

Online Social Media Dating: The Effect of Social Online Dating Applications on How We Create Community & Connect with Others

Abstract

The purpose of this conference paper is to examine the effect that social media dating applications has had on how we actively create community and meaningful connections with others. I argue that this effect has been positive and transforms community as we know it and is done by presenting evidence for different concepts relating to the formation of community through the lens of the online dating world. This essay explores how dating applications have provided a space for those unable to connect in the physical world due to living remotely, or more relevantly, due to social distancing and isolation in the wake of COVID-19. The essay also explores how data collection produces a user-orientated experience in order to create a third space, and how dating applications such as Grindr and Scruff have constructed a platform for a marginalised group to come together in a safer environment. This essay also addresses some counterarguments to the idea that data collection is purely beneficial, through discussing how our personal data can be mishandled. Finally, this conference paper concludes with a recommendation for further study.

Introduction

The ways we come together have been revolutionised by social media. This is particularly prevalent within the online dating sphere. Discovering relationships and friendships alike has been reshaped by dating applications such as Bumble, Tinder and Grindr, and many singles are finding themselves reaching out to these online communities for meaningful connections. Social media has created a greater sense of community by allowing for more people to connect than ever before, and the online dating world has enabled a plethora of opportunities to connect with others on both a local and global scale. Social dating applications have actualised a positive transformation in how we create community and connect in the online dating world. This conference paper examines this through considering how dating apps have created a space for those unable to connect, allowed for user-orientated tailoring and providing a platform to a marginalised group, the LGBTQ+ community.

Community is conceptualised as a place or network where like-minded people with a common interest and normalities congregate and come together, according to an article from the Journal of Community Development. For community to occur, individuals do not have to share physical space or common geographical locality, as community can exist in an online environment. (Bradshaw, 2009). However, there are many individuals who lack community. For the 2021 millennial, time has become valuable and scarce. Commitments, work and study leave little time for socialising and forging new connections. Those living remotely may also struggle to make new connections outside their immediate physical geographical location. Additionally, in light of COVID-19, the cancellation of many social gatherings and events has damaged any means of forging new friendships and relationships for so many people around the world. This can make dating especially challenging. Fortunately, social media creates a space for community to form and individuals to connect, regardless of physical distance. "One of the main benefits of online dating in the context of COVID pandemic is

that, as opposed to in-person encounters, virtual dates cannot result in viral transmission. Thus, dating from the comfort of one's home was portrayed as a safer option." (Willis, 2021). Connecting has become harder than ever before, especially in the new age of the coronavirus pandemic. The absence of socialising can credit social media dating applications such as Bumble and Tinder for their popularity. Bumble and Tinder allow for users to choose radiuses of exposure, which they can tailor to show other users from either their town, their region, state, their country and even globally. The social reach that social media dating apps enables is unlimited, and users can connect to all corners of the world for unique friendships and distanced relationships. According to 'The Covid Crisis (2021)', queer dating app, Scruff, released a statement saying, "Remember that being physically distanced from each other does not mean we're alone." Without community and connections, isolation imposes social challenges and barriers against healthy relationships. Social media dating apps have relieved social media users of any obstacles they have faced in finding community and making valuable connections beyond their physical locality. "Since confinement measures can lead to social isolation, dating apps were also presented as beneficial tools that facilitate meaningful intimate connections, thereby supporting the emotional health of single people, especially those who live alone." (Myles, Duguay, Dietzel, 2021). Social media has transformed our sense of community beyond strictly geographical and has changed our ability to connect by opening up a realm of opportunity for people living in an isolated time to come together online.

Social media algorithms, cookies and data collection in privacy and GPS services have allowed for user-orientated content across linked platforms. This also applies for dating apps, who applies user's data to algorithms that allow users to have a fully tailored experience. "Global positioning system (GPS) based dating apps such as Tinder and Grindr brought about a small revolution in the way individuals meet, interact, and sometimes fall in love with each other." (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017). Services such as Bumble and Tinder allow users to link their Instagram and Facebook accounts to their dating app profiles. As written in the Journal of Computational Culture, using your existing Instagram and Facebook accounts to sign in to and create a new profile on another channel is known as 'Single Sign-On', or 'SSO'. SSOs allow the flow of data between different channels. This convergence of social media platforms allows Bumble and Tinder to streamline their user's information across their profiles. Information about page interest, likes, shares and comments, search history, age and geographical location are some of the data shared from Instagram and Facebook profiles to Bumble and Tinder profiles. "Tinder starts with a request to create a profile by logging in through their Facebook account. Tinder can then access the user's personal information, such as profile picture, personal description, education, work history and friends list... The second and final step in the registration phase is the request to access the user's GPS before continuing, location being an essential data point for this app." (Weltevrede & Jansen, 2019). This data inbuilds information about users into their profile and helps curate and design the content they view. For instance, if a user chooses to create their Bumble account by using the sign in for an existing Facebook account, the Bumble account pre-fills personal information. Age, geographical location and interests are streamlined and inputted from one account to the other, tailoring their experience. This effectively creates a personalised third space dating world. This third place is separate from their work and study and is uniquely individualised. Different people have come together to occupy this third place with the same interest; finding people to date. With the aid of these algorithms and data collection preferences, the community who occupy this dating third place can discover each other and make meaningful connections based on the compatibility of their personal information. However, some research and experts disagree with the notion that personal data collection, cookies and

algorithms create a purely positive impact on a user's experience. Some experts argue that the effects of streamlining of sensitive data through different social media accounts is inevitably harmful and invasive. There are privacy concerns amongst the sharing of data onto dating applications such as Tinder, and whether these apps are being transparent or not. The authors at the 28th USENIX Security Symposium believe so and are concerned about these applications using alternative channels to access protected data. "...Apps can circumvent the permission model and gain access to protected data without user consent by using both covert and side channels. Side channels present in the implementation of the permission system allow apps to access protected data and system resources without permission; whereas covert channels enable communication between two colluding apps so that one app can share its permission." (Reardon, 2019). These experts argue that often users of dating apps agree to sharing their private information without understanding what exact information is being collected, where it is going and who has access. This therefore makes creating connections occur at the cost of your personal data privacy.

Social media has allowed for community and connections to form over the web amongst marginalised communities and groups. Groups that have often felt pushed aside have flourished through the presence of online community, alike the LGBTQ+ community. According to an article from the *Journal of Psychology & Sexuality*, LGBTQ+ people may have found difficulty finding partners on typically heterosexual dating websites in the early 2000s and may also have experienced sexual intolerance and gender-based violence. Currently, there is no absence of an online presence in the online dating realm from this group due to new LGBTQ+ applications, as online dating shifts away from an outdated 'boy meets girl' agenda. "For millions of people, LGBTQ dating apps are the only way to meet new people on a romantic, sexual or social level right now.... Around half of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the USA had used dating apps, and that those who were gay were twice as likely to say they'd used them." (Steinfeld, 2020). Dating applications such as Scruff and Grindr have created a platform for the LGBTQ+ community to come together and connect with other like-minded people in their community. These applications are considered exclusive for LGBTQ+ individuals looking to make both meaningful and casual connections, and also cater to a friendship option and a group chat option. This online space creates community in a safe environment free from targeted intolerance. The friend finder option and group chat option found on Scruff and Grindr, as well as on Bumble, enables subgroups within this community to form, and results in a seamless transition for individuals into the online community.

Community has been redefined and reshaped by social media, and in particular, by online dating applications. These applications have changed how relationships and friendships come to fruition by offering a seamless process in finding companions. Applications such as Bumble and Scruff have created a platform for different groups to come together and create community and meaningful connections from the comfort of their phones. This has been particularly rewarding during COVID-19, when many may find it hard to socialise the physical spaces they normally would. Dating apps have provided a safe non-physical third space where individuals can come together based on interest in groups, in pairs, locally and from across the different corners of the globe. Through understanding the effect of social dating applications on connecting those unable to connect, creating a tailored experience and giving a platform to a marginalised group, we can appreciate how these applications have transformed how we create community and connect for the better. In the occurrence of further research, the effect online dating has on more marginalised groups may be put forward.

#LGBTQ+. #Privacy #Tinder #DatingApps

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