



Talk about turn-offs. Masks, elbow bumps, the waft of hand sanitiser, social distancing – now curfews. After six months of Covid-living, is sexiness the latest casualty?  
 Polly Vernon finds out

**H**as Covid killed sexiness? Encouraged us to put away our cleavages, elasticate our waistbands and enshroud lower halves in shapeless fleecy jogging bottoms – sales of which went up by 1,000 per cent in lockdown. Ernest Leoty, an upscale athleisure brand, registered a 250 per cent increase in sales of its leggings, which is great for them... But is it sexy?

Does it feel inappropriate, now, to “dress sexy”? To bedeck ourselves in the kind of pieces we – only six, seven months ago – routinely integrated into our wardrobes? The low-cut and the tight-fitting? The flesh-flashing, boob-elevating, leg-lengthening, waist-nipping? The extravagant, the dramatic, the daring, the shocking? Might that strike a wrong note in light of All That Has Happened? Seem frivolous, crass, inadequately serious – perhaps even demonstrate a blatant disregard for social distancing in its wanton invitation for attention and, ultimately, physical touch?

What of lipstick and high heels? Rendered redundant by face masks and limited social opportunities, working days spent clattering round our own homes, and rare nights out spent handing over contact details to maitre d’s for tracing purposes, reminiscing about

outmoded concepts like “atmosphere”?

What of Spanx and all other forms of shape-enhancing underwear? And bras, forsaken gleefully by so many barely a week into lockdown? Did anyone put them back on again, or did they simply not bother? Throw out the lippie and the thigh-flesh-tamers; bequeath the heels to charity shops where they’ll fester in the window display like remnants of a half-forgotten civilisation?

How about the pre-Covid push and pull of flirty interactions with strangers, baristas, potential future lovers, “work husbands, work wives”? Loaded air kisses with other people’s spouses, fingertips poised briefly and lightly on forearms as we exit conference rooms, ostensibly in the interest of gaining attention, actually in the interest of gaining *interest*... The back and forth of a quickfire teasing repartee with a colleague, which was always, in its enthusiasm, somewhat characterised by what we now recognise as “heavy droplet expulsion”?

What if we’re single? Does the world seem newly, bleakly, endlessly sexless? Are all

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**CLOSE**

**TO**

**ME**

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potential conquests literally half hidden from us behind face masks? Are the opportunities to meet anyone new blighted by household-bubble limitations and seated table plans in pubs? Does anyone ever one-night-stand any more? Or walk-of-shame? Does the concept of “pulling dresses” – outfits for, and virtually guaranteed to achieve, seduction – still exist?

Are these things even *legal*? The society bible *Tatler* doesn't think so. Its current issue includes a list of “U” (desirably upper class) and “non-U” (embarrassingly aspirational and middle class) behaviours, which has been revised with specific reference to the virus crisis. “Being chaste” rates high among U etiquette; “careless kissing” is classified Non-U.

So is it all over? Is sexiness a pre-Covid notion, gone for good?

From the perspective of autumn's fashion trends, yes. As far as the digitally dispersed runway collections are concerned, blatant sexiness is simply not a preoccupation. Oversized, form-swamping tailoring and an awful lot of knitwear – including the unlikely return of the knitted tank top, an item not renowned for inherent come-hitherness

– dominate, an aesthetic movement Hannah Almassi, of fashion site [whowhatwear.co.uk](http://whowhatwear.co.uk), identifies as “nu-cosy”. “Comfort has become of paramount importance to us from an emotional and a practical perspective,” she tells me. “The era of Covid fast-tracked a pre-existing shift towards comfy dressing. It took a pandemic to make the look really thrive.”

Then there's the question of heels, with which very few of us have bothered over the past six months. Working from home made them irrelevant; locked-down forays to the supermarket to queue for 20 minutes on the faint promise of loo roll made them unthinkable; and a summer in Birkenstocks rendered stilettos as foreign a prospect as corsetry. As the temperature drops and a woman's thoughts naturally turn to new boots, one style dominates. It's ankle boots with an exaggerated tread: corrugated rubber soles so aggressively ridged, they put you in mind of a tank. These are the kind of boots you'd need to cover all circumstances in the event of a zombie apocalypse; only you can get yours at Russell & Bromley (I did). Flat, solid – they're the aesthetic opposite of the high heel.

Alison Loehnis, president of Net-A-Porter, tells me she's waiting on delivery of a pair (Prada's) as we speak. But does Loehnis think

these boots represent the formal end of high heels, and a corresponding end of sexiness? “No! We will wear stilettos again!”

Loehnis acknowledges that the crisis had a dramatic impact on fashion habits. “There was a real evolution in what women were buying. In the earliest stages, they bought loungewear. Leggings. Then in the UK market particularly

came lingerie.” No! Really? “Yes! So I think women felt, ‘OK, I may be wearing a tracksuit, but I’m going to wear something lacy under it.’ Then sportswear” – our PE with Joe Wicks period – “then earrings, which I think again was, ‘Yes, I’m wearing a tracksuit, but I’m going to zhoosh it up a bit.’ Then came tops, which was all about Zoom, of course.” Loehnis thinks we are now buying clothes as a promise to ourselves of better times to come: “Expressions of hope, almost.”

Tracksuits for the foreseeable, then.

What of our behaviour? Is the muted sexiness of our attire a reflection of the muted sexiness of our physical interactions? According to one study, the percentage of virgins among the current crop of 18 to 25-year-olds is higher than at any time

on record – and those figures were gathered *before* coronavirus enforced the idea that to touch a new person is to kill their grandparents in one fell swoop. Socially distanced fresher weeks are taking place in a university near you right now – a time when, traditionally, young people divested themselves of their virginity or, at the very least, laid the groundwork for achieving those ends later in the first term. But now? How can they possibly?

The world is less sexually active; less inclined towards casual hook-ups, more towards online conversation – the inevitable consequence of our not being able to come within 2m of a stranger without wondering if we now qualify as a “superspreader”. On the plus side, this means the UK experienced a massive reduction in new cases of sexually transmitted diseases in lockdown. A London sexual health clinic called lockdown “an unprecedented opportunity...” in that it had “broken a chain of onward infections that’s been relentless and consistent for decades”.

Then again, extramarital affairs became a logistical nightmare (cf Prof Neil Ferguson).

Activity on dating apps increased as opportunities for physical interaction diminished. The dating app Bumble had

an increase of 20 per cent in messages sent through lockdown, Hinge had a 30 per cent increase and Tinder registered the busiest day in its history on March 29, at a point when much of the world had entered lockdown. There were more than 3 billion “swipes” – indications of interest, or rejections, of other clients on the world’s most popular dating app

– in one day. As lockdown progressed, Tinder also reported that messages sent through the app were longer – 30 per cent on average – which, the company extrapolates, suggests conversations were getting deeper. But it wasn’t *all* about emotional intimacy over quick shags. The dating app Quack Quack surveyed dating trends in major Indian cities – Delhi and Mumbai among them – and found users prioritising less sexy behavioural patterns, yet they’d started valuing compatibility over anything as piffling as emotional intimacy. (They made no mention at all of sex.)

By August, as lockdown restrictions lifted and people were allowed tentatively to re-enter the dating arena in the flesh, the Terrence Higgins Trust released official guidelines for engaging in safer sex during a global pandemic. Having established that 84 per cent of us had abstained from sex with people we didn’t live with through lockdown (no mention of how many of us abstained from sex with the people we *did* live with), it recommended that sex in the post-lockdown era involve no kissing, the wearing of a face mask and, uh, *orientations* that don’t involve partners being face-to-face. Because heavy breathing and panting put one at risk of transmission, “larger, more open, ventilated spaces” were recommended as venues.

The concept of “Covid cuffing” has also been floated: the idea that single people, terrified of going back into a second lockdown alone, are spending their time looking for long-term prospects (whom they might “cuff” into relationships), rather than casual hook-ups. In August, the dating app Badoo surveyed 1,000 of its users – 70 per cent said the prospect of locking down alone again had focused their efforts in finding a partner.

But people lie in surveys. Is this truly how we’re behaving in the age of corona? Have we *really* forsaken sex for intimacy, compatibility and the idea that any port in a lockdown is better than no port at all?

“No,” says R, 35, my most single and active of male friends who, it’s fair to say, made an artform of commitment-phobia in the era of

online dating. "It's different, definitely, but not necessarily less sexy. It's more relaxed. Dates in parks rather than bars, which are more intimate, less flashy. You're not trying to prove you have status; you're not trying to prove you're cool. You can't do that in a park."

Does that lead to more or less sex?

"Depends. A girl did come round to mine recently and say, 'We can't f\*\*\* because I'm seeing my gran tomorrow and I don't want to give her anything.'"

"Also, people are pitching new, Covid-improved versions of themselves a lot."

How?

"Like, 'Remember when we went out on that date before Covid, and we slept

together and then you never heard from me? I'm not that person any more. I meditate. Are you free on Saturday?'"

That's a ploy?

"Obviously."

R says he's entirely capable of flirting with people through masks, and that encouraging someone to remove their mask for a chat – in a café, maybe, or in one of the ever flourishing queue scenarios – has become a part of the new courting game.

Which would suggest that, far from killing off sex, the virus has actually enabled a whole new breed of bad behaviour.

But what of the women?

"Has Covid killed off flirting?" asks J, a married female lawyer friend. "I don't think I've ever flirted as much as I'm flirting now. I mean, the opportunities are limited. Flirting on Teams with personality-free lawyers who totally don't get it... But still, I try. I'm getting better at it. You've got to be quick. Keep the bants up or you lose them."

Wear a low top and angle your laptop for maximum bosom? "No. I top up my make-up, but I've found that a low-cut top on Zoom makes me look like a barmaid from the Middle Ages."

"I think people flirt *more* than before," says E, another female friend, who's enjoying what she refers to as a "Covid summer romance" with a man she met while working out in the park. (He asked her for tips on a chest press.) "The lack of social interaction through lockdown means people are more open, more chatty."

Then there is the prevalence of what my friend S refers to as "guys on bikes", legions of men – and women – on bicycles who are

avoiding public transport. "They are *bold*," says S, a long-term, pre-Covid cyclist. "They pull you over to talk, wolf-whistle and so on. This guy pulled up and asked if I had a boyfriend. The thirst is real."

Just as I start to think that, far from curbing our sexual excesses, Covid has in fact fuelled them – the thirst being real, and so on – some disheartened men chip in.

"Never going to the office is *awful* for flirting," says one, a consultant in a long-term relationship, early forties, generally despairing of political correctness.

"Women make less of an effort when they never have to go to the office. And it was why we all went in anyway, wasn't it? Dress up and be charming and pretend it's the corporate way, but actually..." It's flirting? "Yes! And it was fun. I miss it."

"The world was getting really sexless before," points out a 26-year-old friend who hates dating apps. "Girls pose on Instagram, get loads of likes – then everyone looks away when you try to catch their eye on the street or talk to them in a bar, because that's threatening. They already have their fill of validation online and they don't need to flirt in real life." And the virus has made that worse? "Covid's given them an excuse. People spent more time online in lockdown, then became more timid in the flesh... I just got back from Italy. First time I went there, ten years ago, the street interactions were intense. Everyone checked each other out all the time. Now, *nothing*. It's depressing."

Covid hasn't entirely killed sexiness.

At worst, it's accelerated and exacerbated previously existing trends towards sexlessness: the leveraging of Instagram's fake, posed sexuality as an alternative to facing up to, and embracing, real-life, real-world, real-time sex. At best – can we call it "best"? – the virus and related crisis have made us more flirtatious, lecherous in our eagerness to re-engage with humanity, creative in our attempts to circumvent the disease and get laid. So pass me my mask and my megasoled boots. I'm going out on the pull. ■

## **ARE POTENTIAL LOVERS LITERALLY HIDDEN BEHIND A MASK? DOES ANYONE EVER HAVE A ONE-NIGHT STAND?**

### ***SEX AND SEXINESS IN THE TIME OF CORONA***

**BEFORE** Casual hook-ups and “ghosting”  
(ending online contact with a paramour  
suddenly, and without explanation).  
**NOW** Long perambulations in parks.

**BEFORE** Wondering if you’d been  
stood up in bars.  
**NOW** Gazing at the “waiting for host  
to start meeting” message.

**BEFORE** Sexting.  
**NOW** Lengthy exchanges concerning  
the surprising resilience of the human  
condition (which would take place  
on parchment, if both parties weren’t  
concerned about how long the virus  
lives on parchment).

**BEFORE** Matching your mani  
to your pedi.  
**NOW** Matching your mask  
to your frock.

**BEFORE** Aftershave and perfumes.  
**NOW** The lingering aroma  
of hand sanitiser.

**BEFORE** Friends with benefits.  
**NOW** Friends with access  
to outdoor spaces.

**BEFORE** Chlamydia.  
**NOW** Loneliness.