

Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on mobile dating: Critical avenues for research

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Abstract

In this digitally mediated world, initiating sexual or romantic intimacy now frequently occurs on mobile dating apps, which both requires people to navigate new technologies, but also enables them to explore different possibilities for intimacy. The opportunities that mobile dating holds for creating intimacy, and how people take these up, is particularly relevant in light of the global pandemic of COVID-19, when human connection and contact are entangled with varying worries about viral contamination, risk and future uncertainty. But how does the pandemic impact on mobile dating? How are affect and risk intertwined—or even negotiated—by people in their search for intimacy in this pandemic? What possibilities do mobile dating apps hold for people in their search for connection with others? In this commentary, I provide a brief overview of how risk has been examined previously in mobile dating research and explore what future directions could be taken in this field. I argue for research that acknowledges and prioritises: the plurality of people's sociomaterial conditions; the interrelationship between people, digital technologies and COVID-19; and the discursive context that furnishes people's sense of risk and emotional possibility across different sociocultural contexts. These new directions in the field offer opportunities to conduct critical research that is responsive to this dynamic context, and that illuminates the various ways that people are navigating intimacy, risk and emotion across different living conditions during this pandemic.

1 | INTRODUCTION: SHIFTING INTIMACIES IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

The sudden emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has rewritten the rules of society and human connection against a backdrop of infective risk (Brennan et al., 2020; Lupton & Willis, 2020). With varied measures of control, such as population lockdowns, social distancing and travel restrictions, people around the world have been incited to be 'model citizens' for the sake of 'flattening the curve' (particularly in island nations where this is more possible, such as Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia) (Coombe et al., 2020; Rhodes et al., 2020). While such arguments for swift action might seem necessary for the sake of public health, questions are raised about the psychosocial effects on people's lives (Brennan et al., 2020). Such periods of lockdown and social distancing guidelines have ostensibly rendered old ways of connection (temporarily) challenging, for instance; this is particularly so in the case of dating, relationships and other forms of intimacy (Myles et al., 2021). Even as COVID-19 vaccinations have become globally available (World Health Organization, 2021), public distribution and uptake of vaccines will undoubtedly be uneven, leaving public health limitations in place for the foreseeable future (Harrison & Wu, 2020; Lazarus et al., 2020). For some people, this may have prompted a re-thinking of how to achieve intimacy in other, virtual ways, while dating apps themselves have become instruments for public health messaging (Bumble, 2021; Myles et al., 2021); but for some people, it simply may be dating-as-usual.

In a data-driven society, mobile dating apps have already been contributing to breaking down the limits of physical and social disconnection, facilitating interactions between people, with the promise of 'matching', dating and ultimately creating sexual or emotional intimacy (Heidecker et al., 2012; Hobbs et al., 2017; Newett et al., 2018). But what role and possibilities do mobile dating apps now hold for people living in this altered—and continually shifting—reality, and how do people navigate these in light of infective risk?

In this commentary, I firstly reflect on how risk has been previously conceptualised in mobile dating research and how it is coming to the forefront again, in the context of COVID-19. I secondly argue that critical psychological research, drawing inspiration from discursive psychology, is needed to explain how dominant meanings and experiences around intimacy, risk and affect might be changing and re-conceptualised. Lastly, I put forward suggestions for future research avenues through which to examine how people might construct and experience intimacy and affective connection through mobile dating in the context of this ongoing pandemic.

2 | RISK IN MOBILE DATING: A BRIEF RETROSPECTIVE

From a public health perspective, mobile dating apps and digital technology have previously raised concerns for being possible sites through which risk can be constituted (Adam, 2005; Albury et al., 2017; Lupton, 2016). In mobile dating research, for instance, app users' negotiation of 'risk' has been varyingly articulated and understood—by social scientists and users themselves (Race, 2015)—from reified notions of risk as something to be measured and minimised, through to risk being understood as fabricated into 'being' through a range of discourses, techniques and practices. This makes it a rich site for social scientific inquiry to explore the role of app users' agency in negotiating aspects of mobile dating that are constructed as 'risky'. Such risk-oriented sociological and psychological research has tended mostly to involve early adopters of mobile dating apps, namely, young people (Albury & Byron, 2016; Holloway et al., 2014; Sawyer et al., 2018) and men who have sex with men, particularly in negotiating HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (Adam, 2005; Hull et al., 2016; Race, 2015).

Even as so-called 'digital natives', young people regularly attract attention as 'at-risk' subjects who need to be monitored and protected from online dangers (including apps) and digital practices, such as sexting (Albury et al., 2017; Albury & Byron, 2016; Ringrose et al., 2013). Young adults' (aged 18–25) use of dating apps has at times also been correlated with higher rates of sexual partners and unprotective sex (Sawyer et al., 2018)—reinforcing the construction of mobile dating with behaviours that are labelled in public health discourse as risky or problematic. In turn, apps have been considered for how they could assist rectifying the problem they allegedly create. For instance, dating apps and

social networking sites have been used to help minimise sexual risk amongst young people, by delivering sexual health information and even sexual health clinic locations (see e.g., Holloway et al., 2014; Sawyer et al., 2018).

Dating websites, dating apps and 'hook up' apps used for casual sex have similarly all been keenly examined for how they are used by men who have sex with men, particularly in light of 'risky' sexual practices, STIs and, specifically, HIV (Adam, 2005; Hull et al., 2016; Race, 2015). The association between mobile dating apps, higher rates of unprotected sex and higher numbers of sexual partners amongst men who have sex with men is variable—despite early hypotheses about a correlation between app use and risk-taking (Hull et al., 2016). Nevertheless, considerable attention has been paid by social scientists to how men use hook up apps—highlighting elements of sexual risk-taking, but also opportunities for new formations of intimacy, sociability and community (Miles, 2019; Race, 2015).

Such research has demonstrated the deeper moral panics and concerns that continue to surround certain forms of intimacy, for example, those associated with age or sexual practices that do not conform to heteronormative ideals (Adam, 2005; Duguay, 2017). As this body of research has illustrated, mobile dating users are frequently positioned within public discourse and by government as needing to self-regulate and take responsibility within a 'marketplace of risks' (Adam, 2005, p. 340) when making judgements about how they seek out and negotiate intimacy with others. Responsibility is thus placed on individuals to be aware of the range of possible risks they face to their sexual and physical health, through the use of mobile dating, and are incited to self-regulate accordingly, or (presumably) accept the consequences (Adam, 2005). This has arguably been intensified in the age of the 'COVID society', characterised as the 21st-century version of Beck's (1992) 'risk society' (Lupton & Willis, 2020, p. 6).

3 | MOBILE DATING IN THE 'COVID SOCIETY'

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has re-centred 'risk' as a force upon people's lives—something to be identified, managed and ultimately controlled through varying social and political responses, in much the same way as earlier threats of modernity posed 'risks' to people's lives (Lupton & Willis, 2020). Globally implemented public health measures have thus required 'new forms of sociality and intimacy... to be developed, to allow people to engage with others' since the start of the pandemic (Lupton & Willis, 2020, p. 6). Indeed, with people facing periods of social distancing, the early (and varied) stages of vaccination programmes, and new possible viral outbreaks, thoughts of casual sexual hook ups or new intimate relationships might well be less appealing or seem unimaginable for the foreseeable future, while apps might (somewhat ironically) offer 'safer' virtual possibilities or new ways of creating social connection (Myles et al., 2021).

Mobile dating platforms were seemingly able to leverage the pandemic as an opportunity to experiment with new video technology and features, advising users on how to 'date from home' successfully, thereby promoting virtual dates to users who might otherwise have questioned the purpose of dating apps (Coombe et al., 2020; Myles et al., 2021). In doing so, companies such as Tinder, Grindr and Bumble all contributed to re-constructing virtual dating as more 'socially meaningful' and, ultimately, re-establish their relevance in a time when in-person dates could be deemed problematic (Myles et al., 2021, p. 83). The success of this is evident in user statistics, with Tinder recording its highest number of user swipes on one day in March 2020 (Fortune, 2021) and people reporting an increased use of dating apps for organising virtual dates (Coombe et al., 2020).

Reconfigurations of intimacy also swiftly evolved and proliferated in online spaces after the outbreak of the pandemic—from increased chatting and emotional connection through mobile dating apps (Harris, 2020; Shaw, 2020) to sex parties via Zoom video technology, described in popular media articles (Katz, 2020; Parham, 2020; Power & Waling, 2020). The Instagram reality-TV-styled project @loveisquarantine is one example of a particularly creative way people have used social media to seek out connections with others. As a hybrid 'dating service'/'reality show' that emerged during the early days of the global lockdown, it featured people of all ages and sexualities who virtually dated other 'matches', while other Instagram users followed their pre- and post-date video updates (Lorenz, 2020). Similarly, *The Guardian* newspaper's podcast series *Blind Date* facilitated socially distant dates that were relayed through the

podcast (*Blind Date: Podcast*, 2020). Such phenomena, however, have appeared to be as fleeting as the initial novelty of Zoom 'cocktail parties'—the excitement (or anxiety) of the 'new normal' wore off, months down the line from initial outbreaks. Yet, they also show the high adaptability of people to find new ways of creating or sustaining a sense of sexual or emotional intimacy with others in digitally mediated ways when the more usual avenues of dating could not be possible.

This landscape is likely to continue to change in other innovative ways, while broader fears or threats of infection remain—even as vaccinations become more wide-spread, international borders open up again, and COVID-19 is eventually brought under more manageable control. The pandemic has created a dynamic and highly variable context in which to explore how public health measures impact upon people's experience and negotiation of intimacy with others met through mobile dating apps. As Lupton and Willis (2020) note, COVID-19 offers a rich opportunity for a new turn in social theorising; that any contributions from medicine and public health need to be supplemented by social perspectives on how people experience and negotiate risk as they live through the pandemic.

4 | THE AFFORDANCES OF MOBILE DATING AS A FOCUS OF INQUIRY

Mobile dating apps offer fertile ground for exploring 'data cultures'; namely, how people create and use data, the technological affordances of apps the 'datafication of dating' through the use of data science, and the implications for people's health and well-being (Albury et al., 2017, p. 2, emphasis in original). While offering a mechanism for people to seek out sexual or emotional experiences and connections with others (both online and offline), such apps also produce various 'institutionalised routines, habits and knowledge practices' (Albury et al., 2017, p. 2). These habits and practices are brought into being, performed and normalised through app design, such as the mechanism of swiping for 'matches' and the assistance of location-based searches for dating or hooking up (Miles, 2019; Quiroz, 2013). Such practices become further routinised through app use, including people's self-presentation and hyper-aware impression management (Blackwell et al., 2015), ending contact with no communication ('ghosting') (LeFebvre, 2018; LeFebvre et al., 2019), or digitally mediated affective expression (through 'emojis') (Tang, 2017), to name a few.

Discursive psychology offers a useful standpoint from which to view people's affective engagement with each other, through dating apps; where affect is viewed as people's emotional, embodied reactions to entities or events, that are also inseparable from discourse, from the linguistic meaning-making that people engage in, and the wider sets of meanings that circulate within a specific time or place (Wetherell, 2012). Affect is viewed, here, as intertwined with language and meaning-making—through 'affective practices' that are made available and taken up within particular material and discursive contexts (Wetherell, 2012; Wetherell et al., 2015). Thus, viewed from a critical, discursive psychological perspective, mobile dating could be understood as constituted through cycles of discursive interaction and affective meaning-making that are driven and shaped by users, the apps, and broader social and institutional processes.

Through such technological and interactional entanglements, mobile dating has also contributed to a phenomenon of 'liquid love' (Bauman, 2003), where intimacy is constructed and understood differently compared to more 'traditional' forms of meeting and communicating with people. Intimacy today can be multiple and fleeting, and often swiftly initiated between 'virtual' strangers (Jiang et al., 2011; Liu, 2016; Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016; Witt, 2016). Mobile dating has thus come to represent a world where new forms of intimacy and affective connection can be imagined, and where geographical and social barriers can be challenged and even overcome as people search for love, sex, romance or other forms of connection. This notably offers hopeful possibilities for the current context of the pandemic, and is demonstrated in people's continued (and increased) use of mobile dating since 2020 (see e.g., Coombe et al., 2020).

Dating apps are, moreover, the products—and exemplars—of neoliberal Western society, offering social scientists insight into broader socio-political and economic sensibilities, as well as the historical conditions that are at play in shaping people's efforts at intimacy (Illouz, 2007; Liu, 2016). Dating websites (as precursors to mobile dating) and now mobile dating apps have been examined for the ways they have been predicated on the model of the free market,

whereby people are simultaneously positioned as (willing) consumers and products for romantic and sexual consumption (see, in particular, Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2007; Liu, 2016; Schmitz & Zillmann, 2016). For example, apps can promote illusions of availability and choice for a person to swipe through other users' profiles, thus seemingly positioning people as commodities to be selected or disposed of (Beauchamp et al., 2017; Blackwell et al., 2015; David & Cambre, 2016; Duguay et al., 2017; Race, 2015). Additionally, the creation and maintenance of dating profiles, like other forms of social media activity and app usage (Goodwin & Lyons, 2019; Lupton, 2014, 2018, 2019a), also produces highly curated digital versions of people (Blackwell et al., 2015; Illouz, 2007; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017).

It is easy to focus on how mobile dating cultures encourage users to unquestioningly perform and conform within highly public, digitally mediated spaces. But any comprehensive, critical psychological analysis of mobile dating also needs to account for people's agentic power—to adopt, modify or resist the practices and strategies that facilitate connections with others (and the contexts in which these occur). Indeed, people who use dating apps have been found to engage in highly strategic performances as they search for and create 'networked intimacy' with others (David & Cambre, 2016; Hobbs et al., 2017).

The diverse ways that people enact this agency is compelling to consider in light of people's differing sociomaterial conditions (their age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, living conditions) and their different relationships with digital technologies. This avenue for research becomes even more promising when thinking about how people's engagement with mobile dating apps might be shaped by the social processes of 'risk' that are constituting the 'COVID society' we are now living in (Lupton & Willis, 2020; Myles et al., 2021).

5 | NEW TERRAIN IN MOBILE DATING RESEARCH: ENTANGLEMENTS OF RISK, AFFECT, AND DISCURSIVE AGENCY

It is tempting within mobile dating research, however, to view apps and app users within a simple subject/object dichotomy, with users positioned as being 'at risk', while apps and sexual practices are 'risky'. This could be particularly the case for those of us working in psychology or public health, where aims to promote digital and sexual health and well-being are frequently put on the research agenda. However, this can further reinforce a uni-directional relationship, where users act *upon* apps or vice versa. Such a view could also perpetuate realist notions of a rational actor who is removed from their sociocultural and discursive context (as seen in early critiques from discursive psychology quarters (Henriques et al., 1984).

Instead, a turn to new materialism in the social sciences as proposed, for example, by Braidotti (2019), Fulagar (2017) and Lupton (2019b), could offer a new avenue in which the phenomenon of mobile dating can be viewed as a product of material and discursive conditions and relationships between human and non-human actors. From this perspective, agency is afforded to all (humans and non-humans) involved in producing what people experience as intimacy, affect, and connection—in this case—in the performance and experience of mobile dating. This argument can be taken further to explore how intimacy is created, maintained, and negotiated during this historic moment of a viral pandemic. In other words, we need to examine the role and operation of mobile dating apps, COVID-19 as a virus, notions of infective 'risk', public health messaging and so forth, in relation to people both as individuals and as social actors—as a web of relations between humans and non-human actors. Given that this pandemic is unlikely to be eliminated any time soon, and that future pandemics may well occur, understanding how people are able to form intimacy, develop relationships and maintain affective connection with others is vital.

Considering how this occurs must be further located within the surrounding sociomaterial conditions of different lives, in diverse locations. Take the case of Aotearoa New Zealand; whilst we have benefited from a successful and strong public health response to COVID-19, this 'success' will always be contingent on how the pandemic continues to unfold and what strategies are taken to contain it (Binny et al., 2021). Moreover, like other infectious diseases, COVID-19 has affected communities differently across Aotearoa, along existing lines of ethnic and socio-economic inequity (McLeod et al., 2020). But, overall, experiences of the pandemic could differ vastly between Aotearoa and

other countries, given how the pandemic has developed to date. Taking a critical lens in health psychology offers one useful way in which to consider people's experiences in terms of how they are shaped by broader issues of equity, justice and sociocultural context (Chamberlain et al., 2018; Lyons & Chamberlain, 2006). This would involve examining people's diverse socio-economic locations, their cultural values and practices, and the evolving context of the pandemic—namely, the varied conditions in which people discursively make sense of and act on their need for intimacy.

Taking a lens that examines risk and emotion in concert (Lupton, 2013) would additionally be valuable in conducting an inquiry into how intimacy is formed and experienced through current threats of infection and conditions of uncertainty. For instance, what is people's imagined sense of how they can feel, respond and act in relation to other human and non-human actors (i.e., in relation to others, in the context of a pandemic, and through mobile dating technologies)? To answer this question, we need to understand the variety of 'affective practices' that are at play (Lupton, 2013; Wetherell, 2012)—how emotion and intimacy can be created, understood and enacted within material and discursive contexts of risk. Methodologically, we need to examine 'the active work of meaning making [through emotion and discourse] in situ and its practical organisation' (Wetherell et al., 2015, p. 57), in this case, between people, through dating apps, and in the context of the pandemic with prevailing discourses and practices of risk, threat and uncertainty.

6 | CONCLUSION

New research into mobile dating needs to be responsive to the sociomaterial conditions of people's lives, as this pandemic continues to rapidly and differentially evolve across the globe. Like the examples of Zoom parties and fleeting Instagram phenomena, mobile dating practices are likely to emerge, mutate and at times become obsolete, depending on changing degrees of viral threat and the easing or tightening of social regulation in different points and times across the world. To capture the nuances of this phenomenon and its psychosocial effects, we need a theoretical approach that considers the relationship between people, dating technologies and COVID-19, and how they interact with and act upon each other. Critical methods of inquiry in health psychology offer considerable opportunities for conducting research that needs to be deeply contextualised. Further, discursive methods of analysis could be particularly valuable to this end, by allowing for an examination of what affective practices circulate in any material-discursive context and how people discursively and interactively negotiate intimacy in light of the pandemic. By doing so, as researchers, we can develop a sophisticated understanding of the complicated, contextualised production of intimacy as it is created by multiple actors, through mobile dating technologies, at this socio-historic point in time.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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