

Sexual exclusivity

The extent of overlapping sexual partnerships is central to the spread of sexually transmitted infections, and is consequently important for HIV among gay and bisexual men. Here we use sexual exclusivity to mean repeated sex with one partner only. Sexual non-exclusivity can include men with multiple regular partnerships and men with a singular regular partner and additional casual partners either independently or together. This Insight Blast reports on responses to questions about sexual exclusivity asked in Month 8 of the Sigma Panel, sent on 1st September 2011.

1. Prevalence of steady relationships across demographic groups

Overall **48.0%** said they were currently in a steady relationship with a man, including 43.9% in a relationship with one man and 4.1% in concurrent relationships with more than one man (N=1411, missing 3). Among the 52.0% who were not in a current steady relationship with a man (n=733), 25.8% had *never* had a steady relationship with a man and 74.2% had been. This meant that overall, 13.4% of Panel members had never been in a steady relationship with a man.

Overall **4.4%** said they were currently in a steady relationship with a woman, including 4.0% in a relationship with one woman and 0.4% in concurrent relationships with more than one woman (N=1409, missing 5). Among the 95.6% not currently in a steady relationship with a woman, 64.6% had *never* been in a steady relationship with a woman and 35.4% had been. This meant that, overall, 61.8% of Panel members had never been in a steady relationship with a woman.

Age Although the likelihood of having a steady relationship with a man appeared to rise and then fall across the age range, the average ages of men with and without a steady male partner did not vary. However, among men with a steady partner having multiple steady partners was strongly associated with older age. The likelihood of having a steady relationship with a woman increased with age and men with a regular female partner were, as a group, older than those without a regular female partner.

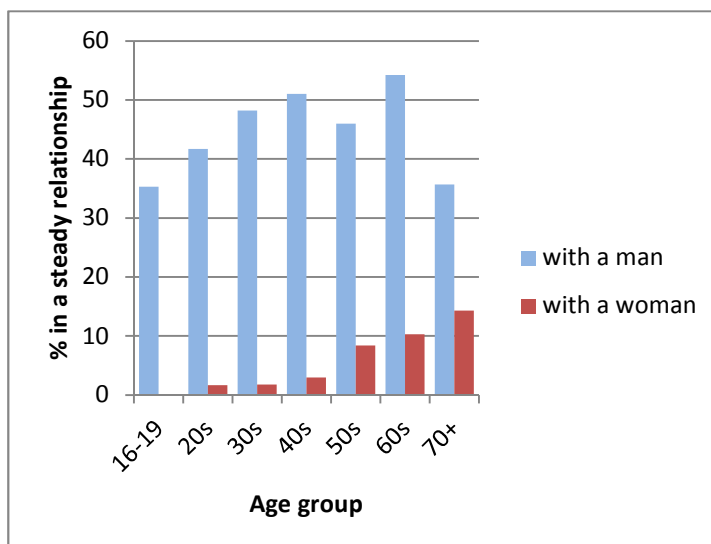


Figure 1: Prevalence of steady relationships by age.

Area of residence was not associated with having a steady relationship with a man but was associated with steady relationships with women. It was least common in the West Midlands (0%, 0/89), London (1.5%, 7/472) and the South East Coast (2.2%, 3/137) and was most common in East Midlands 7.3%, 6/82), East of England (9.5%, 9/95) and Yorkshire & Humber (11.4%, 10/88).

Ethnicity was not associated with having a steady relationship with a man but was associated with having a steady relationship with a woman. All of the men with a regular female partner were White

– none of the 75 Black and other minority ethnic group members who took part in Month 8 of the Panel was in a steady relationship with a woman. So contrary to other surveys (where behavioural bisexuality is usually associated with ethnic minority status), having a female partner was strongly associated with being White. This association was significant after controlling for age and residence. **Education** was not associated with steady relationships with either men or women.

2. Association with sexual happiness

Men were also asked *On a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is the most unhappy and 10 is the most happy), how happy are you with your sex life?* The chart shows the proportion giving each response.

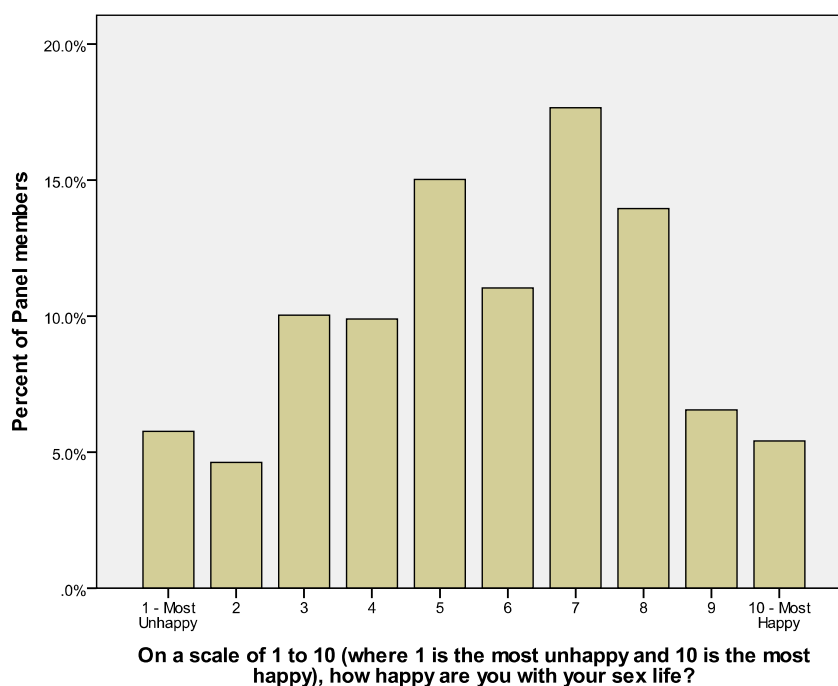


Figure 2: How happy are you with your sex life?

The overall mean score was 5.75 (standard deviation 2.4, median 6). So the average score for the group was almost exactly half-way up the scale (the half-way point is 5.5).

Men with a steady relationships rated themselves as significantly more happy with their sex life (mean 6.6, sd=2.2, median 7) than men not in a steady relationship (mean 5.0, sd=2.3, median 5). However, among men with a steady relationship having more than one did not increase or decrease sexual happiness. Men with and without a steady relationship with a woman did not rate their sexual happiness as significantly different and, among men with a steady relationship with a woman, multiple female partnerships did not appear to increase or decrease sexual happiness.

As shown in the table below, men who rated their sexual happiness as highest were the small group (n=14) in steady relationships with both men and women, followed by those with a male partner/s, those with a female partner, and those with no partner rating their sexual happiness the lowest.

Sexual happiness scores by steady partner status	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Range
No steady partner	679	4.9	2.27	5.0	1-10
Female steady only	47	5.9	2.12	6.0	1-10
Male steady only	656	6.6	2.24	7.0	1-10
Both male and female steady	14	6.6	2.10	7.5	3-9

INSIGHT: A steady sexual partner is a strong predictor of sexual happiness.

3. Duration of steady relationships with men

Men were asked “How many years have you been in a steady relationship with this man?” If they were in more than one steady relationship they were asked “Thinking about the man you have been in a steady relationship with for the longest period of time, how many years have you been in this steady relationship?” the following chart shows the distribution of length of relationships.



Figure 3: Duration of steady relationships with men.

Among men in a steady relationship, 16.9% had been in their relationship under 1 year and 6.1% had been in their steady relationship for over 25 years. The median length of relationship was 5 years and a quarter of men had been in the relationship 13 years or more. The large number of men in relationships of under one year duration suggests that starting and ending steady relationships within a 12 month period is common.

Men who had more than one partner had been in their primary relationship on average longer (median 9 years) than those with only one steady partner (median 6 years). This supports the common observation that gay relationships are more likely to become sexually open with increasing duration.

The chart below shows the average sexual happiness score for relationships of increasing length. Scores of sexual happiness were highest for men in the first year of a steady relationship, after which the average score dropped with increasing relationship length until about 20 years of relationship, when it appears to turn up again. However, the mean sexual happiness score never drops below 5.0, the average score for men who were single.

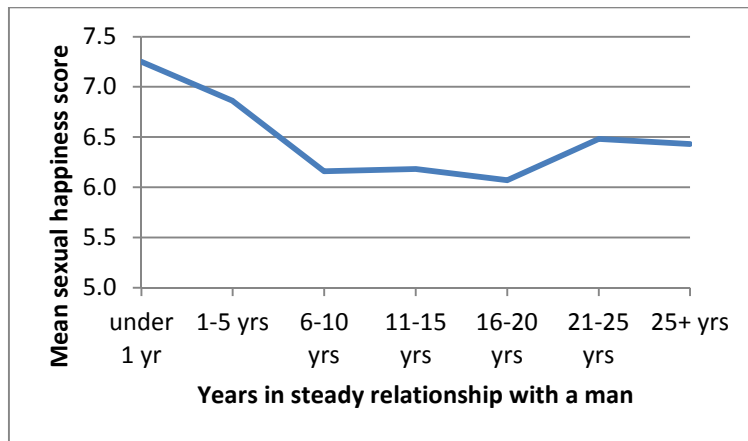


Figure 4: Current happiness with sex life by duration of steady relationship with a man.

INSIGHT: There is a high turn-over of new regular partnerships that last a relatively short time but during which men are likely to be very happy with their sex life – this provides a strong impetus to found new relationships.

4. Monogamy orientation

Men were told: “By 'sexually exclusive' we mean couples who only have sex with one another. Some people call this monogamy” and were then asked “How do you feel about a sexually exclusive relationship?” They were offered the following five responses: *I'm in one now and am happy to be;* *I'm in one now but wish I was not;* *I'm not in a sexually exclusive relationship but would like to be;* *I'm not in a sexually exclusive relationship and do not want to be;* *Other answer.* The following chart shows the proportion of men giving each response.

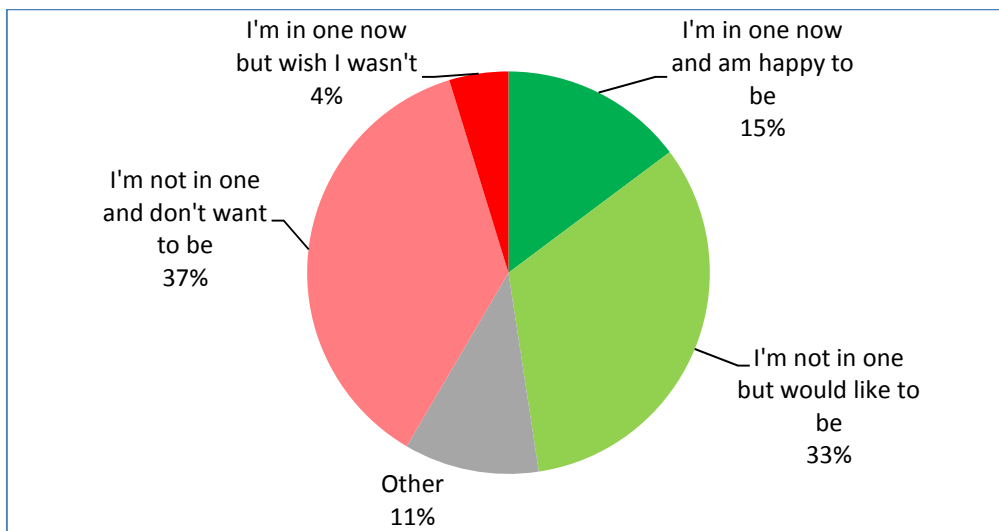


Figure 5: How do you feel about a sexually exclusive relationship?

Overall, only 19% indicated they were currently in monogamous relationship. However, 48% of Panel members expressed a preference for a monogamous relationship, of which only a third were currently in a monogamous relationship. Fewer men, 41%, indicated they did *not* want a monogamous relationship, although 10% of these men were in monogamous relationships they were unhappy with.

Other answers were varied and included: the kind of relationship I wanted would depend on the partner; not wanting a relationship at the moment but wanting an exclusive relationship if one

occurred; wanting a relationship and exclusivity not being a deal breaker; currently enjoying celibacy; in a happy duo-gamy; not knowing what kind of relationship I want; being unsure whether I want my current relationship to be exclusive; happily in a mostly exclusive relationship but having threesomes occasionally; unhappily in an exclusive relationship I wish was better rather than non-exclusive; not wanting to be in an exclusive relationship currently but will want to be in the future; in relationship that is negotiated exclusive but one or both of us 'plays away'.

INSIGHT: Sexual exclusivity (monogamy) is the preferred sexual lifestyle of many more men than follow it.

The following table shows the profile for sexual happiness scores according to men's orientation to a sexually exclusive relationship, which varied significantly ($F=73.02$, $df=4$, $p<.001$).

Sexual happiness scores by orientation to a sexually exclusive relationship	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Range
In one now and am happy to be	208	7.39	2.19	8	1-10
Not in one and do not want to be	518	6.25	2.12	7	1-10
<i>Other answer</i>	<i>146</i>	<i>5.73</i>	<i>2.45</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>1-10</i>
In one now but wish I was not	67	5.01	2.06	5	1-8
Not in one but would like to be	459	4.54	2.19	5	1-10

Men who were happily in a sexually exclusive relationship were most likely to report they were happy with their sex life and, as a group, were more likely to be happy with their sex life than men not in a sexually exclusive relationship and who did not want to be.

However, men in sexually exclusive relationship who did not want to be in them were least likely to be happy with their sex lives. So monogamy is not a sure fire-route to sexual happiness. However, if happiness partly consists of matching desires and values to lifestyles, it appears many more men would prefer to be in sexually exclusive relationships than are currently in one, and that more normative support could be provided for them.

5. Benefits and costs of monogamy

Men were asked two open-ended questions: *From your perspective, what are the advantages (or benefits) of being sexually exclusive with one person?* and *Again from your perspective, what are the disadvantages (or costs) of being sexually exclusive with one person?*

Some men mentioned benefits of having a steady partner rather than not having a steady partner, such as sex getting better over time as partners explore, experiment and learn together. Others specifically mentioned benefits of co-habitation such as companionship (company, someone to sleep with; someone to come home too) having a better standard of living (with two incomes) and having someone else to walk the dog, or potential cost of co-habiting in loss of housing benefit. However, all of these benefits and costs can also be pertinent to sexually open-relationships. Figure 6 below summarises the benefits and costs men perceived in choosing exclusivity or non-exclusivity, if they had a steady sexual partner.

Figure 6: Perceived benefits and costs of sexual exclusivity versus also having sex with others, if we have a steady sexual partner, the Sigma Panel Month 8.

	Being sexually exclusive	Also having sex with others
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of being special (fosters love, trust, intimacy, respect, commitment). • Feelings of stability and security; more reliant on each other; less likely to feel jealous (insecure). • The feeling of being loved and that you are fully satisfying your partner in every way. • Stronger friendship and sense of familiarity (deeper knowledge of likes and dislikes). • Sex more intense (intimate, private) as you are the exclusive focus of someone's sexual attention. • Can have more sex without having to hunt for it; can avoid the gay commercial scene as no need to search for sexual partners; can avoid “wasted hours” looking for sex online (and no shows). • Less risk of exposure to STIs via partner. • Unprotected anal intercourse is safer. • Simpler - less complicated to manage than an open relationship (disclosure <i>etc</i>). • More stable home life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual variety (more novelty, excitement, energy). • More frequent sex (especially if partner wants sex less often than me). • Maintains sexual interest in partner. • Meets sexual needs not met by partner, and creates less pressure to provide total fulfilment for another person. • Gain excitement associated with meeting new partners. • Less potential for deceit, dishonesty and guilt. • Less potential for jealousy and possessiveness (envy, mistrust). • Less fear of separation and loss; less loneliness and unhappiness if (when) it ends. • Less likely to have a false sense of security in sexual health. • Less of a sense of conformity to a heterosexual norm (unnatural); • Less likely to be judged as boring by others. • Less likely to feel excluded from gay society. • Meet new people – increases networks.
Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased risk of sexual boredom (routine, dull, monotony, repetition, sexual lethargy). • Risk of less frequent sex. • Risk of boredom with same sexual partner. • Risk having sexual needs a partner might not want or be able to meet. • Loss of excitement at meeting new partners. • More potential for deceit, dishonesty and guilt. • More potential for jealousy and possessiveness (envy, mistrust). • Greater fear of separation and loss; more loneliness and unhappiness if (when) it ends. • A false sense of security in sexual health. • A sense of conformity to a heterosexual norm (unnatural). • Being judged as boring by others. • Feeling excluded from gay society. • Becoming socially insular. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship feels less special (less likely to foster love, trust, intimacy, respect, commitment). • Feelings of instability, insecurity and jealousy. • Feeling you do not satisfy your partner sexually. • Sense of distance (deeper knowledge of likes and dislikes). • Sex less intense, less intimate or private: wondering what he’s done with others. • Still have to find other sexual partners: having to use the gay commercial scene to search for sexual partners; “wasted hours” looking for sex online (and no shows). • More risk of exposure to STIs via steady partner (if he’s also having sex with others), and other partners. • Unprotected anal intercourse with steady partners is less safe. • Complicated to manage an open relationship (disclosure <i>etc</i>). • Less stable home life.

The benefits of sexual exclusivity were broad ranging but centred on the quality of the primary relationship being different when both partners are having sex only with each other. This included both benefits to the quality of the sex itself (increasing in intensity and being tailored to desires) and to the strength and character of close emotional feelings, especially their reciprocity. Positive social

marketing of sexual exclusivity could raise awareness and desirability of these outcomes. The other benefits were primarily the absence of the costs of also having other sexual partners: fewer STI risks, less emotional and logistical complications, and no time spent seeking new partners (see Insight Blast 2 for further detail on the costs associated with new sexual partners). Negative social marketing of sexual exclusivity could utilise these outcomes.

INSIGHT: Social marketing to promote sexual exclusivity among gay and bisexual men could stress the increased quality of sexual lives.

In terms of what men are giving up when choosing exclusivity, the more commonly cited potential costs were unfulfilled sexual desires (if some aspects do not match the partner's) and increasing boredom with only having sex with the same partner. Men gain more new sexual partners than simply sexual relief and being sexually exclusive may mean foregoing some of these benefits. Extending sexual networks, the thrill of an attractive man finding you attractive, and confirmation of 'gay' credibility were all cited. Some men felt that agreeing to a monogamous relationship actually fosters negative qualities of possession and dependency in the relationship, and that it would not ensure they did not have sex with other men, therefore being more likely to lead to deceit.

INSIGHT: Social marketing to promote sexual exclusivity among gay and bisexual men could attempt to mitigate the perceived social 'irregularity' of gay monogamy.

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