A Space of Our Own: Exploring the Relationship Initiation Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual Dating App Users

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study explores dating app use within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) community. LGBTQIA+ dating app users (*N* = 231) from across the U.S. were surveyed about their relationship initiation experiences. Thematic analysis was used to identify the benefits and challenges participants faced on dating apps and their motives for adopting (or avoiding) dating apps specifically for the LGBTQIA+ community (e.g., Grindr, Her, Butterfly). Participants described benefitting from dating apps, but also confronting significant challenges such as discrimination and the erasure of identity. Just over half (55.0%) of the sample reported using LGBTQIA+ dating apps, which functioned as safe spaces, reduced uncertainty about others' identities, and were better adapted to community norms. Multiple logistic regression was also used to test predictions regarding user adoption. Findings have implications for understanding how people in historically thin dating markets are using mobile technology to expand their opportunities for relationship initiation.

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The history of online dating can be traced back to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) communities of the early 1990s. Before online dating, LGBTQIA+ people often contended with thin dating markets that presented limited opportunities for initiating relationships outside of their immediate geographic vicinity (Grov et al., 2014; Weinrich, 1997). LGBTQIA+ people were early adopters of online dating and remain among its most common users, even as the popularity of these platforms has skyrocketed. Thirty percent of all adults and 55% of LGBTQIA+ adults in the U.S. (single or married) have used online dating (Anderson et al., 2020). Same-sex couples are also more likely than heterosexual couples to have met and formed long-term relationships online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Moreover, many of the earliest online dating platforms were designed by and for LGBTQIA+ users. For instance, dating apps like Tinder and Bumble were modeled after Grindr, a location-aware dating app launched several years prior by openly gay CEO Joel Simkhai to serve the queer community.

Despite being such prolific users, not enough is known about LGBTQIA+ experiences on dating apps. What little research does exist suggests that dating apps are not always welcoming to LGBTQIA+ users (Anderson et al., 2020; Pond & Farvid, 2017). This has led to an explosion of niche dating apps designed specifically for LGBTQIA+ markets such as Grindr (which is arguably the most studied LGBTQIA+ dating app; see Blackwell et al., 2015; Brubaker et al., 2016; Corriero & Tong, 2016), Her, and Butterfly. To better understand the needs these platforms fulfill, we investigate the relationship initiation experiences of LGBTQIA+ dating app users through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. Using inductive reasoning, we explore the benefits and challenges of dating apps that motivate adoption (or avoidance) of LGBTQIA+-specific platforms through the lens of uses and gratifications (U&G) theory (i.e., a theory about the motives that drive technology use; Katz et al., 1973). We also apply deductive logic to predict the likelihood of using LGBTQIA+ dating apps for relationship initiation.

This study contributes to the literature by answering calls for research on the relationship initiation experiences of gender and sexual minority populations (Gudelunas, 2012). Online dating is the most common way LGBTQIA+ people meet romantic partners (Anderson et al., 2020), which makes these platforms significant not only in their own right but also because they provide the context for understanding how LGBTQIA+ relationships are being initiated more broadly. Of course, the LGBTQIA+ community is not a monolithic group, and we draw on mixed-methods data from diverse subpopulations to examine how multiple identities intersect in users' experiences across different types of platforms (Crenshaw, 1989). In doing so, we shed light on some of the most highly engaged yet least studied populations of users in the literature. We also advance U&G theory alongside foundational theories of relationship development (e.g., Knapp, 1978) by studying how LGBTQIA+ people use dating apps in the earliest stages of relationships, which often occur entirely through technology and are thus outside the scope of most traditional models of relationship development. Additionally, we explore the unique needs that LGBTQIA+ dating apps fulfill for their communities. Much of online dating today happens on apps designed to reach niche markets. Understanding who uses niche dating apps and why is an important step toward being able to anticipate their effects on LGBTQIA+ relationships.

We begin this article by exploring LGBTQIA+ dating experiences across different kinds of platforms with an emphasis on the benefits and challenges that may be especially salient to this community of users. Next, we narrow in on people's motives for using LGBTQIA+ dating apps in addition to - or as a substitute for - more generalized platforms. After that, we describe our method for collecting mixed-methods data from a diverse sample of 231 LGBTQIA+ dating app users. To conclude, we discuss our results and their implications for relationship research.

The Good (and Bad) of Apps for LGBTQIA+ Dating

Dating apps offer several advantages over conventional forms of relationship initiation (e.g., meeting in person; see Finkel et al., 2012; Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019). While some of these benefits may resonate more strongly with LGBTQIA+ users, others are unique to this community's experiences on dating apps. For example, dating apps allow people to control their self-presentation and may allow LGBTQIA+ users to explore their gender and sexuality in ways they could not safely do offline. Dating apps also provide people with a larger dating pool (Finkel et al., 2012), which may be especially beneficial for expanding access to potential partners among minority populations. Additionally, people who lack strong LGBTQIA+ networks offline may discover that dating apps reduce uncertainty about others' identities and contribute to valuable support networks (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). For instance, Byron et al. (2021) found that young people used dating apps to initiate LGBTQIA+ friendships in addition to seeking romantic relationships. Building on this research, we begin our study by asking:

> **RQ1:** Across platforms, what benefits do LGBTQIA+ people report experiencing on dating apps?

Although dating apps offer multiple potential benefits, they may also pose challenges for LGBTQIA+ users (Anderson et al., 2020). For instance, forms of rejection and exclusion such as ghosting (i.e., abruptly ending contact without explanation) are prevalent on dating apps (Timmermans et al., 2021), and studies suggest that they may be experienced at higher rates by LGBTQIA+ users. For example, Blair and Hoskin (2019) found that transgender people are unfortunately often excluded from the dating pool, with 87.5% of participants in their study reporting that they would not date someone who was transgender. Deception is another common occurrence on dating apps, with Toma et al. (2008) showing that online daters misrepresent themselves to appear more attractive. Within the LGBTQIA+ community, deception may be more pronounced for the simple reason that not all people who use dating apps are out yet (Miller, 2015). According to communication privacy management theory, people can be relatively open on dating apps while wanting to keep parts of their identity such as their sexual orientation private (Petronio, 2002).

There are also challenges that may uniquely affect LGBTQIA+ users and outweigh many of the benefits they receive from using different types of dating apps (Kellermann, 1984). For example, some transgender users have been banned from general dating apps,

which they suspect is because of others seeing and reporting them for merely existing on these platforms (Cheung, 2022). Harassment is widespread on dating apps and disproportionately affects LGBTQIA+ users, who can be subjected to sexually explicit messages, name calling, and physical threats (Anderson et al., 2020). Dating apps can also be efficient tools to identify LGBTQIA+ people, putting them at risk for hate crimes, blackmail, and arrest (Steinfeld, 2020). Tinder (2022) warns users about swiping in one of the roughly 70 countries where being LGBTQIA+ is a crime, noting that "some law enforcement have been known to use dating apps as tools for potential entrapment" (para. 15). There have also been cases of individuals using dating apps to harm LGBTQIA+ users, including one well-known incident involving a man who was targeted and badly beaten in a hate crime committed by someone on Grindr hiding behind the username "str8 curious" (Dickinson, 2021). This leads us to also ask:

> **RQ2:** Across platforms, what challenges do LGBTQIA+ people report experiencing on dating apps?

The Long Tail of Dating Apps: From Mass Markets to Niche Audiences

The benefits and challenges of online dating may be part of what drives users to apps like Scruff and Fem that are designed specifically for the LGBTQIA+ community. U&G theory (Katz et al., 1973) proposes that users actively seek media to fulfill social and psychological needs. Using U&G theory, researchers have identified multiple motives for dating app use aside from relationship seeking, including social approval and validation, casual sex, flirting, traveling, getting over an ex, belonging, peer pressure, socializing, meeting others with similar sexual orientations, excitement and entertainment, distraction, and curiosity (Sumter et al., 2017; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). These motives can differ depending on age and gender and predict how frequently users engage with dating apps (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Sumter et al., 2017). Importantly though, most studies focus on general dating apps and may not extend to other types of platforms. While many people in the LGBTQIA+ community are still active on general platforms like Match and OkCupid, the Internet and mobile technology have evolved from catering to the masses to becoming more fractured and segmented (Ruggiero, 2000). As Anderson (2004) writes in the theory of the long tail, dating app use is no longer concentrated on a few popular platforms; rather, as shown in Figure 1, users are becoming spread out along the long tail of niche alternatives. LGBTQIA+ users may have unique needs for relationship initiation that are better fulfilled by niche dating apps. This makes it critical to distinguish between general platforms intended for broad audiences and specialized dating apps for LGBTQIA+ users.

Niche dating apps may fulfill similar needs as those catering to mass markets while also responding to challenges that are not addressed by general platforms. Pond and Farvid (2017) found that some LGBTQIA+ users thought general dating apps were not "queer friendly" and expressed frustration with "not having a digital space to call their own" (p. 9). People may be motivated to use LGBTQIA+ dating apps to avoid these and other
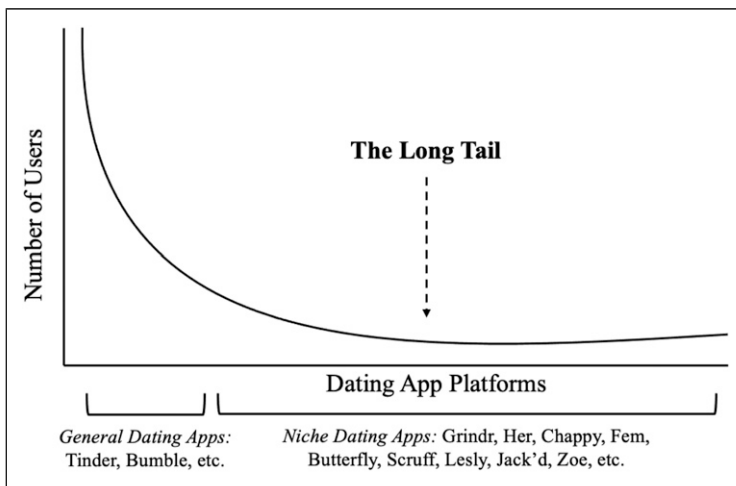
Figure 1. The long tail of dating apps.

difficulties with mass marketed platforms. For instance, gay men report using the Internet for sex, friendship, and romantic relationships, as well as for more nuanced reasons such as social inclusion and safety (Gudelunas, 2012; Miller, 2015; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014). We devote this study to achieving a richer understanding of why people use LGBTQIA+ dating apps to initiate relationships. We also extend U&G theory by exploring novel motives for use alongside motives for non-use that prevent people from adopting LGBTQIA+ dating apps for relationship initiation. While most U&G research focuses on active users, we consider the needs these platforms are not fulfilling that prevent more widespread adoption. To that end, we ask:

RQ3: What motivates people to (a) adopt or (b) avoid LGBTQIA+ dating apps?

Predicting Adoption of Niche Dating Apps

To complement our qualitative analyses, we also explore several quantitative predictors of LGBTQIA+ dating app use. Studying these predictors is important for understanding *who* uses LGBTQIA+ dating apps in addition to *why*. Doing so is also valuable for determining whether there are specific characteristics that would allow us to distinguish between users and non-users of these platforms in a systematic way. One reason people use apps like Tinder is to meet others with the same sexual orientation (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017), which is a motive we expect to be salient among LGBTQIA+ users. People who attach greater significance to their gender and sexual identity may also be more likely to use dating apps that emphasize LGBTQIA+ pride (Mohr & Kendra, 2011). LGBTQIA+ dating apps allow "geographically dispersed minority individuals to interact with one another as if they were a local majority" (Weinrich, 1997, p. 62), meaning users from rural

communities may be more likely than those in urban markets to rely on dating apps for connection. Of course, the decision to use niche platforms could also be less about individual users and their immediate physical environments and more about how active they are on dating apps in general, with active users being more likely to try different kinds of apps. Based on this logic, we test a constellation of individual (i.e., sexual orientation motivation, identity centrality), environmental (i.e., geographic location), and behavioral (i.e., length of use, frequency of use) predictors of LGBTQIA+ dating app use. We hypothesize that:

> **H1:** People who are more motivated by their sexual orientation, who are more cognizant of their LGBTQIA+ identity, who live in more rural areas, and who have been using dating apps longer and more frequently will have an increased likelihood of using LGBTQIA+ dating apps.

Method

Participants and Procedures

We recruited a diverse sample of 231 LGBTQIA+ dating app users from across the U.S. to complete a survey.[1] The survey invited participants to reflect on their dating app experiences using a combination of open- and closed-ended questions. Participants came from 41 of the 50 states in the U.S. and ranged from 18 to 66 years of age ($M = 32.70$; *Mdn.* = 32.00; $SD = 8.92$). They were White (76.2%), Black (13.4%), Latina/o/x (9.1%), Asian (6.1%), American Indian or Alaska Native (1.3%), Middle Eastern or North African (0.9%), and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.4%), with some selecting more than one race/ethnicity. Our sample was split between women (49.8%) and men (44.6%), with 5.6% identifying as non-binary or another gender identity (e.g., Nebularian). 10 percent of participants were transgender. In terms of sexual orientation, 50.2% were bisexual, 19.5% were gay, and 13.0% were lesbian, which mirrors national data showing most LGBTQIA+ people in the U.S. are bisexual, followed by gay and lesbian (Jones, 2021). Additionally, 3.9% were asexual and 13.4% identified with another sexual orientation (e.g., pansexual).[2] Participants lived in mostly urban/suburban (85.3%) areas. Over half (58.0%) had a bachelor's or advanced degree.

Quantitative Measures

Participants completed quantitative measures of their dating app frequency, the centrality of their LGBTQIA+ identity, and sexual orientation as a motivation for their dating app use. To measure frequency of use, participants responded to one item ("How often do you use dating apps?"; 1 = *rarely*, 7 = *multiple times a day*) about their behaviors ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.57$). Identity centrality was measured with five items (e.g., "My LGBTQIA + identity is a significant part of who I am"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) adapted from Mohr and Kendra's (2011) Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.50$, $\alpha = .94$). Sexual orientation motivation was tapped with three items (e.g.,

"I use dating apps to connect with other people with the same sexual orientation"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) from Timmermans and De Caluwé's (2017) Tinder Motives Scale ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .92$).

Qualitative Coding

Participants also responded to three qualitative items exploring the benefits and challenges of dating apps and why they had (or had not) used dating apps specifically for the LGBTQIA+ community. Their responses were analyzed using thematic analysis in three steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the authors and a team of undergraduate research assistants read through the data several times and inductively compiled initial codes. After the initial codes were identified, second-level coding was used to uncover salient themes, which were organized in a codebook. Using the finalized codebook, the authors unitized and coded approximately 20% of the data for reliability (Guetzkow's $U = .97$ to .99; Krippendorff's $\alpha = .85$ to .90). After achieving acceptable reliability, the remaining data were coded systematically.

Results[3]

Participants used anywhere from one to 11 dating apps ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.43$). The most popular general dating apps were Tinder (66.2%), Bumble (28.1%), OkCupid (23.8%), Plenty of Fish (21.6%), Hinge (13.0%), and Coffee Meets Bagel (5.6%). The most common niche dating apps were Grindr (34.6%), Her (7.8%), Butterfly (4.8%), Scruff (4.3%), Fem (3.5%), and Chappy (4.3%). Some participants (11.7%) also used other dating apps (e.g., Facebook Dating). Participants had been using dating apps for an average of 21.82 months ($SD = 26.00$). The majority (77.5%) met an equal or greater number of people on dating apps than in person.

Benefits and Challenges of Dating Apps for LGBTIQA+ Users (RQ1 and RQ2)

Dating app benefits. Research Question one explored the general benefits that LGBTQIA+ people experienced on dating apps. Specifically, participants responded to an item that asked, "What benefits (if any) have you gained from using dating apps?" Six substantive themes captured LGBTQIA+ participants' perceptions of the benefits of dating apps for relationship initiation. Remaining responses were coded as "None" ($n = 20$; 8.7% of the sample) or "Other" ($n = 9$; 3.9% of the sample). The distribution of substantive dating apps benefits by gender and sexual orientation can be found in Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix A. Fisher's exact tests showed that the likelihood of experiencing each benefit did not differ by gender or sexual orientation.

Making offline connections. Ninety-eight participants (42.4% of the sample) described using dating apps to initiate offline relationships within the LGBTQIA+ community. Despite the stereotype that dating apps are used for hookups, only 5.2% of the sample explicitly reported seeking a casual sexual relationship. Joy (a 33-year-old bisexual

woman) said: "I've met a lot of lovely men and women on them, so there's that. Some of the best nights of my life are a result of using dating apps." Kenneth (a 34-year-old gay man) shared: "I met Ben, a guy I am dating on Grindr, and I haven't been this happy in a long time." Participants also found dating apps useful for forming platonic relationships. Allison (a 27-year-old lesbian woman) commented: "I have met a whole lot of new friends. I will become friends with the ones I am not interested in romantically."

Expanding the dating pool. Forty-eight participants (20.8% of the sample) referenced having access to more LGBTQIA+ partners on dating apps than through their offline networks. Kimberly (a 22-year-old lesbian woman) said: "Online dating allows me to meet so many more people than I can in real life. I will see people on the site or app that are in my area but I might never cross paths with." Latisha (a 37-year-old bisexual woman) noted: "I met a wider variety of people than I would have without using the apps." According to Yelena (a 44-year-old lesbian woman): "I have met a lot of people I never would have met otherwise."

Knowledge and self-discovery. Thirty-one participants (13.4% of the sample) said that dating apps provided them with an education in LGBTQIA+ dating. Jeff (a 29-year-old gay man) responded: "I've learned some interesting life lessons and practical dating lessons. And I've grown some as a person, like learning how to stand up for myself, what I like and don't like, and how I can be in a relationship." Monica (a 33-year-old asexual woman) added: "I had been in a long-term relationship before using them and felt a little late to the party. It was like a crash-course and I very quickly learned how to protect myself and spot red-flags." Dating apps also affirmed participants' LGBTQIA+ identities. Kari (a 19-year-old bisexual woman) stated: "I have become more confident in myself and gained social skills."

Ease of use. Thirty-one participants (13.4% of the sample) found that the features and affordances of dating apps made dating more convenient for LGBTQIA+ users. Ann (a 20-year-old bisexual and asexual woman) reported: "It is much easier to meet people, since you only have to swipe to see other people. It is also easy to see a basic introduction of someone through the pictures they post and their biography." Mindi (a 25-year-old lesbian woman) emphasized: "Apps are so much easier than trying to find dates the old fashioned ways. Apps take a lot of the awkwardness out of dating." Dating apps also removed obstacles to relationship initiation. Peter (a 37-year-old bisexual man) noted: "It was easy to look through the people and find someone I was attracted to. It's way easier than going to a bar or meeting someone out in public."

Sense of belonging. Twelve participants (5.2% of the sample) described how dating apps connected them to the larger LGBTQIA+ community. Henry (a 29-year-old bisexual man) said: "I have met a lot of interesting people that have helped me find a variety of ways to meet people in the community." By introducing participants to LGBTQIA+ users in the area, dating apps also made them feel less isolated. Sean (a 33-year-old gay man) said dating apps helped with "not feeling alone in a small town." Ashton (a 35-year-old

bisexual man) remarked: "I have a better way of finding people who are like me. It's hard to do that in the real world."

Safer introductions. Six participants (2.6% of the sample) shared that they felt safer initiating LGBTQIA+ relationships on dating apps. There is a common perception that meeting strangers online is risky, but for some participants dating offline was seen as unsafe. Thaddeus (a 35-year-old gay man) reported that because of dating apps he: "Met people and had an easy way to do so without feeling unsafe." According to Alberto (a 33-year-old bisexual man), dating apps addressed: "The issues of safety with going out and meeting people." Jon (a 66-year-old bisexual man) said they allowed him to: "Maintain a semblance of anonymity and safety."

Dating app challenges. Research Question two inquired about the general challenges that LGBTQIA+ people experienced on dating apps. Specifically, participants responded to an item that asked, "What (if any) are your biggest frustrations about using dating apps?" Six substantive themes captured LGBTQIA+ participants' perceptions of the challenges that dating apps posed for relationship initiation. Some responses received codes of "None" (n = 17; 7.4% of the sample) or "Other" (n = 19; 8.2% of the sample). The distribution of substantive dating app challenges by gender and sexual orientation are in Tables B1 and B2 in Appendix B. Fisher's exact tests revealed that gay participants were more likely to report *ghosting the relationship* as a challenge ($p < .05$).

Lack of authenticity. Ninety participants (39.0% of the sample) expressed frustration with other LGBTQIA+ people lying or misrepresenting themselves on dating apps. Ashton (a 35-year-old bisexual man) said: "So many people lie about who they are. I wish people would just be themselves." Ricky (a 24-year-old bisexual man) pointed out: "A lot of people tend to bend the truth in certain ways when using apps, so sometimes people are nothing like you originally thought." Multiple participants also encountered bots posing as people. Freddie (a 30-year-old gay man) shared: "There are lots of bots. Sometimes I don't know if they are real."

Bias and harassment. Thirty participants (13.0% of the sample) reported being the targets of hatred and hostility on dating apps, which often centered around their identity. Brad (a 22-year-old gay man) said: "People are often more brazen with their pre-existing prejudices against people of different bodies, races, gender identities, etc., which can be irritating to read." Sometimes this escalated to threats and harassment, making participants feel unsafe and placing them in potentially dangerous situations. Monica (a 33-year-old asexual woman) shared: "A lot of people are on these apps just looking to hook up and things would escalate or get creepy very quickly, including a few situations where I didn't feel safe." Nicholas (a 32-year-old straight man) observed: "The app does not have a good warning system. If there is someone on there abusing the app to get money or rob people or just generally mistreat them, the next person would never know."

Ghosting the relationship. Thirty participants (13.0% of the sample) revealed that a challenge of dating apps for LGBTQIA+ users was rejection. Oliver (a 20-year-old gay man) said: "It is so common to get ghosted. It happens a fair bit of time and it hurts every time to just get left on read for days or hours, or forever." Some participants wondered what they did to cause the ghosting. Alexis (a 28-year-old bisexual woman) disclosed: "It's hard when people don't respond to you. I can't tell what I did wrong." Yvette (a 35-year-old lesbian woman) shared: "It's hard to meet someone outside of the app. Many just don't show up."

Quantity over quality. Twenty-two participants (9.5% of the sample) referred to sorting through many low-quality matches. Mattie (a 32-year-old bisexual man) complained about having: "Lots of garbage to wade through." Jeff (a 29-year-old gay man) said: "I can be picky, so I don't love the choices I have. I don't enjoy the chore of searching that it feels like sometimes." Ruben (a 33-year-old gay man) added: "It tends to be more about meeting a lot of people and hoping you find someone you're compatible with rather than a way to focus on people you're more likely to be compatible with."

Physical proximity. Six participants (2.6% of the sample) mentioned that their physical locations made it difficult to meet LGBTQIA+ people on dating apps. For example, some participants increased the size of the local dating pool by expanding their search radius, which made it hard to meet offline. Lauren (a 36-year-old bisexual woman) said: "There aren't a lot of people on the apps I use that are nearby where I live, so sometimes I end up driving for a date a lot further than I intended." Latisha (a 37-year-old bisexual woman) remarked that many partners she met were: "Too far away for me and for things to be feasible on a long-term basis."

Erasure of identity. Three participants (1.3% of the sample) described feeling that their LGBTQIA+ identity was erased by dating app platforms and users. Catrina (a 34-year-old bisexual woman) said: "Many do not give the option to pick that I want to date men or women." Allison (a 27-year-old lesbian woman) emphasized: "It is hard to screen for what you are sexually compatible with. I am femme switch/versatile and prefer a versatile partner." Cathy (a 31-year-old lesbian woman) shared that despite being interested in dating women: "Men often disregard my sexuality and message me."

Motives for Using LGBTQIA+ Dating Apps (RQ3)

Motives for use. Research Question 3a addressed people's motives for adopting or avoiding LGBTQIA+ dating apps. Specifically, participants responded to an item that read, "Why have (or haven't) you used a dating app specifically for LGBTQIA+ people?" The sample was split between those who had ($n = 127$; 55.0%) and had not ($n = 104$; 45.0%) used LGBTQIA+ dating apps. Five substantive themes captured participants' reasons for using LGBTQIA+ dating apps for relationship initiation. Responses that could not be categorized were labeled as "Other" ($n = 21$; 9.1% of the sample). The distribution of substantive motives for use of LGBTQIA+ dating apps by gender and sexual

orientation can be found in Tables C1 and C2 in Appendix C. Fisher's exact tests showed that male participants were more likely to report being motivated by *exclusive selection* (*p* < .001). Gay participants were more likely to report *positive word-of-mouth* as a motive (*p* < .01).

Exclusive selection. Forty-eight participants (20.8% of the sample) described having more options due to the LGBTQIA+-majority dating pool on niche dating apps. Emma (a 22-year-old bisexual woman) shared: "I find it hard meeting people in person who are LGBTQIA." Ronald (a 30-year-old gay man) found Grindr superior because: "It has people very similar to myself versus a traditional dating app which is primarily for opposite sex dating." Dan (a 34-year-old queer man) said of LGBTQIA+ dating apps: "I exclusively use those apps. I use them because that's where the people I'm attracted to are."

Community culture. Twenty-six participants (11.3% of the sample) preferred niche dating apps because they provided a space created by and for LGBTQIA+ users that was tailored to their needs. Lee (a 29-year-old lesbian non-binary person) said: "I think it can be just easier using something that's made for queer folks. It doesn't feel like we've been forced to fit into an app not meant for us." Cameron (a 28-year-old pansexual non-binary person) concurred: "It was easier to meet people like me instead of people trying to force me into a heteronormative box." Jeff (a 29-year-old gay man) explained: "It caters specifically to what I am looking for not only out of online dating but also some of the more nuanced ways in which gay people interact, like sexual position and sexual health status."

Safe spaces. Sixteen participants (6.9% of the sample) described LGBTQIA+ dating apps as spaces free of bias and judgement. Alexis (a 28-year-old bisexual woman) shared: "I feel like there's less of an adverse reaction when you tell someone you're not straight." She went on to note that with general dating apps, "You may get some hateful reactions, which you can block, but you still receive it just for existing." Likewise, Nate (a 28-year-old bisexual man) responded: "I have used apps specifically for LGBTQIA+ people as the traditional dating apps are somewhat homophobic and racist." Some LGBTQIA+ women also reported using niche dating apps to avoid straight men. Jody (a 33-year-old bisexual woman) said Her: "Cuts down on the predatory messages I get from men on traditional dating apps." Sabrina (a 33-year-old bisexual woman) also switched to Her because: "It's easier to find women that are genuinely attracted to women and I don't necessarily have to deal with creepy men."

Easy identification. Seventeen participants (7.4% of the sample) adopted niche dating apps because they provided assurances that others identified as LGBTQIA+. Melanie (a 48-year-old bisexual woman) explained: "I think they allow for more positive contacts. I don't have as many concerns as I do if I'm on a mixed app that I'll wind up liking someone who isn't part of the LGBTQIA+ community." Mindi (a 25-year-old lesbian woman) used Her because: "I feel like the girls on the app are looking for the same things as me. I don't

have to worry about sexual orientation at all, so I'm a little more comfortable." Darrel (a 24-year-old bisexual man) preferred Grindr because: "Most of the time you can't tell if a man is gay in person, so the only way to proceed without this worry is to use an LGBTQIA+ dating app."

Positive word-of-mouth. Seven participants (3.0% of the sample) were drawn to LGBTQIA+ dating apps by their positive reputations within the community. Allen (a 30-year-old gay man) commented: "Everyone was using Grindr, so I did too." Jarod (a 33-year-old gay man) similarly observed: "Everyone was on Grindr back in college and it was a normal thing to have, similar to everyone having a Myspace years before, and then Facebook even though I hated it. At the time, it felt like a necessity." Participants also adopted niche dating apps after receiving positive recommendations from other LGBTQIA+ users. For example, Allison (a 27-year-old lesbian woman) learned of PinkCupid from a former partner: "I had an ex who was on so I tried it. After that I joined Zoosk as a recommendation from another friend."

Motives for non-use. Research Question 3b revealed six substantive themes capturing participants' reasons for avoiding LGBTQIA+ apps for relationship initiation. "Other" (n = 12; 5.2% of the sample) captured responses that could not be categorized. The distribution of substantive motives for non-use of LGBTQIA+ dating apps by gender and sexual orientation are in Tables C1 and C2 in Appendix C. Fisher's exact tests revealed that participants of other gender identities ($p < .01$) and sexual orientations ($p < .01$) were more likely to report being motivated to non-use by *lack of awareness*. Lesbian participants were more likely to report platforms being *redundant with other apps* as a motive for non-use ($p < .05$).

Redundant with other apps. Thirty-one participants (13.4% of the sample) were not interested in using LGBTQIA+ dating apps because they perceived them as unnecessary given the popularity of general platforms. Bruce (a 33-year-old bisexual man) explained: "I began using general dating apps first because those were the ones I learned about. So I signed up for those and found that they had plenty of people from across the spectrum." Henry (a 29-year-old bisexual man) said: "I don't feel the need to use them since you can find what you're looking for on other apps." Ruth (a 36-year-old lesbian woman) noted: "I figured I'd have better luck with one of the more popular apps than one that's not particularly well-known but is just for lesbians."

Lack of awareness. Twenty-nine participants (12.6% of the sample) attributed their inexperience with LGBTQIA+ dating apps to simply not knowing that platforms for their community existed. Marcus (a 23-year-old bisexual man) said: "I never knew there were apps specifically for LGBTQIA+ people." Lila (a 31-year-old bisexual woman) replied that she was: "Not familiar with LGBTQIA+ apps other than Grindr, which is for men." Janice (a 40-year-old asexual woman) commented that: "I haven't found a specific app for people who are asexual/graysexual. If one exists, I haven't found it in my area!"

Too limiting. Twelve participants (5.2% of the sample) did not use LGBTQIA+ dating apps because of limited opportunities for relationship initiation. Mattie (a 32-year-old bisexual man) stated: "I don't like those kinds of exclusionary services." Rose (a 27-year-old bisexual woman) said: "I'd no more go on a dating app 'just' for bisexuals than I would go on a dating app 'just' for Hispanics. I think that would be putting the wrong foot forward." Lawrence (a 35-year-old pansexual man) commented: "I just want to find people, no matter what they are. Specifying a certain type of person limits my choices."

Negative word-of-mouth. Ten participants (4.3% of the sample) reported being driven away by the negative reputations of some LGBTQIA+ dating apps. Paula (a 37-year-old bisexual woman) said: "The things that I heard about them made them seem very trashy and not a place to meet a potential long-term partner." Doris (a 41-year-old queer woman) added: "They have bad reputations as hookup apps." Others worried they were unsafe for LGBTQIA+ people. Bruce (a 33-year-old bisexual man) shared: "I also heard bad things about those other sites as far as dangerous people and being targeted specifically for being on those sites."

Feeling like an outsider. Five participants (2.2% of the sample) said they did not use LGBTQIA+ dating apps because they did not feel like they belonged. Chris (a 27-year-old bisexual man) said: "I don't like making my sexual orientation my identity." Others felt that LGBTQIA+ dating apps affirmed some identities while excluding others. Ann (a 20-year-old bisexual and asexual woman) responded: "I feel like because I am bisexual and asexual, I don't fit in very well with the LGBTQIA+ community. It feels strange being on a dating app meant for LGBTQIA+ people when I don't fit in well." Lori (a 30-year-old bisexual woman) concluded: "I feel like those apps are geared towards gay men. I don't feel that there are enough gay women."

Not out yet. Four participants (1.7% of the sample) avoided niche dating apps because they did not openly identify as LGBTQIA+. Sadly, Sarah (a 26-year-old lesbian woman) said she did not use LGBTQIA+ dating apps because: "I am ashamed." Participants who wanted to keep their sexual orientation private also showed a preference for dating apps that allowed them to "pass as straight." Monica (a 33-year-old asexual woman) disclosed: "I don't tell people my identity at first since it's still mostly men that I am interested in meeting as a woman." Sally (a 22-year-old bisexual woman) revealed: "I wasn't out to the people around me, so I thought I would be wasting time using those apps if I couldn't bring LGBTQIA+ dates around."

Predicting LGBTQIA+ Dating App Use (H1)

Hypothesis 1 predicted the likelihood of using LGBTQIA+ dating apps by regressing whether participants had ever used one or more of these platforms (a dichotomous indicator comparing users to non-users where 1 = yes and 0 = no) on each predictor (i.e.,

identity central, length of use, sexual orientation motivation, frequency of use, and geographic location). Age, race, and education were entered as covariates. The full logistic regression model was significant: $\chi^2(8, N = 231) = 37.80$, $p < .001$, with the predictors explaining 21.7% (Nagelkerke R squared) variance. The contributions of each logistic regression coefficient were evaluated using Wald tests. As Table 1 shows, when controlling for other variables, users who considered their LGBTQIA+ identity more central to their self-concept, who were more motivated to use online dating to meet others with the same sexual orientation, and who had been using online dating longer were more likely to try LGBTQIA+ dating apps.

Discussion

LGBTQIA+ users helped popularize online dating, yet their experiences on these platforms are often overlooked in relationship science. Drawing on a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data, this study filled a gap in the literature by investigating how the experiences of LGBTQIA+ dating app users intersect with existing research on relationships in the earliest stages of development (Knapp, 1978). Our qualitative results uncovered six benefits and six challenges of dating apps that are particularly salient for LGBTQIA+ users. We also found five motives for use and six motives for non-use of niche dating apps as alternatives to general platforms (e.g., Hinge). Our quantitative analysis further revealed a set of characteristics that predicted niche dating app use. These results shed light on the ways LGBTQIA+ people meet online while also presenting new opportunities and challenges for relationship initiation.

Table 1. Multiple Logistic Regression Predicting LGBTQIA+ Dating App Use.

	B	SE	Wald	df	p	OR	95% CI	
							LL	UL
Constant	−3.17**	1.08	8.60	1	.00	.04	—	—
Age	−.01	.01	.47	1	.48	.98	.95	1.02
Race	.02	.36	.00	1	.95	1.02	.50	2.06
Education	−.31	.31	1.01	1	.31	.73	.39	1.34
Identity centrality	.33**	.11	9.03	1	.00	1.40	1.12	1.75
Length of use	.01*	.00	5.69	1	.01	1.01	1.00	1.03
Sexual orientation motivation	.30**	.11	7.14	1	.00	1.36	1.08	1.70
Frequency of use	.09	.09	.99	1	.31	1.10	.90	1.34
Geographic location	−.18	.46	.16	1	.68	.82	.33	2.04

Note. Race was coded 1 = White (the most frequent category) and 0 = other. Location was coded 1 = urban/suburban and 0 = rural. Education was coded 1 = less than a bachelor's degree and 0 = bachelor's or advanced degree. The dependent variable ("Have you ever used a dating app specifically for LGBTQIA+ people?") was coded 1 = yes and 0 = no. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; OR = odds ratio.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

Some of the benefits and challenges participants experienced across different kinds of dating apps are similar to those identified in past studies, while others are unique to our LGBTQIA+ sample. The most frequently reported benefit was *making offline* connections, which coheres with research showing that dating apps facilitate romantic as well as platonic relationships with other LGBTQIA+ users (Byron et al., 2021). Participants also found dating apps useful for *expanding the dating pool*. One advantage of dating apps is that they increase the choices people have in potential partners (Finkel et al., 2012), and our results suggest that this may be especially important for users in thin dating markets (such as LGBTQIA+ users). By reducing uncertainty about others' identities, dating apps also contributed to a *sense of belonging* by connecting users with the broader LGBTQIA+ community (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Other primary benefits participants referenced included *safer introductions*, *ease of use*, and the *knowledge and self-discovery* users gained from expressing themselves freely on dating apps. These findings point to ways dating apps confer benefits to LGBTQIA+ users that are not always available when initiating relationships offline.

Although some participants described only positive experiences on dating apps, the number of challenges outnumbered the benefits they reported. It is possible that a negativity bias caused participants to attach more weight to experiences that left them feeling frustrated or dissatisfied with these platforms (Kellermann, 1984). For example, *lack of authenticity* was the most prevalent challenge in our sample and was spontaneously mentioned by 39% of LGBTQIA+ participants. This is supported by studies showing that upwards of 80% of people in heterosexual samples lie in their online dating profiles (Toma & Hancock, 2010; Toma et al., 2008). However, much of this deception was subtle, perhaps because many LGBTQIA+ dating apps encourage quickly meeting FtF (Toma et al., 2019). Dating app profiles also do not allow for the same type of phased disclosure process that people are accustomed to offline, which could contribute to perceptions of dishonesty by forcing them to choose between revelation and concealment (Petronio, 2002). Harassment is another common occurrence in online dating (Anderson et al., 2020), with several participants experiencing *bias and harassment* on dating apps for being LGBTQIA+. The pseudo-anonymity of dating apps may encourage toxic disinhibition (Suler, 2004), allowing racism and homophobia to be expressed more easily online. Participants also said that the emphasis on *quantity over quality* was overwhelming and did not necessarily lead to better outcomes. Many of the most popular LGBTQIA+ dating apps are location based, which may contribute to choice overload by displaying everyone within a certain vicinity (Schwartz, 2004). Additional challenges participants reported were *ghosting the relationship*, *erasure of identity*, and issues with *physical proximity* stemming from an absence of LGBTQIA+ users nearby. While not all of these challenges are unique to LGBTQIA+ users, our results demonstrate which problems tend to be the most prevalent within this community.

These difficulties motivated roughly half of our sample to adopt niche dating apps, making these platforms a significant part of relationship initiation for LGBTQIA+ people. Some participants were pushed to LGBTQIA+ dating apps because of the *exclusive*

selection of an LGBTQIA+-majority dating pool, making this the most frequent motive in our sample. Participants also described these platforms as *safe spaces*, unlike general dating apps that could be heteronormative and unfriendly toward queer users (Gudelunas, 2012; Pond & Farvid, 2017). Other participants were pulled to LGBTQIA+ dating apps because they functioned differently from other platforms. For instance, participants said these apps provided *easy identification* that allowed them to get to know people without having to wonder if they identified as LGBTQIA+. Participants also said these apps had a *community culture* more customized to LGBTQIA+ dating norms and more *positive word-of-mouth* within the community. These findings advance research on dating apps by providing further evidence that LGBTQIA+ users have different reasons for adopting niche platforms (Miller, 2015; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014). Ruggiero (2000) observed that mobile technology is becoming more fragmented into an "endless feast of niches and specialties" (Ha & James, 1998, p. 2), and our results show that for LGBTQIA+ users, niche dating apps fulfill unique needs relative to general platforms.

Our results also reveal what prevented some participants from adopting niche dating apps. Participants who avoided LGBTQIA+ dating apps said they did so primarily because they were *redundant with other apps*, but also because of *negative word-of-mouth* and because they found these apps *too limiting*. There were also participants who were *not out yet* or who worried about *feeling like an outsider* among other LGBTQIA+ users. Even within the LGBTQIA+ community, there can still be discrimination directed at different groups and feelings of exclusion among those who feel out of place on both general and niche dating apps (Pond & Farvid, 2017). Additionally, some participants reported a *lack of awareness* of dating apps for LGBTIQA+ people, especially newer users. Most dating app research using U&G theory focuses on motives for use (Gudelunas, 2012; Miller, 2015; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014), yet it is also critical to understand motives for non-use that may serve as barriers to relationship initiation.

We found individual characteristics useful for distinguishing between participants who used niche dating apps from those who did not. Participants whose LGBTQIA+ identity was more central to their self-concept and whose sexual orientation was a motivating factor in their decision to date online were the most likely to use LGBTQIA+ dating apps. These findings underscore the value that niche dating apps can have for members of marginalized communities when initiating relationships. The likelihood of using LGBTQIA+ platforms also increased the longer participants had been using dating apps, even after controlling for age. It is possible people who have been using dating apps for an extended period are more likely to become aware of LGBTQIA+ dating apps or to expand their search beyond general platforms. To our surprise, age, race, education, frequency of use, and geographic location were not significant predictors. This suggests that the decision to use niche dating apps depends most strongly on the extent to which people identify with the communities these platforms serve. These results point to which people may benefit the most from using LGBTQIA+ dating apps to initiate relationships by spotlighting characteristics shared by participants. They also provide dating app developers with a quantifiable set of variables that predict user adoption.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Findings from this study offer practical insight for dating app developers to use in designing more inclusive experiences. Young people are the most active dating app users (Anderson et al., 2020), and Gallup estimates that as many as one in six Gen Zers identify as LGBTQIA+ (Jones, 2021). Our findings provide an in-depth look at the experiences of LGBTQIA+ users when initiating relationships on dating apps – who uses them, who does not, and why. Although many of the LGBTQIA+ participants in our sample formed fulfilling relationships using dating apps, their experiences also offer a poignant reminder that these platforms sometimes pose significant threats to physical safety and psychological well-being. For users of these apps, our results also highlight benefits and drawbacks to be mindful of when choosing between platforms.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our survey generated a substantial number of unusable responses. In the future, a more focused data collection strategy that specifically targets LGBTQIA+ spaces is recommended, as this might encourage higher quality responses and a larger participant pool. Although we explored the dating app experiences of gender and sexual minorities, other kinds of diversity (e.g., disability) should be considered in future online dating studies. Future research can also use the themes identified in this study to develop a measure of dating app motives that is unique to LGBTQIA+ users. Although measures of dating app motives exist (see Sumter et al., 2017; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017), they tend to be exclusive to Tinder. It is worth developing a non-platform-specific scale for the LGBTQIA+ community given evidence that this population faces unique benefits and challenges when dating online. Additionally, future research could build on these results by exploring if LGBTQIA+ couples who meet on niche platforms experience different relationship outcomes than couples who meet on general dating apps or offline.

Conclusion

LGBTQIA+ dating apps allow users the freedom to initiate relationships and experiment with their identities in a safe and pseudo-anonymous environment, yet they can also introduce new challenges and exacerbate existing threats to well-being. With online dating now being the most common way to initiate relationships, it is important to explore the relationship initiation process in non-heterosexual samples to understand contemporary dating within the LGBTQIA+ community. The benefits that LGBTQIA+ users obtain from dating apps and the unique concerns they face deserve further consideration in the online dating literature specifically and within interpersonal communication at large.

Author's Note

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We had 598 participants initially respond to the survey. After removing participants who were missing data or who provided low quality responses, our final sample size was 231.
2. Following prior research, we retained participants in our sample if they self-selected into the study but identified as heterosexual or straight (Blackwell et al., 2015; Miller, 2015). These participants accounted for 3.9% of our sample, and all but one reported using dating apps specifically for the LGBTQIA+ community (e.g., Chappy, Grindr, Her).
3. Responses were lightly edited for spelling, grammar, and length. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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