



# Queer dating during social distancing using a text-based app

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Received: 1 June 2021 / Accepted: 28 March 2022 / Published online: 16 May 2022  
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## Abstract

Sex and gender queer people experience feelings of isolation in a vast array of ways. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, queer people have been forced endure additional isolation not only from people, but also from much needed sources of acceptance for sexualities and genders. As queer-focused dating apps have increased in popularity and acceptance, they have become one way in which otherwise isolated queer people are able to connect, see, and be seen. While queer physical community spaces can no longer be safely accessed due to social distancing, dating apps remain available as an essential opportunity to reach out to other queer people and to access large numbers of fellow queer people. This study reviewed a sample of 1500 Lex personal ads during the summer of 2020 that directly or indirectly reference the COVID-19 pandemic posted by users in the United States. The researchers saved and recorded appropriate text messages. These text-based personals posts were then analyzed to gain a greater understanding of both the isolation that is experienced by queer people who are not cis-men, as well as the attempts to reduce isolation through the app.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Queer · Dating · Phone apps · Isolation

## Introduction

Sex and gender queer people experience feelings of isolation in a vast array of ways. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, queer people have been forced to endure additional isolation not only from people in general, but also from other people like them who provide much needed sources of acceptance for their sexualities and genders. Throughout recent history, and likely before, queer people have frequently utilized

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sex and dating as an avenue to reduce stigma-driven isolation and its impacts. The popularity of queer dating apps has increased the ability for these individuals to connect across distances, as well as to locate each other within their own regions.

As queer-focused dating apps have increased in popularity and acceptance, they have become one way in which otherwise isolated queer people are able to connect, see, and be seen in ways that are not always possible offline (DeHaan et al. 2013; White Hughto et al. 2017). A wealth of research has been done on various aspects of gay and predominantly cis-men's dating apps, such as Grindr (Zervoulis et al. 2020). However, less attention has been given to queer dating apps that do not focus the cis-men demographic. Cis-men are people who are born as male and identify as male. Lex is a popular donation-based dating app marketed to sex and gender queer people who are not cis-men. From its beginnings as an Instagram feed, to its current existence as a standalone app, Lex is a purely text-based platform with members located around the globe.

While physical queer community spaces could not be safely accessed due to physical distancing, dating apps remain available as an essential opportunity to reach out to other queer people and to access large numbers of fellow queer people. The mobile application Lex is an example of how people can connect with other queer women and non-binary folks to establish a safe place for communication. A sample of 1500 recent Lex personal ads that directly or indirectly referenced the COVID-19 pandemic were analyzed. These posts were found in the public area of Lex with no supposition of privacy by Lex, which notifies their users that these posts are public (Lex 2021). Appropriate text messages were saved and recorded in a Word document by the researchers using the app on their phones. They were then analyzed for themes and trends within the messages. These text-based personals posts were analyzed to gain a greater understanding the isolation that is experienced by queer people who are not cis-men, as well as their attempts to lessen the felt isolation.

## Queer dating and unique struggles

Defining what queer means can be difficult since it can have a variety of meanings for different people. In a 2018 journal article, the term queer was described differently by each participant, but the overwhelming idea was that their sexual orientations do not conform to any set definition (Sprott and Hadcock 2018). Queer can be an umbrella term used to describe people who are LGBTQ+, but often it is a term embraced by those who disagree with the idea of two distinct genders. When looking for a romantic relationship, time must be spent on understanding what queer means for the potential partners to make sure they agree and are compatible. This experience might not make sense to someone who does not identify with a queer label because people take for granted binary genders, which is considered the social norm.

People have the need to be understood and community is an important element (Prati et al. 2016). Community is important in healing, exploration, peak experiences, and growth, which Sprott and Hadcock showed while linking the queer and kink community as they discussed how a community can be instrumental in

exploration of both kink and sexual orientation (Sprott and Hadcock 2018). Within the queer community, there is understanding that labels are difficult to define for some folks and understanding is important as they move forward in relationships. Communities help people celebrate wins as well as provide someone to cry with during losses. As social isolation progressed, communities found ways to adapt in order to provide the space needed for their members.

Community also provides socialization and support in coping with stigma and minority stress (Sprott and Hadcock 2018). Stigma Theory suggests that people who are in marginalized populations can feel stigma on four different levels which include structural, public, self, and stigmas by association (Bos et al. 2013). Structural stigmas are when institutions and societal philosophies stigmatize against members of a group, and this can be seen in the queer community by laws surrounding both healthcare and work. Public stigmas are people's reactions to the stigmatized populations. Queer identifying people learn to recognize when an individual is not comfortable with them and how this looks. These instances of being viewed by people who are not comfortable with them can lead to micro-aggressions that build up over time. The public and structural stigmas lead to self-stigmas, which are internalized stigmas created from the awareness that public and structural stigmas exist against themselves and who they are. Finally, stigma by association is created when those friends and loved ones supporting them are stigmatized because of their relationship with the queer individual (Bos et al. 2013).

Minority stress is linked to increased isolation, shame, depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Gillum 2017). LGBTQ+ individuals are a part of a minority that does encounter micro-aggressions during their daily lives because of the public and structural stigmas. Results in a study of anxiety and depression across gender and sexual minorities in 2018 showed that people identifying as queer had higher rates of depression and anxiety than cisgender LGBT participants (Borgogna et al. 2019). Community helps mitigate the effects of minority stress by giving queer people others to talk to so they can relieve the tension felt by living outside of the heteronormative societal constructs. Being with others who accept and understand who they are is a healing factor of being in community.

Internalized homophobia, the self-hatred felt about who they are, is also present in the queer population. Internalized homophobia is felt most strongly by queer millennials and less strongly by queer Baby Boomers, leading to the idea that the queer dating participants may be battling with internalized homophobia as they date and dodge outside negative responses (Wickham et al. 2019). When added to the minority stress and stigmas felt on a daily basis, this can add up to someone who needs others for support and guidance.

These populations cannot rely on the use of therapy to process their relationship struggles because the therapy office often is not a safe space for queer clients (Petrei 2019). Master's level trained therapists are not often trained to work with sexual minorities, including queer populations. If the client does not feel safe in their therapy session, they will not disclose to their therapist some of the underlying feelings they are experiencing because joining, or the creation of a connection between a therapist and client that facilitates open and honest conversation, cannot take place effectively without safety. Furthermore, therapeutic relationships are not intended to

replace social supports and intimate relationships. Attending therapy on a weekly basis can help, but people usually cannot contact their therapist when they feel lonely or hurt at the end of the day.

Queer dating often takes place on the Internet through digital mobile technologies because it is easier to find like-minded individuals online than it would be using more traditional ways of meeting potential mates. Queer dating sites have always been considered a protective environment, as well as less hierarchical and more egalitarian. However, there are still the prejudicial discourses present online as found in offline queer spaces. This means that the need to find safe ways of dating still exists. Finding safe spaces online is even more critical with shelter in place and social isolating throughout this community as COVID-19 created greater risks in face-to-face contact.

### **COVID-19 pandemic and social isolation: how the community responded**

In a thesis written in 2015, Peter Balogh discusses the idea of queer quarantine and how the queer population has been segregated because of the fear of contamination of queerness and, later, HIV-AIDS (Balogh 2015). This idea of separating from the heteronormative population is one that can be seen in the habits of people who identify as queer when it comes to their friends, dating habits, kinship families, and other relationships (Balogh 2015). Even before social isolation was thought of for everyone during COVID-19, it was being practiced by the queer community to reduce minority stress and other harms.

When the increase of stay-at-home orders began in March of 2020 and sometimes extended to a year in length, the queer community began responding to the lack of physical closeness. Some people continued to physically have sex with people whom they do not live after physical distancing and isolation was encouraged or mandated, while others immediately moved to a digital style of dating (Kumar 2020). People who lived away from home, such as at university campuses, had increased concerns about returning home. There were difficult decisions about where to live and how to reduce the potential harm in their lives for queer students from violent or unsupportive homes who had been living on campus (Tucker 2020).

Well documented increased risks of trying to access health care as LGBTQ people made some queer individuals were more motivated to exercise caution during the pandemic (NWLC 2014; Mirza and Rooney 2018; Hafeez et al. 2017; Brown et al. 2020). This includes attempts to access COVID-19-related care for LGBTQ+ people.

Medical care has not always been safe and accepting for the LGBTQ population and avoiding hospitals can be a reason to exercise caution during this pandemic. In a 2014 survey, eight percent of LGB and 27% of Trans people with HIV report being denied medical care (NWLC 2014). During the COVID-19 outbreak when New York City was struggling to keep up with health care needs, a field hospital in New York asked potential volunteers to sign a statement of faith reflecting fundamentalist Christian tenets, increasing the risk of an LGBTQ person receiving substandard care in that facility.

There are steps being taken to improve the health care situation for LGBTQ patients, including going through congress and the 2019 Conscience Rights Rule of the US Department of Health and Human Services (Cardoza 2019). However, there are many concerns at this point with medical care that would incentivize the queer community to take extra precautions in staying healthy.

Also in play is the implication that HIV-AIDS might make COVID-19 more dangerous with a smaller chance of recovery (Collins 2020). No one knew what increased the potential of death for the virus with all of its variants. Extra caution for everyone who has pre-existing conditions was advised.

For all relationships that did move online, including queer relationships, there is the added stress of distance dating. Students at a New York City university found that the distance forced by COVID-19 showed flaws in their relationships. This led them to begin to value themselves more than an unsatisfactory relationship (Meisels 2020). Deciding to end a relationship during a time of stress only increases the feeling of isolation and sadness and may open the need for a new relationship in a time when social gatherings were discouraged. Communicating online with a new potential partner can help ease the isolation caused by a break up during quarantine.

For a community that relies heavily on each other, as well as one that has been isolated in the past, the queer community has shown signs of gathering resources and offering opportunities for those who would like to participate in them. Club Quarantine helped people cope by offering a virtual night club every night that 100–1000 people logged on to. This benefited people who couldn't or wouldn't risk going to a physical club (Goldfine 2020). If Zoom raves were wanted, people could watch others doing whatever they want in their own homes for as long as they liked. Numerous other queer-focused workshops, support groups, classes, prayer gatherings, and other opportunities also moved to online spaces.

LGBTQ dating sites also responded with practical reminders for their members during the shutdowns. Grindr encouraged hand washing in its blogs and Lex posted relevant ads encouraging people not to travel (Reynolds 2020). Grindr also was free during social isolation and Reddit provided queer subreddits and threads about quarantine and dating. Hinge created a "Date from Home" feature that allowed Zoom conferencing if both members agreed, Tinder offered its Passport service for free where you could chat with people from around the world, and The League offered speed dating options for its vetted members.

This study addresses the lack of research on queer dating apps designed for genders other than cis-men. Furthermore, it considers the importance of the text-based dating app, Lex, as a tool for connection and self-expression among its queer users who were self-isolating or quarantined during COVID-19. Using qualitative analysis of publicly available, non-identified posts to Lex, themes are explored within the posts from Lex users, considering what they were saying and seeking during the COVID-19 pandemic that began in spring, 2020.

## Methods

After IRB review, the researchers collected the text of 6817 publicly available posts on the Lex dating app, which advertised itself as a “lo-fi, text-based dating and social app... for womxn and trans, genderqueer, intersex, two spirit, and non-binary people for meeting lovers and friends” (<https://thisislex.app>). Posts on Lex are available for 30 days, or less if the poster chooses to remove them. All of the North American Lex posts available at the time of data collection were analyzed (June and July, 2020) that referenced COVID-19 either directly or indirectly, through references such as “isolation” and “quarantine.” No identifying data from users’ profiles were retained, and any identifying data in the posts themselves were disguised. Posts are seen for 30 days, after which they disappear. Because of this, data collection occurred twice daily during the time posts were collected. Posts that were from people who live in the United States and mentioned COVID-19 or quarantine were specifically noted. The posts included in the data collection also mentioned dating, meeting up, or connecting with others.

Data collection of the posts began on June 6, 2020, and concluded on July 26, 2020. These dates began when our IRB was approved for collection and ended when it appeared saturation of data had been met. We began to notice themes in the data and the number of posts that met our specifications were declining each day and we began to see repeats of the same themes. This indicated that we had gathered all of the important information we could at that time.

This study aimed to describe the experiences of Lex users during the summer of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. These data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach in order to determine common themes and descriptions of what Lex users were seeking and saying during this pandemic. We guided our analysis using Moustakas (1994) eight-step process of horizontalizing or sorting by relevant expressions, reduction of experiences to the invariant constituents, thematic clustering to create core themes, comparison of multiple data sources to validate the invariant constituents, crafting of individual textual descriptions of participants, construction of individual structural descriptions, construction of composite structural descriptions, and synthesis of the texture and structure into an expression (Moustakas 1994). No software was used, and each coder read the posts individually and noted what theme or themes the post referenced and what type of relationship the poster was seeking.

Each researcher reviewed the data collected independently and created their categories based on their interpretation of the analyzed data. Once this step was complete, the researchers worked together to review the data and categories to find similarities between the two researchers. Where there were differences, the data were discussed and further reviewed so a consensus could be found. The classifications agreed upon between coders were accepted, and questions of themes were discussed between coders along with justification for the themes identified.

The research team is composed of two members, both of which are white and multi-generational North Americans born in the USA. One of these members is

a straight cis-woman in the USA, and one is a bisexual cis-woman in the USA. No Lex users were contacted for the purpose of this study nor was a study-related post made on the app.

## Results

During collection, we kept 6817 screenshots that potentially matched our data requirements. Of these, we kept 1029 screenshots that met the criteria for inclusion of mentioning COVID-19 or quarantine and dating or meeting up for companionship. We divided these into categories of looking for a relationship, looking for a hookup, looking for both, and looking for neither. These categories were created by the coders and are not included in the app. We found eleven themes that are listed in Table 1.

Looking at the data by percentage, 42.57% were looking for a relationship, 40.43% were looking for a hookup, 8.65% were looking for both a relationship and/or a hookup, and 8.36% did not specify either a relationship or a hookup. The most common themes found were wanting to ignore guidelines (22.64%), wanting to communicate online only (21.67%), and wanting to meet in a socially distant manner (21.67%). The posts could include more than one category and all the categories mentioned in the posts are notated in our totals. This would include posts that discussed a negative test and wanting to ignore guidelines, although not all of the posts about negative tests also discussed ignoring guidelines.

**Table 1** Themes of posts reviewed

Themes of post	Relationship	Hook up	Both	Neither	Totals
Online meeting	123	76	10	14	223
In person distanced	135	49	20	19	223
Ignoring guidelines	36	162	26	9	233
Analog communication	8	0	1	2	11
2nd wave, resurgence, lower restrictions	4	6	3	0	13
Fresh negative test or antibodies	14	37	4	1	56
Loneliness	37	19	6	16	78
Isolation	7	2	0	4	13
Increased sex drive due to quarantine	11	30	8	2	51
Dating break up due to pandemic	8	1	1	7	17
Meet "when it's over" or "when it calms down"	28	9	4	1	42
No themes detected	27	25	6	11	69
Totals	438	416	89	86	1029

$n = 1029$

## Categories

Each post was placed into categories based on what the original poster was seeking, both logistically (online, in person) and emotionally (relationship, friend, casual).

### Online meetings

The posters that wanted to meet online in some capacity were combined into online meetings. Most of these posts wanted a relationship (123), and next highest number was those who wanted a hookup (76). Some seeking online meetings wanted both a relationship and a hook up (10), while others did not specify what type of meeting they preferred (14). All of the posts were looking for creative ways to have conversations or sexual encounters via the Internet. These types of meetings included Zoom, phone calls, and leaving it up to them to see what would work. These posts were from people concerned about catching COVID-19 and they were cautious. Some posts did mention they were interested in meeting once it is safe (42 total). This helped the online meeting seem more preliminary, leading to a face-to-face relationship when possible. For those who posted looking for relationships, the idea of how they could even accomplish a relationship was explored, from logistical issues to the idea of dating in a pandemic at all.

Sample post:

- What even is dating in the time of covid? (post)

### Face to face

The next category, with the same number of posts as the online category, was posts looking to meet face to face in a socially distanced way. These posts discussed online meetings as well, but finding creative ways to meet, talk, etc., while keeping COVID guidelines in place. COVID guidelines discussed included remaining 6 feet apart, wearing masks, using hand sanitizer, and meeting outside only. Most of these wanted a relationship (135), but some wanted a hook up (49). Of those wanting a hookup, they wanted to meet in person, maintaining a social distance in the beginning and maybe eventually finding ways to be physically close when it seemed there was potential for a hookup. Several people talked about wearing a mask while being physically intimate as a way to be COVID safe during this time. As with the online category, some wanted both a relationship and a hook up (20) and some specified neither (19) but wanted someone to meet up with and talk without specifying a type of relationship.

### Ignoring guidelines

Our third category that specified a meeting type was those who wanted to ignore the COVID guidelines completely for a variety of reasons. Those posts that were looking for a relationship (39) generally wanted to ignore guidelines because they felt that they lived isolated enough that someone else living isolated enough would



be okay and there would be little danger. Those who wanted to hookup (162) posted about ignoring what was going on because they were starved for human touch and wanted to connect with another person. The posts in this category that wanted both a relationship and hookup (26) discussed a hookup leading to a long-term relationship. Nine of these posts did not specify either type of meeting. Many posts mentioned disregarding recommendations from officials because their need for touch or a hook up was greater than their desire to stay safe.

Sample posts:

- ISO sleep partner. Have trouble sleeping alone? Me too. Let's get tea and see if we like each other. Genuinely just looking for someone to sleep next to me. I work from home and am practicing social distancing. (post)
- Let's distance-meet to see if our contact budgets and risk calculations align, and if we're hot for each other. If yes, I'll show you my maskless face if you show me yours. Non-monogs pre-COVID/willing to navigate now, but nothing is casual. Tell me about your attachment style. (post)

Many posts discussed ways to meet socially distanced, and some hinted at breaking that restriction if they both agree. The main idea in these posts seemed to be finding ways to interact safely.

Sample post:

- I've got lots of cute masks from my crafty sibling. Give me a reason to put them on and show them off. POC with a tender heart looking for others to tramp through the woods and spider webs for that breathtaking peak. Must be ok with good food and intense conversations. Down for chill times too. (post)

### Analog communication

An analog communication category was included for posts that wanted to write letters and mail them as a romantic way of communicating. All in this category wanted a relationship (8), except two who did not specify, and an additional post that wanted either a hookup or relationship. Although this was a small number of posts, it seems significant that people wanted to go back to simpler ways of communication. There was the idea that it would be romantic to communicate via handwritten letters and that going back to simpler times was indicative of what the shutdown was forcing everyone to do.

### Returning to normal

While data were being collected, there was thought that COVID would be contained and that we would be able to resume normal face-to-face activities sometimes later in the summer of 2020. This led to several posts discussing the number of cases declining and some areas of the country reducing restrictions. These posts included wanting to take advantage of these lowered restrictions before numbers went back up. Some of these posts discussed wanting a relationship (4), a hook up (6), or both a relationship and a hook up (3).

## Antibodies and face to face

With COVID testing came the idea that once recovered from COVID, there was no reinfection risk, and there was a group of posts that discussed receiving a negative test recently or recovering from COVID recently and having antibodies. Most of these posts wanted a hookup (37), some of these wanted a relationship (4), and some wanted both (4), with one post not specifying either (1). This idea of temporarily being safe and finding ways to reconnect with people was an interesting loophole in the COVID restrictions. It is worth noting that the data were recorded in June and July 2020, before it became common knowledge that reinfection was possible.

Sample post:

- I don't mean it.. Do i? Covid negative result, trans masc cancer, and bear bodied boi ISO covid neg result queer with no pod to text and maybe cuddle. No white folx (post)

## Loneliness and isolation

As with many dating apps, loneliness was a driver for many of the posts (78). This expressed loneliness because they lived alone or did not live with a group of people who understood them. Some of these posts were from people who lived with their family of origin and could not fully express themselves to those around them. These posts expressed ideas of wanting to connect with someone who understood them and had something in common with them. There were posts looking for a relationship (37), a hookup (19), or both a relationship and a hookup (6). The posts that did not specify either a relationship or a hookup (16) seemed to be crying out their loneliness because there was no other form of release available to them. Posts often showed desperation in trying to find ways to connect with others who understood them.

Sample post:

- Flirt with me. COVID sucks but I still want to feel special. Flirt with me and I'll flirt back.(post)

Along with loneliness, isolation was a separate category because these posts expressed a deeper sense of being completely alone (13). These were people who lived by themselves or truly believed they had no support from those around them. It seemed to go deeper than loneliness. Some of these posts wanted a relationship (7), some wanted a hook up (2), and some did not specify (4). As with loneliness, these posts felt like a cry out of frustration for being alone, when there didn't seem to be a change in the near future.

Sample posts:

- Quarantine is getting to me. Feeling numb, useless, longing, bored, zoned out, sad, angry, lonely, pick your poison and I'm probably feeling it (post)

- I'm (M, 19) really feeling the quarantine blues, if you're also a hopeless romantic then hit me up cuz I need to fall in love ASAP (post)

### Increased drive

The increased need for touch and for sexual satisfaction was expressed in the category increased drive (51). Those who are touch starved shared their frustration of being isolated, without being able to physically touch others.

Sample posts:

- Make out anyone? I'm not gonna lie... my love languages are physical touch and quality time. Both a bit more challenging to navigate these days... Anyone wanna pack a meal and hand outside, distanced, and maybe build to a make out? (post)
- Have mask, will travel. Lonely executive, early 40's, average build seeks femme or soft butch for drinks, the park and other fun things.;) She should be north of 45, intellectually curious, in good shape and financially independent. (post)
- Touch me on the hill irl. I need someone to touch. I need to be touched. If we're both safe in the rest of our lives the risk would be small. Love to trade non-sexual massage or just cuddle. A good vibe and consent is important so let's meet in public to make sure. I'm a queer two spirit born with an outy but open to all (post)

This group of posts seemed similar to loneliness and isolation, except explicit words like "horny," "touch starved," and "missing connection" were present. These posts seemed to be from people who needed physical touch in order to feel loved by others. Of these, the majority wanted hookup (30), some wanted either a relationship or a hookup (8), some wanted a relationship (11), and some did not specify (2).

### Inability to date or loss of relationship

In certain living situations, there were breakups due to the pandemic because people were not able to physically connect at this time. These posts talked about breaking up or not being able to date during the pandemic (17). Specific topics included losing out on situations that could have led to dating, breaking up with partners, or feeling like looking for dates/relationships was currently forbidden due to the pandemic.

### Post quarantine

There was a category of posts included in the "When things calm down" section. This category of posts discussed staying safe now (meeting online) and perhaps meeting in person when things "calm down." The online portion of their relationship was temporary until it was safe to meet face to face. Of the posts discussing this, some wanted a relationship (42), or a hookup (9), some wanted either a relationship or a hookup (4), and one did not specify.

Sample post:

- I will wander bookstores, sit in cafes, and soak up sunshine with a cute femme again. Oh, and travel the world. Just need a COVID-19 vaccine and a cute femme. (post)  
Other posts were specific in wanting to only meet online, perhaps meeting face to face when it was safe.

Sample post:

- Sweet homebody ginger bi (24) seeks online romance and relationship. Wanna blossom into something more after Covid-19? Me too. Come say hi? (post)

### No theme

There was a group of posts that were identified as having no themes (69). These discussed COVID and dating in some capacity without mentioning any themes like COVID tests, being lonely, or looking for meetings. These were posts just speaking to the void of a social networking site about their experiences with COVID and dating without asking for anything or seeking specific encounters. Of these, some wanted a relationship (27), some wanted a hookup (25), some wanted either a relationship or a hookup (6), and some specified neither (11). This category was included because the posts met the criteria of discussing COVID or the shut down, and mentioned dating, but didn't specify any other type of information that would fit into the established categories. The posts were varied enough that they were individual in the information included.

These also included posts by people angry about those going out and disregarding the guidelines (15). These posts were collected from people who did not want meetups to happen and were shaming those looking for relationships during the time of COVID-19 or explicitly stating that hookups should not be shamed due to the human need for touch. Some of these talked about how "we are all touch starved" and everyone wants to meetup but how it is not safe. They specifically talked about it not being worth the risk or respectful of those who needed to be safer. These posts were included in the data because they seemed to be hurtful and accusatory, showing that even in a safe environment, such as Lex, there is judgment for what is posted at times. Those making comments like this could be influenced by the impact of the AIDS crisis on the LGBTQ+ community. AIDS is still influential in the community to this day due to what is often described as an entire generation of LGBTQ+ being lost (Nagel 2020).

### Discussion

This culmination of data demonstrates a real need for connection from this group of people to others like themselves, a need for communication that can be seen in all populations but especially populations experiencing stigma (Sprott and Hadcock 2018). The posts on Lex showed that those using the app could be in a household with other family members and still feel incredibly lonely and isolated. Some

posts specifically mentioned feeling lonely or isolated even in a home with other people. The LGBTQ+ community has always been creative in finding ways to meet and connect, often by necessity. The pandemic has changed how everyone is able to connect, and the posts have shown distress related to the increased difficulty of connection.

Posts often showed desperation in trying to find ways to connect with others who understood them. They discussed frustrations about quarantine, and the problems of feeling isolated and touch starved while being unable to physically connect. Likely as a result of the frustration and isolation, many posts mentioned disregarding recommendations from officials asking for in person meetings or hookups.

Some posts mentioned a negative COVID-19 test or antibodies and asked about meeting up in person. Since this was early in the summer 2020, cases of reinfection were not apparent and people thought that exposure to COVID-19 after having been infected would be safe, though scientists now know this is not accurate. With the increased number of variants of COVID-19, there is even less likelihood of being safe from a prior infection or from a vaccination. None of the posts mentioned being vaccinated because this was not an option at the time we gathered information. Our data come from a time when little was known about the long-term effects of infection and there were no variants of the virus for our posts to consider.

There was a juxtaposition between posts advocating for meeting up, precautions or no, and many posts condemning anyone looking to meet in person during the pandemic. The overwhelming number of posts related to COVID-19 during the time period of collection discussed wanting to meet (digitally, in person, or at a later date), isolation, and loneliness being the biggest topics of conversation. The community on Lex was reaching out in all the ways they could for human connection. The data shows that the people posting wanted basic human connection and many were not sure of how to do this safely. These posts were during a time of uncertainty for everyone, but especially for the queer community that has the need to be cautious because of public and societal stigmas, as well as prejudices from individual people. The posts were trying to find an emotionally safe connection to others like them when many could not even connect to the people in their own homes because of the risk of being ostracized for who they are.

As expected, the posts looking for a hookup more than a relationship mentioned meeting physically and ignoring guidelines at a higher percentage than posts looking for relationships. This emphasized how the more touch-starved posts were looking for ways to be touched. The recommendation for safety was unimportant compared to the need for physical touch for them. A slightly concerning fifth of all posts discussed ignoring guidelines of some sort, on top of another fifth of posts asking to meet in person with some social distancing such as meeting outside or specifically with masks. This really speaks to the need humans have for physical touch and acceptance. The queer population has less acceptance overall and are part of a marginalized population. The risk of COVID-19 from disregarding guidelines could be easily minimized with the opportunity to engage in touching to fill the physical need for closeness.

This lack of safety precautions spurred posts shaming those who were looking for physical touch with a frustration expressed in these posts that can also be seen

in the loneliness and isolation posts. The shaming posts also expressed a need to be with others, but they were tied by rule following behavior more than the ones who wanted to take risks and find ways to be touched in the current situation. This is an interesting look into the two sides of the argument that has roots both in the human need for touch and the trauma in the LGBTQ+ community suffered through the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and early 1990s. The AIDS crisis resulted in what many describe as the loss of an entire generation of LGBTQ+ people (Nagel 2020). Additionally, HIV-AIDS might be on many people's minds in the community due to the impact HIV-AIDS might have on a patient with COVID-19 and their recovery, an impact that is mostly unknown but seems to be negative based on early research (Collins 2020).

The posts not looking for either a relationship or a hookup had the highest mentions of loneliness and isolation. Overall loneliness and isolation were huge complaints for the posts, with almost one out of every ten posts commenting on either loneliness or isolation. Feeling lonely and isolated is not unique to the queer community during this pandemic, and neither is trying to find connection despite the pandemic. People have been creative in ways to feel connected and this app showed some of the creativity using zoom, phone calls, texts, game nights, etc., in order to ease the loneliness and increase the sense of connection. Voicing feelings can help with connection and these posts emphasizing loneliness and isolation served to voice the feelings and find connections with other app users. Historically the queer community has used one another for social support due to lack of acceptance and ostracization from the heteronormative society (Balogh 2015).

Some limitations of this research include anonymity since we were unable to follow up on any of the posts. Some of the posts had nuances that would be interesting to explore. The app does not provide personal information so no further contact was possible. Additionally, this research is limited by only collecting data from users who post on an app that not every LGBTQ+ person uses. There was no way to access what is discussed in private messages and not every LGBTQ+ person will use Lex, and therefore not all opinions and thoughts could be recorded. Lex itself is an app meant for "womxn and trans, genderqueer, intersex, two spirit, and non-binary people for meeting lovers and friends," and is specifically not meant for cis-gender men, which means their perspective is not represented in the current research (<https://thisislex.app>). Finally, Lex is a text-based app leading to a limitation in the information gathered because pictures, videos, and comments are not included. Lex limits characters and no comment option is available, creating limitations in the communication on the app and the research based on that communication.

There are implications for the research that could be wide reaching. Understanding isolation during the pandemic is essential and can inform future treatments and research. Additionally, studying the LGBTQ+ community, which is historically misunderstood and underrepresented, may improve future therapeutic interventions for those in the community. A huge implication of this data collection is the fact that the population never stopped trying to find human connection, either within the bounds of the pandemic or through disregarding safety measures. Knowing the importance of connection within the queer community can help therapists realize that part of their work could be creatively collaborating

with their LGBTQ+ clients on ways to find others who can form communities. Kinship families are helpful when biological families are not available to their clients.

This research could be repeated after a few years if the COVID-19 pandemic is still a factor in day-to-day life to see how the population is adjusting to vaccines, lower restrictions, and variants to the virus. Another research opportunity would be to look at online counseling and see if the queer community was able to use the surge in telehealth options to find connection and help from a therapist, although finding queer friendly therapists is another limitation to getting mental health for this population.

In conclusion, the research found that people who identified as queer and used the Lex app during the summer of 2020 were creative in finding ways to connect. Not all of their ideas were agreed upon by other users of this app, but they were able to post these ideas and express their need for connection. The need for physical touch and other forms of connection were evident, and the reflex was to reach out to others like them by using this established text-based app. As researchers look back to the early part of the pandemic when accurate information was still not available, this collection of data creates a time capsule of posts from a community of people doing the best that they could to keep hold of each other.

**Author contributions** Both authors contributed equally in research, data collection, data analysis, and writing. Dr. Powell developed the methodology and publication information.

**Funding** No funding, grants, or other support was received.

**Data availability** All data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the authors on reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval** We completed the research under an IRB # #20-065 issued by Abilene Christian University, following all relevant guidelines and regulations.

**Informed consent** Since this research was completed on publicly submitted posts on an open dating app, no consent was required or asked for and there was no identifying information.

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