

Online sex parties and virtual reality porn: Can sex in isolation be as fulfilling as real life?

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The public health response to COVID-19 has placed unprecedented limits on social contact. Many people may [go without](#) physical sexual intimacy for an extended (and indefinite) period.

Given human touch and connection are fundamental to humanity, this could have [significant implications for the well-being](#) of those who are

single or [apart from their sexual partners](#).

[The media has reported](#) people turning to [digital technologies](#) to find sexual pleasure and human contact during periods of social isolation.

But what does [research](#) tell us about the [capacity for technologies to meet human needs](#) for sex, touch and intimacy?

Making love alone

[Solo sex](#) is one solution to lack of sexual contact and well within [current health guidelines](#). People are using technology to enhance this.

Reportedly, [traffic to the pornography website Pornhub](#) has increased exponentially during the COVID-19 crisis, and there has been a significant [leap in sales](#) of popular sex toys.

Meanwhile, [erotic fiction](#) has found a new fan base by drawing on themes of [isolation and quarantine](#).

However, not everyone has the physical capacity to pleasure themselves and sex is also about intimacy, human connection and touch. Does the online environment allow for this?

Connecting with others

People have been [seeking sex online](#) for years.

COVID-19 is accelerating this trend, prompting increased use of dating apps for [chatting](#), [cyber-flirting](#) and [sexting](#).

Real-life "hook ups" may be off the table for a while, but research shows that cyber-flirting and sexting can [enhance sexual creativity and fantasy](#),

help with [sexual and relationship satisfaction in real life](#) and, for some, [increase body confidence](#) and a sense of desirability.

COVID-19 has also meant people are getting more creative with their webcams. [Sex party organisers](#) have been [hosting online parties](#) which, for some, have been their first foray into sex online. People have found this experience to be surprisingly satisfying, [replicating feelings of anticipation and excitement](#) that are similar to real-life sex.

Similarly, research on [cybersex](#) – which may involve sex with avatars rather than webcams—has shown it can enhance people's sex lives by enabling exploration of [desires and fantasies](#) they may not feel comfortable to pursue in real life.

Along with potential for enhanced sexual satisfaction, a [recent study by the Kinsey Institute](#) showed that people who use technology for sexting or webcamming gained a sense of emotional connection as well as sexual gratification from this contact.

This included people who accessed [professional webcam sex services](#), as well as those sexting or 'camming with a lover or person they met online.

What about touch?

[Simulating human touch](#) is more complex.

[Teledildonic devices](#), which are internet-connected sex toys, enable people to control their partner's vibrator using a mobile phone app.

COVID-19 appears to have generated an [increase in demand for these devices](#), although research is limited on the extent to which they [enhance people's sense of connection](#) or sexual satisfaction.

Technologies are also evolving toward [immersive experiences](#) in which tactile sensation is matched with visual stimuli to evoke a more realistic sense of touch.

For example, devices such as the ["Vstroker" and the "Auto-Blow2"](#) link to virtual reality (VR) porn. The actions in the VR film (for example, oral or penetrative sex) are timed with the device functions so the visuals match the physical sensation. [Research has shown](#) VR pornography can enhance feelings of presence and arousal.

Are there risks?

Online sex brings risks along with benefits, and many of these are well-documented. Sharing erotic images or videos carries the risk of unwanted exposure through non-consensual dissemination, such as "revenge pornography."

In recent weeks, we have also heard about widespread "[Zoom-bombing](#)", in which people hack into online meetings on the Zoom video-conferencing app. This is clearly a risk for those using video chat platforms for sex.

This feeds into existing concerns about [data hacking, consent](#) and inappropriate monitoring of [teledildonic users](#) by the companies that make them. Two of these companies were recently [sued for collecting intimate data on users](#), including body temperature and vibration frequency during device use.

As social distancing continues, there are also concerns of [increased catfishing](#), the practice of luring people into fake online relationships for financial scams.

Is online intimacy the same as being together?

One question raised in studies of sex and intimacy is whether the online environment [enables a sense of human connection](#) akin to physical presence.

Being physically close to someone allows for [intimate practices](#) that involve touch and everyday acts of care. [Some research](#) suggests online communication creates a less [authentic form of intimacy](#) or encourages people to [present false versions](#) of themselves. [Trust](#) may also be difficult to build online due to [complex or limited visual cues](#).

However, other studies show potential for the [online world](#) to facilitate, or even enhance, closeness as people are more inclined to [share personal and vulnerable details](#) about themselves through text than face-to-face.

The future of sex?

COVID-19 may be a turning point in the use of, and attitudes toward, technologically mediated sex and intimacy.

It is too soon to know how this will play out when social isolation measures are relaxed, but for now digital technology has never been so central to human sexual and intimate connection.

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