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The mediation of gay men's lives: A review on gay dating app studies

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Abstract

A growing body of literature focuses on gay men's use of mobile dating applications or "dating apps." Running on smartphones and working with GPS, dating apps connect users to others in close geographic proximity and often in real time. These apps allow users to create profiles to present themselves and interact with each other to reach multiple goals, such as casual sex, dating, or networking. Attending to the dynamics between communication technologies and society, this article reviews gay dating app studies that highlight the communicative practices and social relations mediated by dating apps. Using the mediation framework as a starting point, we examine major themes in these studies, including gay men's online self-presentation and interactions, gay community in the digital era, and gay men's interpersonal relationships. We suggest that future research should pay more attention to the technical development of dating devices and the transformation of gay men's social relations.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a surge in gay men's use of mobile dating applications or "dating apps." Running on smartphones and working with GPS, dating apps connect users to others in close geographic proximity and often in real time. These apps allow users to create profiles to present themselves and interact with each other to reach multiple goals, such as casual sex, dating, or networking. Unlike traditional dating sites, dating apps seem to reduce the time for getting a match; unlike Facebook, dating apps bring strangers together. The academic world has expressed interest in the increasing prevalence of dating apps. Dating apps designed for gay men, or more broadly, men who have sex with men (MSM), such as Grindr, Scruff, and Jack'd, have become an object of study for social science researchers. To study these apps and their uses, researchers have adopted distinct approaches. Accordingly, literature on gay dating apps is generated in different disciplines, namely, sociology and psychology, and in different fields, such as communication studies, gender studies, and HIV prevention studies. Specifically focused on the

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dynamics between communication technologies and society, this article reviews studies that highlight communication practices and social relations mediated by dating apps, rather than the correlation between dating app use and sexual risk practices that concerns HIV prevention researchers. Nevertheless, even within our narrowed scope, these studies draw on various theories, which makes it hard to tell a coherent story. There is a relatively clear research strand marked by self-presentation and interaction frameworks. This strand—to which researchers from Northwestern University in the United States (NU Social Media Lab) has contributed greatly—focuses on how users present themselves on their profiles and interact with each other through private chat (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014; Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015; Chan, 2016; Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2016; Licoppe, Rivière, & Morel, 2015). Except for this strand, however, other literatures on gay dating apps do not form a direct dialogue.

Given the novelty of this field and the current lack of an overview, in this paper, we provide a thematic review of gay dating app studies. To critically assess existing literature, we use the *mediation* framework proposed by Lievrouw (2014). This framework helps in understanding how communication technologies and society mutually shape each other. Lievrouw frames communication technologies as infrastructures. She argues that these infrastructures consist of three components, namely, (a) *artifacts*, devices or objects with certain technological and material features, used by people to communicate with each other; (2) *practices*, how people engage in communication with devices; and (3) *social arrangements*, social relations, institutions, and structures that not only organize and govern but also form and

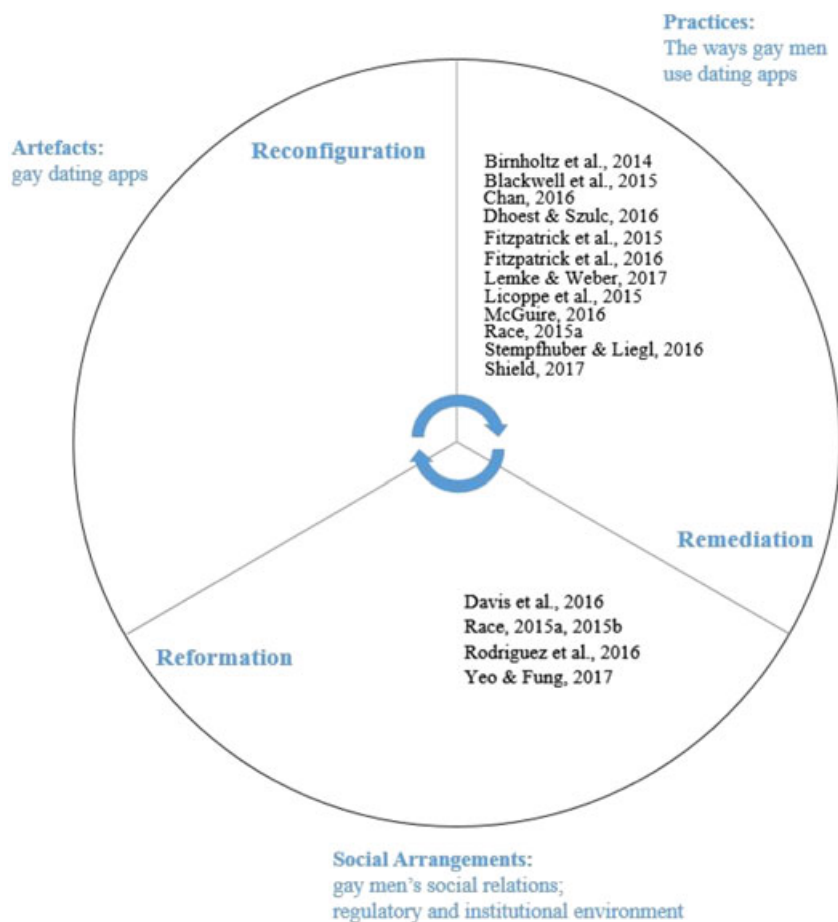


FIGURE 1 How gay dating app studies fit into Lievrouw's mediation framework. Adapted with permission from Lievrouw (2014, p. 46)

develop around communication technologies and practices. These three components are in a constant state of flux. She identifies three corresponding modes of change, which are respectively called *reconfiguration* of artifacts, *remediation* of practices, and *reformation* of social arrangements. The “ongoing, articulated, and mutually determining relationship among [the] three components of communication technology infrastructure and [their] three corresponding processes or modes of change” (Lievrouw, 2014, p. 45) is understood as *mediation*.

By borrowing from this mediation framework, we look at how dating app studies have enriched our knowledge of the dynamic interactions and articulations among artifacts, practices, and social arrangements. In the case of gay dating apps, we see dating apps as technical products representing *artifacts*. The ways gay men use dating apps can be defined as *practices*, and finally, the social relations among gay men can be viewed as *social arrangements*. In this review, we categorize the literature by examining the components and processes researchers have emphasized. For instance, as we mentioned earlier, researchers of the NU Social Media Lab explore self-presentation and interaction on gay dating apps, and this focus gives us abundant detail about users' practices that are shaped by the technological attributes of devices. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that some studies examine multiple components and processes (e.g., Race, 2015a).

In Figure 1, we provide an overview of how gay dating app studies fit into Lievrouw's mediation framework. This figure serves to structure the remainder of this review. For example, in the first section, we zoom in on the micro level of people's practices. We look at studies highlighting how gay men's use of dating apps is afforded by technique and design features of the dating devices under existing but changing social arrangements. These studies demonstrate multiple goals of gay dating app users, some of which are even not intended by dating app designers (Shield, 2017), and the ways users present themselves in profiles and interact with others through private chat to achieve certain goals (Birnholtz et al., 2014; Blackwell et al., 2015; Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2016). In Figure 1, this focus can be found in the segment defined as *remediation* and highlights the *practices* of gay dating app users. In the second section of the review, we zoom out to explore a macro landscape of existing social arrangements, and how these arrangements respond to dating apps and gay men's online dating practices. We identify the debate on gay communities in the digital era (Davis, Flowers, Lorimer, Oakland, & Frankis, 2016) and new forms of social relation afforded by dating apps (Race, 2015a, 2015b) as two major themes concerning researchers. In Figure 1, this focus can be seen in the segment defined as *reformation* and focuses on the *social arrangements* between gay men. Finally, in the discussion, we make several suggestions for future research. These suggestions include focusing on the naissance and evolvment of gay dating apps and looking into the meaning of sex and emergence of new social relations. In Figure 1, it is clear that a focus is missing regarding *reconfiguration* and a look at gay dating apps as *artifacts*.

2 | REMEDIATION OF GAY MEN'S DATING PRACTICES

Many gay dating app researchers are interested in how dating apps, playing on the existing social norms within certain cultural contexts, shape gay men's online dating practices. They examine how people actually use dating apps and what the technology affords. In this section, we begin with an overview of the multiple incentives for gay men to use dating apps and then look into users' self-presentation and interaction on dating apps.

The design of gay dating apps allows users to express various expectations and engage in a variety of practices. Dating app profiles have checkboxes that allow people to communicate multiple goals. For example, on Grindr, users can tick more than one “looking-for” checkbox among options such as “chat,” “dates,” “friends,” “networking,” “relationship,” and “[sex] right now.” Options on other dating apps are similar. Indeed, the ways of using dating apps are diversified by users' multi-identities and social backgrounds. In their study of gay immigrants' use of social media in Belgium, including dating apps, Dhoest and Szulc (2016) summarize the relevant factors for gay immigrants, including the degree of “outness” in real life, the social and/or economic dependence on family and members from the ethnocultural community, economic self-sufficiency, linguistic proficiency and literacy (to communicate on social media), a sense of safety and security, and Internet access. Given the variety of users' backgrounds, practices which

are not specifically intended by designers are also afforded by dating apps and carried out by users. Shield (2017) argues that immigrants to Copenhagen use dating app profiles to develop social networks to adapt to local life, and chats on dating apps are a useful way to initially engage with local gay residents. Many dating apps allow users to browse profiles in foreign countries, and some potential immigrants take advantage of this feature before they actually move to their destination. After learning local information about a host country through dating app profiles, including the subcultures of that host country, they reevaluate their decision to move. Stempfhuber and Liegl (2016) note that the use of dating apps transforms travelers' experiences. Dating apps do so by helping travelers to observe and make sense of the strange surroundings by browsing local users' profiles. Travelers are thus able to orient themselves in unfamiliar local contexts. Similarly, for urban residents, a dating app "is often used as a mapping device for the reading of urban space" (Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016, p. 65).

Researchers deliberately situate their examination of gay men's practices in a sociotechnical context, paying careful attention to the technical attributes of dating apps. Inevitably, comparisons are made in different ways. On the one hand, practices on dating apps are compared to those in real life or to an era when dating apps had not yet been invented. Hooking up on dating apps, which is different from cruising in a physical space, provides gay men with greater control in releasing or gathering information, such as HIV status (Race, 2015a).

On the other hand, the understanding of these technical attributes does not start from scratch, and the design and functionalities of dating apps are often compared to those of online gay venues accessed with computers, including chat rooms or dating sites. Studies therefore highlight the new affordances of dating apps. For instance, traditional dating sites are said to focus on meeting people in a general area and may involve weeks or months of online communication before a date, while the "location-based real-time dating applications" facilitate local, immediate social or sexual encounters (Blackwell et al., 2015). Blackwell et al. (2015) frame Grindr, one of the most popular gay dating apps, as a "co-situation technology" that causes "context collapse" by bringing users with different intentions from different social groups into a single online setting in ways that transcend geographic boundaries. Because the contexts that help people discern what constitutes normative behavior collapse on dating apps, users rely heavily on self-presentation and interaction to communicate their identities and intentions. Thus, self-presentation and interaction are two main aspects of the remediation of gay men's online dating practices. Next, we offer an overview of findings about self-presentation and interaction.

2.1 | Self-presentation in profiles

Gay dating app users experience tension. On the one hand, they aim to self-disclose in ways that result in a positive perception from other users. On the other hand, they do not want to reveal too much identifying information. Users develop a set of strategies to signal their intentions and make themselves attractive. In virtual space on dating apps where identification cues are limited, users find their own way to reinsert identification information to gain social attraction. For instance, Grindr shows only distance information for nearby users and erases location details. Thus, in their profiles, some users input the name of socially defined spaces that they identify with, such as neighborhoods, city names, or institutions. They associate themselves with these landmarks to make themselves more socially attractive (Birnholtz et al., 2014).

At the same time, users need to manage the possibility of exposing identifying information. There are several possible cases. First, some users are reluctant to reveal their gay identity to others. Second, some people are comfortable with others' being aware of their sexual preferences, but they still feel a need to separate their different roles in online and off-line settings. Thus, on dating apps, they avoid interaction with off-line acquaintances. Finally, sex-related stigma attached to dating apps can cause stress (Blackwell et al., 2015). Users carefully present themselves as not looking for casual sex to circumvent the stigma, and even those who seek causal sexual encounters tend to use euphemistic terms or abbreviations, such as "fun" for sex and "nsa" for "no strings attached" (Birnholtz et al., 2014). To hide their identity, users may use profile pictures that do not reveal their face (Blackwell et al., 2015).

Some patterns of textual and visual self-presentation are outlined in quantitative research studies. For instance, in the United States, older users and those who share race are less likely to disclose their faces. In contrast, users with higher body mass index, users who disclose relationship status, and those who seek friends or relationships are more likely to show their faces on a dating app (Fitzpatrick, Birnholtz, & Brubaker, 2015). Compared to Americans, gay dating app users in China are less likely to show their faces or mention their goals, and more Chinese users mention seeking relationships than American users (Chan, 2016).

However, photos and profiles are not always reliable indicators of others' intentions. Users' actual behaviors do not always match what they say in their profiles, and users do not always update their profiles after their intentions change (Blackwell et al., 2015). In private interaction, users may provide more personal information about themselves.

2.2 | Interaction through private chat

In private chat on dating apps, users are still trying to positively present themselves and signal their intentions while discerning others' intentions. Given that prior work has largely focused on self-presentation in profiles, Fitzpatrick and Birnholtz (2016) argue that researchers should pay more attention to interactions on dating apps. They delineate three stages of the interactions facilitated by dating apps. First, profile functions as an initial negotiation. When constructing their profiles, "people think less about lying or being lied to, and more about how much to reveal about their goals and when in the process to reveal this information" (Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2016, p. 22). Given that goals can vary with time, stating a specific goal in one's profile makes it difficult to withdraw this information later, and retaining some ambiguity means leaving room to maneuver in the interaction. Second, chat on dating apps functions as strategic, interactive self-presentation. Users may negotiate their goals in the chat, and the timing of another user's reply, whether it is immediate or delayed, may change the flow of the chat and alter previous expectations. Third, face-to-face meetings, facilitated by interaction on dating apps, are another stage of negotiation, where users either verify or overturn the prior, online impression they had of another dating app user.

In a more specific case, Licoppe et al. (2015) explore how Grindr users in France who seek casual sexual encounters use interaction strategies to circumvent relational development. As they argue:

Grindr users have evolved a particular "linguistic ideology" (Silverstein, 1979) which provides them with an ideal type of what an ordinary "friendly conversation" is about (relational development), of what kind of conversational practices support such an orientation (mentioning personal events as topics) and which they reject as unsuitable to their own interactional purposes. (Licoppe et al., 2015, p. 2549)

With a checklist in mind regarding what to ask step by step, users routinize the chat and follow the "matching sequences" (Licoppe et al., 2015, p. 2556). This allows users to avoid referring to personal issues and biographical detail that could lead to more social and emotional involvement. After interviewing Grindr users and analyzing the chat history they provided, Licoppe and his colleagues observed three aspects of checklist-style talk. First, users ask and answer questions in a way that information is made explicit and brief, such as pictures, location, and immediate goals. Second, questions in the beginning may be raised rapidly one after another, leaving the interrogee little time to reply to each in turn. Third, information such as pictures and locations may be sent voluntarily to encourage reciprocity.

Before we end this *remediation* section, it should be noted that there seems to be a divergence between the hidden MSM, those who want to conceal their sexualities or who do not self-identify as gay, and the open MSM. Compared to open MSM, hidden MSM are more reluctant to post recognizable profile pictures and less frequently use online dating platforms for nonsexual purposes. They prefer online dating platforms to off-line gay venues like gay bars or clubs (Lemke & Weber, 2017). In the transition of cruising from physical venues to dating apps, hidden

MSM tend to feel an anxiety that they are at a bigger risk of exposure on dating apps than in physical cruising venues, as shown in McGuire's (2016) study based in Seoul.

In addition to detailing the remediation of gay men's online dating practices, gay dating app research also contributes to understanding the *reformation of social arrangements* around gay life. In the following section, we detail two themes in regard to social arrangements, namely, gay communities in the digital era and new forms of social relations.

3 | REFORMATION OF SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS AROUND GAY LIFE

Social arrangements, such as patterns of relations, organizing, and institutional structure, respond and adapt to available systems and devices and to communicative practices, in a process of *reformation* (Lievrouw, 2014). In gay dating app studies, researchers have been especially concerned with the reformation of gay men's relationships to each other in gay communities. This academic interest is inherited from the long-running debate about gay communities in the digital era. The concept of "gay community" has been especially of interest to HIV prevention researchers, because gay communities have played an important role in HIV prevention work, such as disseminating the knowledge of safe sex (Holt, 2011). The prevalence of the Internet and digital devices, making *gay community attachment* less necessary for gay men to socialize with each other, has triggered the debate on whether gay communities are dying (Holt, 2011; Rosser, West, & Weinmeyer, 2008; Rowe & Dowsett, 2008; Zablotska, Holt, & Prestage, 2012). Arguing against the nostalgic, monolithic, and metropolitan-centric view on the fate of gay communities, Davis et al. (2016), with their study based in a Scottish county, remind us that it has never been easy for culturally and geographically marginalized gay men to get access to publicly visible gay communities. They suggest "the debate should be reframed in terms of what collective sexual life could become in the era of hook-up technologies and related capacities for connection with others" (Davis et al., 2016, p. 849). Moreover, the "decline theory" cannot be applied universally, since the development of information and communication technology is believed to have facilitated the flourishing of gay communities in some non-Western societies, such as in Asia (Berry, Martin, & Yue, 2003).

Some studies claim that dating apps actually provide alternative access to the gay community. Framing dating apps as social networking sites (SNSs), Gudelunas (2012) demonstrates that gay-specific SNSs provide gay men with virtual space where they can connect to the larger gay community apart from existing physical spaces like gay bars. Given the relative homogeneity on gay SNSs, gay men are more likely to reveal their sexual identity and express their desires. But even so, they do not totally get away from dominant gender norms. Within the gay community on dating apps, the policing of masculinity still exists and reinforces a masculine elite, "an elite that is predominantly white, young, fit, and healthy" (Rodriguez, Huemmer, & Blumell, 2016).

In more detailed accounts of gay men's relations to each other, there has been an interest in gay men's app use for sex. Gudelunas (2012) argues that dating apps facilitate gay men's ability to seek casual sexual encounters; Tziallas (2015) attributes the success of gay dating apps partly to their functioning as amateur porn platforms; Licoppe et al. (2015) delineate how users deliberately circumvent emotional involvement through strategic interaction. Although some studies reinforced the reputation of dating apps as "hook-up apps," others allow more nuances into the discussion of gay men's sex and social relations. For example, Race (2015a) theorizes the dating app as "infrastructure of the sexual encounter," or shortly "sexual infrastructure." He argues that this new sexual infrastructure "is generating new modes of material participation in gay sexual culture, new forms of community and speculative practices" (Race, 2015a, p. 269). For instance, in contrast to walking into a public restroom and engaging in sex with strangers in silence (Humphreys, 1970), chat mechanisms on dating apps enable various forms of control, wherein picture exchange is essential to trustworthiness establishment (Albury & Byron, 2016), and make it possible for casual sex seekers to anonymously disclose themselves before sexual encounters (Race, 2015b). Storage and retrieval functions of dating apps promote "the capacity to maintain a loose web of fuck-buddies" (Race, 2015a), a relation referred to as "fuckbuddyhood" in popular press articles, because users are able to stay in touch via dating apps. Sex without a romantic relational commitment does not have to be a single occurrence and can be recurring. New

meanings may be given to sex between two men who are not lovers, and new forms of social arrangements may be coming into being. Race (2015a, p. 271) puts it in this way:

This is a historically distinctive way of arranging erotic and intimate life, which may be approached as a specific infrastructure of intimacy that has erotic, social and communal potentials. These devices and practices are participating in the construction of a specific sphere of sociability and amiable acquaintance among men in urban centers that prioritizes sex as a principle mechanism for connection and sociability.

Nevertheless, this sociability, or the amiable ambiance among gay men on the apps, seems to be counterbalanced by one's reduced obligation to the other, which is instigated by dating apps' blocking capacity (Davis et al., 2016). Moreover, as shown in Yeo and Fung's (2017) study based in Hong Kong, users who seek more durable relationships can be frustrated by the incongruence between the accelerated tempo of browsing and exchange on apps and the normative tempo prescribing formation of friendships and romantic relationships. Those "accelerated relationships" are perceived by some users to be ephemeral.

4 | DISCUSSION

Notably, gay dating app studies have focused on the remediation of gay men's dating practices, and the reformation of social relations among gay men. By contrast, the *reconfiguration of artifacts* is understudied, as reflected in a lack of comparisons of artifacts in both horizontal and longitudinal dimensions. In the horizontal dimension, many researchers simply frame dating apps as social media or consider apps as similar to dating sites, rather than contrasting dating apps to these analogues. This is problematic, given that even the design difference between two dating apps can inspire different interpretations and preferred motives of users (MacKee, 2016). On other occasions, researchers elaborately delineate the design of dating apps and account for users' practices in relation to the technological context. This is, however, a single static moment cut from the continuous evolvement of dating devices. The missing piece to the puzzle is a historical and technical "genealogy" of dating devices (Allen-Robertson, 2017), a "media archaeology" of how dating apps came into being and are developing (Parikka, 2012). How did dating app designers draw inspiration from prior media forms, such as SNSs and dating sites, as well as people's existing practices? How are dating apps evolving along with users' practices and articulated expectations, and the subtle, gradual transformation of social relations? Questions about the reconfiguration of dating devices for gay men remain to be answered. Even for researchers who are more interested in dating practices and social relations, it is beneficial to consider the continuity of dating devices' lineage as well as the uniqueness that distinguishes dating apps from SNSs and dating sites.

To grasp the coevolution between user practices and dating apps, "data cultures" (Albury, Burgess, Light, Race, & Wilken, 2017) of mobile dating apps—how user data are generated, collected, and processed in the development of dating apps and how users experience data structures and processes—can be a good starting point. Moreover, how is this coevolution locally subjected to social arrangements on the institutional level, such as governmental Internet regulations and gay men's legal position? An example can be taken from the study of Liu (2016), which reveals how Momo, a Chinese dating app that is primarily used by heterosexuals, underwent a dramatic change of technical features and marketing strategies to get rid of its reputation as a hook-up app. These changes took place because of governmental regulations and market pressure. Similarly, locality also unfolds in the evolution of gay dating apps developed by Chinese companies. According to our observation, these Chinese gay dating apps, such as Blued and Aloha, seem to have more functionalities than their Western counterparts, as they have gradually integrated technical features of SNSs like Facebook and Twitter, allowing users to post statuses, "retweet" others' statuses, follow each other, and even broadcast/watch live streaming. Therefore, researchers should fully examine how dating apps are reconfigured in a local context, especial the non-Western context, which is relatively understudied.

On the other hand, studies on the reformation of gay communities and gay social relations can be more fruitful. With respect to dating apps' impact on gay communities, we suggest that researchers reject the monolithic "decline theory" and look into local paths for gay communities in a "dating app era." Regarding physical gay venues, such as gay bars, which have long been seen as an indicator of the vitality of gay communities, researchers should explore more about how the roles and meanings of these venues have transformed with the prevalence of dating apps (Rafalow & Adams, 2017). As for online gay communities, it is worth thinking about how gay men experience the division between dating apps and other online gay venues, and moreover, the division among user groups clustered around different dating apps. As we know, many gay dating apps are targeted at specific subgroups within gay communities, such as Scruff for "bears" (Roth, 2014); Tinder-like designs are believed to spawn a better quality of users than Grindr-like design does (MacKee, 2016). Researchers should examine whether these apps have reinforced the subcultures marked by bodies within gay communities and whether they forged a hierarchical perception of online gay communities.

With regard to the interpersonal relationships fostered by dating apps, the sociability among gay dating app users that "prioritizes sex as a principle mechanism for connection" (Race, 2015a, p. 271) has extended our understanding of sexual relations. This challenges an understanding that has long been overshadowed by the sexual scripts of "non-strings-attached" sex (Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013). We encourage further examination of how this sociability is experienced by gay men with different backgrounds. Besides, it is also worth scrutinizing how the affordances of dating apps for social relations shape our existing interpersonal relationships in everyday, "off-line" settings. As we have discussed, dating apps may bring tension to newer romantic relationships where partners have not yet discussed their relationship objectives or negotiated how they relate to strangers on dating apps (Albury & Byron, 2016; Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2014). Thus, we suggest that researchers examine the new sets of norms and expectations formed around the use of dating apps for negotiating social relations online and off-line.

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