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Exploring Dating App Intimacies During COVID-19 in the UK: A Protocol for a Mixed-Methods Study on the Impact of Dating Apps on Intimacy, Resilience, and Wellbeing [ES/W002426/I]

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ijqJaime Garcia-Iglesias¹ , Brian Heaphy² , and Neta Yodovich²

Abstract

This protocol outlines a mixed-methods study to explore the dynamics of intimacy on dating apps before, during and after the crisis years of COVID-19 in the UK; how these influenced/were influenced by different gendered and sexual cultures of relating; and their impact on personal resilience, viral risk, and wellbeing. The project examines diverse gendered and sexual cultures, examining the experiences of heterosexuals and LGBT+ communities. Through a two-stage approach involving a UK-wide quantitative survey and in-depth qualitative interviews, the study explores how dating app practices influence resilience, viral risk, and intimate norms. The project aims to generate knowledge about how app-based services can be harnessed to support the social and emotional needs of diverse gendered and sexual groups during and after COVID-19 providing valuable insights into strategies for personal resilience in the face of viral risk and social distancing during periods of social distancing.

Keywords

COVID-19, intimacy, dating apps, mixed-methods, risk

Introduction

Lockdowns and social distance regulations in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic implied major changes in social norms and inter-personal interactions, exacerbating pre-existing social and health inequalities (Bowleg, 2020; Garcia Iglesias et al., 2024). In fact, changes in people's practices of intimacy were so profound that Spanish philosopher Paul B. Preciado wrote that the virus compelled us to think "under what conditions and in which ways is life worth living?" (Preciado, 2020).

In the UK, the impact of COVID-19 has been socially, culturally and economically profound, which has led some to refer to the period since 2020 as 'the COVID decade' (The British Academy, 2021), and the extended periods of lockdown and social distance between March 2020 and December 2021 have had and still have significant impacts on people's day-to-day lives (Institute for Government, 2022).

This period also saw an acceleration of the already-growing use of dating apps, which became key conduits for the development of digital connections and virtual intimacies (Duguay et al., 2022; Gibson, 2021; Lopes et al., 2020; Portolan & McAlister, 2022). In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, dating apps reported historically high figures in usage (Meisenzahl, 2020; Shaw, 2020) which solidified their position as tools through which new possibilities for relating and social connections developed (Race, 2015).

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Background

As sociologists with an interest on the changing patterns of LGBT+ and heterosexual intimate relationships, the impact of intimate relations on healthcare decision-making, and the social impacts of COVID-19 (García-Iglesias, 2022; García-Iglesias et al., 2023b; Heaphy, 2007; Heaphy et al., 2013), we were interested in how the COVID-19 period, as it coincided with the rise of dating apps, might become a moment of transformation for practices of intimacy and that these, in turn, might have significant impacts on people's resilience (that is, their capacity to adapt and thrive in adverse contexts) with respect to the risks of social isolation, loneliness and diminished well-being associated with pandemic (Goldbach et al., 2021; Hyndman et al., 2021). We understood that these changes would not be evenly spread throughout society but, rather, that their negative impacts would disproportionately affect already marginalized groups (Hawke et al., 2021; Potter et al., 2021; Solomon et al., 2021).

Based on these interests, we developed the project "Covid intimacies: Resilience and viral safety among LGBT and heterosexual people using dating apps in the COVID-19 era," which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [ES/W002426/1]. Our goal was to explore the dynamics of intimacy on dating apps before, during and after the crisis years of COVID-19 in the UK; how these influenced/were influenced by different gendered and sexual cultures of relating; and their impact on personal resilience, viral risk, and wellbeing. In doing so, the project also established a link with existing long-standing interests in sociology of intimacy (Dean, 2009; Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 2013; Plummer, 2003; Weeks, 1986; Weeks et al., 2001). This project defines intimacy broadly, as emotional or physical closeness. Intimacy can involve couple, family, and friendship relationships, both sexual and otherwise, that imply a strong sense of emotional or physical closeness that does not require co-presence (Forstie, 2017). Further to this, we also considered that sexuality would be a relevant axis of comparison for this project, as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual (LGBT+) communities have, in comparison with heterosexual counterparts, distinct histories and socio-cultural practices of intimacy (Blasius, 1994; Weeks et al., 2001).

We understood that dating apps were a particularly interesting entry-point to understanding changes to intimacy and their impacts on resilience during COVID-19 due to both their wide-spread use and, most importantly, the potential they offer for forming social connections and intimacy during times, such as COVID-19, of social distancing. Dating apps are mobile applications designed to facilitate social connections characterized by their use of geolocation to identify potential partners, a feature which blurs the online-offline boundary (Koch & Miles, 2020; Veel & Thylstrup, 2018). According to Gibson, dating apps offer "new forms of intimacy and affective connection" (2021), but that can also have a dark side linked to romance scams, symbolic violence and

discrimination, and can have negative effects of a positive sense of self and well-being (Conner, 2023; Lauckner et al., 2019; Li & Chen, 2021). Well-known examples of dating apps include Tinder, Grindr, and Plenty of Fish, and dating apps have been given in-depth scholarly attention in recent years (Bandinelli, 2022; Chan, 2017; Duguay, 2016; Hobbs et al., 2016).

Our goal with this project was to generate knowledge about how app-based services can be harnessed to support the social and emotional needs of diverse gendered and sexual groups during and after COVID-19. We understood that the knowledge generated would be specific to the COVID-19 context and the UK setting, but we hope it will provide valuable insights into strategies for personal resilience in the face of viral risk and social distancing more generally.

Study Aims and Research Questions

Based on the considerations above, we developed five specific research questions:

- a) How does sexuality, as it interlinks with gender, shape the experiences of dating apps as a route to improved or diminished personal resilience and viral safety during the COVID-19 period?
- b) What established and new practices of intimacy emerge as significant in dating app use during and after social distancing and lockdowns, and how do they promote or diminish personal resilience and viral risk amongst LGBT and heterosexual people in distinctive and/or common ways?
- c) How are LGBT and heterosexually gendered experiences of dating app use during and after social distance linked to socio-economic factors (e.g. personal finances, geography, generation and race/ethnicity)?
- d) What 'new' practices and norms of intimacy emerged in dating apps use during COVID-19 and how likely are they to be (or not) carried over to post-COVID-19 contexts?
- e) How can the findings of the study inform sexual and public health communities' strategies to support virtual intimacies as a resource for personal resilience in the context of social distance and heightened viral risk?

Materials and Methods

Research Design

To answer these research questions, we developed an approach which combined both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather both the "meanings, views and experiences" of participants (Pope & Mays, 1995, p. 43) while also remaining attentive to the "interrelationships between cultural, social and economic resources" and how they influence people's lives (Heaphy, 2007, p. 21). The first stage of the

project was comprised of a UK-wide quantitative survey. The second stage involved semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews. Across both stages we sought to address the three main areas of interest of the project (dating app use, practices of intimacy, and resilience and viral risk) while also collecting relevant information about respondents' demographic and socio-economic backgrounds.

Stage 1: Quantitative Survey

Participant Recruitment. For the survey, we decided to secure a non-probability sample using pre-established response panels (DYANATA), accessed through a third-party survey distributor (MEL Research). MEL Research is a UK-based company that seeks to “work collaboratively and in partnership with [...] clients to deliver clear insights and solutions” for positive change and work extensively with government, third-sector and universities (MEL Research). Involving a survey company and pre-established response panels allowed us to request a sample which roughly matched the UK 2021 Census regarding distribution of gender (male, female), ethnicity, and age, but that oversampled LGBTQ+ respondents to facilitate potential subgroup analysis (which had been underrepresented in previous research) (Lehmiller et al., 2020; Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021; Williams et al., 2021). The sample could not be representative because of weighting in terms of sexual identity, but also because the population of LGBTQ+ people is not well known. Survey inclusion criteria were that respondents must be adults (aged 18 years-old or older), have lived primarily in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020–July 2021), and have used dating apps (regardless of frequency) in that same period. Exclusion criteria were: being underage, a vulnerable adult, unable to communicate in English (orally and in writing) and/or unable to provide informed consent. The survey was open for responses between January 9th, 2023, and February 10th, 2023, and obtained 824 responses. In accordance with the survey panel provider, a dynamic reward for completion was set ranging between 50 pence and £1 per survey.

Survey Design. We designed the survey questions in collaboration with both the members of an Advisory Board (which included a mixture of quantitative and qualitative experts from health, sociology, media, and community organisations) and researchers from MEL Research. Whenever possible, we followed ONS harmonization guidelines to align our questions with the UK 2021 Census (Office for National Statistics, 2021). More generally, we developed our questions considering previous surveys on dating app use (Anderson et al., 2020; Hamard et al., 2017; Pew Research Center, 2019; Rice, 2012; Zervoulis et al., 2019) and on experiences of COVID-19 (Studies, Centre for Longitudinal, 2020). It is worth noting that the survey was administered in early 2023 (that is, roughly after COVID-19 restrictions) but some questions required retrospective responses about the time before and during

COVID-19 (before March 2020, and between March 2020 and June 2021).

In short, the survey comprised of the following sections (see [supplemental material](#) for full survey script):

- A. Screening questions based on predetermined criteria,
- B. A detailed participant information sheet and consent form,
- C. About you: sex and gender, sexuality, ethnicity, residency,
- D. Health and wellbeing: disability, shielding, HIV status,
- E. Dating app use:
 - a. Before: frequency and motivations of use.
 - b. During: frequency and motivation, satisfaction of use, intensity of use, number of connections, payment, COVID-19 precautions, most frequently-used apps.
 - c. After: frequency and motivations of use.
- F. Mpox and discrimination
- G. Loneliness: The three-item loneliness scale (Hughes et al., 2004) related to before, during and after COVID-19.
- H. Resilience and adaptability: The International Adjustment Disorder Questionnaire (Shevlin et al., 2020) and the Brief Resilience Score (Smith et al., 2008).
- I. Household and finances: household and employment finances, changes in finances during COVID-19

The survey concluded by offering respondents the possibility of registering their interest to take part in an interview, a thank you note, and a list of resources around relationships and mental health for respondents to follow up if they wished.

In deciding the questions to be included in the survey, we aimed to capture a range of outcomes related to dating apps, intimacy and resilience in relation to COVID-19, emphasizing the comparison between LGBTQ+ and heterosexual respondents while recognizing the complex diversity that exists within these groups. To do this, we included questions to capture quantitative and qualitative changes to dating app use (such as frequency of app use or people's satisfaction with apps), information related to resilience, loneliness, and wellbeing, as well as other protective and risk factors (such as experiences of discrimination), and factors that might have influenced people's experiences of COVID-19 (such as disability). We also included questions that would allow us to situate results within socio-economic backgrounds and trends (such as employment, house ownership, or postcode to associate with the indices of deprivation). It is worth mentioning that we added a number of items in response to the mpox outbreak happening in the UK at the time of survey distribution (Garcia-Iglesias et al. 2023a; U. K. Health Security Agency, 2022).

Analysis. Anonymized survey results were generated by MEL Research and are being analyzed by the research team using

SPSS and R. Data analysis was descriptive and inferential to explore changes in dating app patterns of use across the three time points (before, during and after COVID-19) and how they are linked to different demographic and socio-economic groups; risk and protective factors for loneliness, resilience, and adjustment; characteristics (e.g. age, sexuality, gender) associated with different motivations for using dating apps and levels of satisfaction. Whenever possible, we analyze differences and commonalities by forming subgroups along gender and sexual orientation lines. We analyze the survey results in conjunction with qualitative data to develop our interpretations and to theorise, not least because as a self-selecting non-probability sample, the quantitative aspect of the study needs to be seen as experimental. Results and comparison outside the dataset cannot be seen as representative or generalizable.

Stage 2: Qualitative Interviews

Participant Recruitment. We recruited participants for the interviews through several channels to maximize potential diversity among the sample. These were:

- a. Upon completion of the survey, respondents were offered the option of registering their interest in being interviewed in exchange for additional compensation.
- b. Calls for participants were posted on social media, including in the accounts of the research project, research team members' and research group accounts, and retweeted by numerous community organizations and members of the public.
- c. Additionally, a number of community organizations were approached and asked to distribute the call for participants, both through their internal mailing lists and their own social media. A list of the community organisations who contributed to recruitment can be found in the acknowledgements.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were the same as for the survey. We provided potential participants (or, in the case of survey respondents by MEL Research on behalf of the research team) with a link to a GDPR-compliant online form in QualtricsXM that included:

- a. Participant information sheet and consent form (specific to the interview),
- b. Name and contact information, including preferred contact method,
- c. Age, sex, trans-status, sexual orientation, ethnicity, first part of postcode, disability,
- d. The UCLA three-item loneliness scale (plus a direct question about loneliness) asked both at the time of registration (early 2023) and retrospectively (before COVID-19 and during COVID-19) (Hughes et al., 2004).

- e. A modified version of the International Adjustment Disorder Questionnaire (as in the survey) (Shevlin et al., 2020).
- f. The Brief resilience scale (Smith et al., 2008).
- g. A question about income and financial comfort before COVID-19 and changes to this during COVID-19, as in the survey.

Participants who had already completed the survey would only be presented with questions from sections A and B. Upon completion, a member of the research team would contact participants to arrange an interview. As a token of gratitude for their time and to cover expenses, participants were provided with a £20 Amazon electronic shopping voucher, issued by the University within two weeks of the interview being completed. Interviews with 53 participants were conducted between May and November 2023. Participants included 22 women, 28 men (two of which were trans), 2 non-binary and one trans with undisclosed gender. Twenty-four interviewees identified as heterosexual and 29 identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Most interviewees were white (43), while others were Black, Asian or mixed. The average age of the interviewees was 40, with the youngest being 20 years old and the oldest, 74.

Interview Design. We designed the interviews to be in-depth and semi-structured (Legard et al., 2003; Schmidt, 2004), meaning that we sought to focus on several thematic areas but that, overall, interviews were flexible enough to allow for participants' own interests and experiences to arise. In doing so, we hoped that interviews would allow us to collect "depth, complexity and roundness in data, rather than [...] broad surface patterns" (Mason, 2002, p. 65). This approach has been used effectively in a large of previous studies around intimacy and sexuality both generally (Huysamen, 2022; Paasonen et al., 2023; Twamley, 2018) and by the research team (Garcia Iglesias, 2021; Garcia-Iglesias, 2020; Heaphy et al., 1998). Interviews allowed for the generation of data about the flux and flow of dating app use, the meanings and practices attached to virtual intimacies, and of COVID-19. We provide the interview guide as [supplemental material](#). The interview guide included the following sections:

- A. About you: demographic information and an opening question 'tell me a bit about yourself'—which allowed participants to emphasize preferred aspects of their identity.
- B. Dating apps use before COVID-19: motivations, app usage and changes in use and motivations throughout time.
- C. COVID-19: living arrangements, mental and physical health.
- D. Dating apps during COVID-19: motivations and frequency use.

- E. Dating apps use after COVID-19: changes in usage and motivations and health behaviours.
- F. Conclusion: questions eliciting general views about daring apps and intimacy.

Interviews were conducted solely using Zoom and Teams as a video-conference platforms, as this allowed flexibility for the research team and participants around scheduling while remaining useful data-collection tools (Deakin & Kelley, 2013; Hanna, 2012; Seitz, 2015). Interviews were audio-recorded. The automatic transcript generated by Zoom and Teams was used as a basis for the research team to transcribe the interviews. Transcriptions were checked against the audio by the researcher and corrected where necessary.

Data Analysis. We employed a ‘narrative reality’ approach to identify arising themes from the transcripts (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Plummer, 1995; Seale et al., 2006). A subset of transcripts was independently analyzed by team members who then, jointly, identified themes arising from the data in relation to the areas of interest of the project and agreed upon a code-book. This was applied to code the entire set of interview transcripts. Interview transcripts were uploaded to Nvivo for analysis. From the data arising from the interviews, we performed a contextually situated analysis of change with respect to practices of intimacy, dating app use, and experiences of COVID-19, lockdowns and social distancing. We then focused on identifying intimate norms; how these were structured by gender and sexuality, and how they were disrupted and negotiated (or not) virtually in the face of the changes brought about by COVID-19. The analysis incorporates biographical, socio-economic and cultural positions.

Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Quantitative and qualitative data analysis are iterative and inform each other, with a focus on identifying the socio-cultural shaping of commonalities and differences. We believe that quantitative data provides broad insights about the intersection of our areas of interest with socio-economic and geographical trends among our sample, which in combination with the existing literature and theory, is used as prompts for the analysis of qualitative data. Qualitative data provides in-depth insights into social and inter-personal practices, experiences and sense-making processes.

Community Involvement

We involved communities in this project from the outset in two ways: first, members of the Advisory Board, which provided advice on research design (including on designing the survey and interview schedule, and provided input on analysis and dissemination) include clinicians, policy actors, and staff working in community organizations supporting people who use dating apps. In addition, and thanks to a

collaboration scheme funded by the School of Social Sciences (University of Manchester), we partnered with a local community organisation, Black Beetle Health, which focuses on improving the health and wellbeing of LGBT+ Black and People of Colour. Staff members from Black Beetle Health underwent secondments within the research team during which they piloted the survey and provided feedback on it. In addition to this, we have also engaged with dating app businesses to identify their research priorities and with community organisations to determine what support services for intimate relations should be developed and/or transitioned to online service delivery during times of social distancing, with an emphasis on catering for diverse intimate cultures.

Ethical Considerations and Declarations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Manchester University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) [2022-13725-25583]. While we do not believe that the subject matter discussed would be inherently distressing to participants, a number of resources were developed to ensure participants’ wellbeing including a Distress Protocol (with guidance about managing and referring participants experiencing distress) and a Referral document (with resources to refer participants who wish to access additional support beyond the project). The survey provider (MEL Research) only shared anonymized data with the research team, and a strict protocol for anonymizing interview transcripts was developed. Anonymized quantitative data will be made available through the UK Data Service, with adequate meta-data and information to facilitate its re-use, upon completion of the project.

Status and Timeline of the Project

Data collection was completed on in October 2023 and preliminary data analysis commenced in late 2023. Data analysis is expected to be completed in September 2023, followed by a period of writing and dissemination of findings.

Discussion

This project addresses the unique juncture of COVID-19 and the rise of dating app use. While dating apps have profoundly transformed people’s practices of intimacy, COVID-19 (and the measures put in place to halt the spread of the virus) has also had and continues to have significant negative impacts on people’s wellbeing. To our knowledge, this is the first project of its scale that is concerned with different sexualities to address digital practices of intimacy in relation to COVID-19 while remaining attentive to wellbeing (resilience, loneliness and viral risks).

Our intention is for the research to significantly add to our knowledge of the implications of COVID-19 for relating, but also go beyond this: our findings will provide a first look into people’s use of dating apps during times of social distancing and will

contribute to our understanding of people's desires and needs around intimacy and virtual intimacy during acute periods of viral risk. These periods may relate to a pandemic such as COVID-19 and to infections such as mpox but may also emerge for individuals and groups with autoimmune or short and long-term immunodeficient conditions. These findings will provide the basis of evidence from which to inform the development of policies and (online or offline) services that cater to the intimacy and wellbeing needs of different groups while harnessing the power of digital tools. Furthermore, this project will also provide novel data about changing practices of intimacy in the 21st century more generally, capturing both the impact of dating apps and COVID-19, but situating them in their larger temporal (before, during and after COVID-19) and socio-demographic contexts. In doing so, it charts how people's intimate practices adapt to new possibilities (as those provided by dating apps), transform in the face of crises (such as COVID-19) and in their aftermath. The project findings will be disseminated through a range of outputs including reports, datasets, policy briefings, fact-sheets tailored to different audiences, and peer-reviewed publications.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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