covered everything in anti-

bac. He cycled over to avoid public transport and wore a mask the whole way over. We'd both been isolating, so I knew the chances of catching COVID were low, but if I'd got it from him and passed it on to my flatmate, I'd have felt horrendous. The consequences could have been deadly." >

**"It had been so long since she'd had this kind of erotic physical contact"**

It took weeks for Eve's guilt to subside. As time went on and neither she nor her flatmate became unwell, they both began to relax. By the time the restrictions were eased in the summer, both were going on socially distanced (and not so socially distanced) dates in full agreement with each other. "I gave a few handjobs and was fingered in the park," Eve says. "I also met a couple for a threesome. Things progressed more quickly than usual – I think people just felt desperate to get down to it after the rules had eased."

Research released by sexual health charity the Terrence Higgins Trust in June showed that 84% of people were abstaining from sex with anyone outside their household. But stats don't tell the whole story. Most of us know someone who broke lockdown to see their partner or went on a date and ended up getting frisky in the park. Being

cooped up had many of us bouncing off the walls with sexual frustration. No wonder, then, that extra-marital affairs website Ashley Madison saw a 30% bump in new members once rules were relaxed in May.

Something about the combination of fear, anxiety, boredom, anger and increasing frustration with the rules led to couples and single people alike ditching their inhibitions and doing things they'd never normally dream of. When I asked my social-media followers for their stories, my DMs were flooded. Salma's resolve to stick to Zoom dates broke within two weeks of lockdown when a guy she was chatting to invited her over. Ruby went on a socially distanced walk that culminated in kissing and groping behind a bush. Amy formed a support bubble with her best friend

**"We've had time to tune in to what we really want from our sex lives"**

and ended up having sex with her because "neither of us could have sex with anyone else". Alex and Ella had a threesome with their friend who later got an NHS alert forcing them all to self-isolate for two weeks. Holly alternated between two different men throughout lockdown, walking to their houses for sex when she was supposedly out for her daily exercise.

All of them admit it wasn't right, but it still happened. Having watched government scientist Neil Ferguson break lockdown with visits from his lover, and the PM's then chief advisor Dominic Cummings reportedly break the rules, many felt angry about the potential double standard. "Married politicians were telling me what I can and can't do with my body, irrespective of the mental health damage that does to me," says Ruby.

The fact that IRL hook-ups still happened when they were banned would indicate that tech can't provide an adequate stand-in for sex. Prolonged periods without human contact are bad for us. Studies into "skin hunger" – the human craving for touch – have found it

can affect everything from stress levels and overall mental health, to happiness, sleep quality and our experience of pain.

With so many people obliged to abstain from sex, whether they want to or not, it's created a deep divide in some friendship groups. Most of the people I spoke to said their friends were understanding, and in many cases, behaving the same way, but not everyone is so forgiving. Those with chronic illnesses or vulnerable family members take a dim view of people who flout the rules for casual sex. Others who hadn't hugged their friends and family,



Below-the-waist clothing: so 2019

even during the toughest of moments, couldn't see why anyone would break the rules "just for a shag".

## Time to reflect

If you weren't one of the people having illicit threesomes or making a bush into a makeshift bedroom, don't worry. Overall, we had less sex and masturbated less from March to June 2020, according to the Kinsey Institute. When Bumble users in the UK were asked how COVID-19 has impacted their sex lives, 71% said their sexual needs were not being met. Between April and June, Durex reported a decline in condom sales. When you consider the bigger picture, it's not surprising: with ongoing fear and uncertainty, plus the



says Boffard. She also says there has been a rise in people seeking sex and relationship therapy.

Whether you're single or coupled up, it seems the pandemic has given us time to tune in to what we really want and need from our sex lives. It's still hard to envision a post-pandemic world, but when we do get there, is there anything we'll want to keep?

Dr Kate Devlin, author of *Turned On: Science, Sex And Robots*, is pleased that the experience has lessened the taboos around sex tech and introduced people to things they might not have tried otherwise, but she says she can't see virtual sex replacing the real thing. "Toys and tech provide a substitute, but we still have an overwhelming drive to connect with other humans."

So will we still be having online orgies this time next year? "I suspect they'll drop off as time goes on," says Devlin. Nikki agrees: "While it was fun at the time, I don't think I would do another virtual party. I'd rather wait for the real thing."

While we wait for whatever our "new normal" might be, we can at least reflect on what 2020 has taught us – whether that's how to focus on our own bodies and pleasure, tap into new fantasies, try out new things or simply pay more attention to what works and what doesn't in our relationships and sex lives. If we can take those findings into our post-pandemic sex lives then, arguably, it hasn't been a wasted year at all. ♦



#### BEHIND THE SCENES

### Franki Cookney

"Although there were a lot of great digital sex inventions in 2020, what about the sex tech no one asked for? I, for one, did not need to witness the invention of a Joe Exotic dildo (look it up...or don't). Yeah, we all enjoyed *Tiger King*, but not even lockdown could make that appealing."

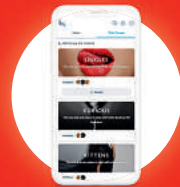
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demands of work – or job insecurity – a lot of people found their levels of desire almost non-existent. "When anxiety or stress go up, the ability to engage in a sexual response goes down," says clinical sexologist and psychotherapist Catriona Boffard.

Even for cohabiting couples, being together 24/7 was, for many, a passion killer. "At the start of lockdown, some people thought they were going to have sex all the time," says Boffard. "The reality of domestic life is working, cooking, perhaps parenting. There's little space for playfulness within our four walls." But for every couple who struggled last year, there are those who came out feeling their relationships were stronger than ever. "It's actually helped them resolve issues that they were facing, because they were forced to be in the same house all the time,"