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## **“I STILL WANT TO KNOW THEY’RE NOT TERRIBLE PEOPLE”: NEGOTIATING TRUST, PLEASURE AND QUEER ETHICS IN LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE’S DATING APP USE**

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Dating and hook-up apps constitute spaces of intense negotiation around issues of sex, identity and intimacy, in which norms are tested and reinforced. This paper examines discussions of ‘ideal app use’ which emerged in qualitative workshops conducted in 2018 with 23 LGBTQ+ app-users aged 18-35 in urban and regional New South Wales. When asked to describe the ways they distinguished ‘good’ (or trustworthy) profiles from ‘bad’ (untrustworthy) profiles, many participants expressed a need to perceive potential hook-ups as ‘good people’, with a shared political sensibility.

Previous research on ethical practice and hook-up apps has considered how users’ continuous negotiation (and, crucially, their transgression) of their own ‘rules’ constitutes a “process of self-formation” (Byron and Albury, 2018, p. 225). In this process, users oscillate between describing app interactions as embedded in everyday life, and at

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other times as discrete spaces with particular functions (Byron and Albury, 2018). Our workshops invited app users to articulate their 'rules' for conduct on dating apps via creative design activities. These prompted participants to create 'how-tos' for ideal app use, including lists of instructions for crafting a good profile and avoiding 'red flags'.

Within the workshop discussions, the ideal ethical user was articulated as being clear and consistent in their dating app practices of picture-sharing, messaging and blocking as a means of demonstrating self-knowledge and responsibility for others' emotions. However, participants observed inconsistencies between their ideal ethical standpoint and their own app use, which they explained in relation to the challenges of negotiating app affordances and prioritising their own safety and desires. In some cases, app affordances enabled strategies for connecting with users that were aligned with their politics, implicitly conferring a greater sense of trustworthiness.

In their discussions, participants articulated their 'rules' for filtering matches in relation to particular design features and affordances which enabled (sexed and gendered) cultures of accountability to others. For example, a *Grindr* user described blocking other users as a practical filtering measure which frees up space for more relevant matches. Although he experienced anxiety when he himself was blocked, he justified his blocking of others as "a courtesy to people that have the free version... one less person taking up space". By contrast, a female participant described how the app *Her* demands the user select from a menu of explanations when blocking another user, making the practice less common and its significance heightened. This reflects the privileging of temporality over spatiality in the design of queer women's dating apps, where proximity is referenced in geolocative features but is countered by a stronger emphasis on fostering connections that may emerge gradually (Murray & Sapnar Ankersen, 2016).

For non-binary and trans participants, the affordances of app profiles were viewed as crucial to providing the conditions for self-presentation and strategies for being seen safely by the right kind of users. One regional non-binary participant described shifting between gender and sexuality identities regularly on *Tinder* to avoid contact with straight cis men. Trans participants further discussed the incorporation of pronouns and gender identity in profiles which allowed them not only to identify (and potentially match with) other trans people, but also noted that those using the 'cisgender' label were likely to be more trans-friendly.

Participants often spoke about needing to feel someone is a 'nice person', particularly in groups featuring female, trans and non-binary users. A 'nice person' was synonymous with being politically aligned, and this heightened feelings of safety, or even initial desire or interest:

Even if it's just for a hook-up ... I don't want to sleep with people who are actually shit people at the end of the day, or have crappy politics ... I still want to know they're not terrible people. (*queer, non-binary transmasculine, regional*)

The concern with engaging with the 'right kind of person', regardless of how casual or fleeting the connection, was consistent in these groups. In tandem with this emphasis on the politics, ethics and likeability of potential matches, users across all groups

articulated an expectation of consistency and clarity from themselves and others. In these instances, self-awareness and agency were presumed to be expressed through consistency of self-presentation in profile photographs and biographies, that was interpreted through a lens of 'knowing what you're looking for'. For example, one participant noted that: "Sometimes I tend to go, you're way too wholesome for what I'm looking for... I don't want to fuck up your life, bye." (*queer, cisgender female, urban*).

In imagining the ideal app user as a self-aware subject who knows in advance what they are seeking, and crafts their profile accordingly, users seemed to be guided by an expectation of a consistent, stable alignment between in-app personae and personal politics and ethics. This was most apparent in the tension between users' articulation of their ideal best practice, and how they reflected on their actual behaviour and interpreted that of other users. For example, one urban participant noted that despite her commitment to challenging femme-invisibility in queer communities, she tended to dismiss women whose profile pictures "seem straight". Similarly, another user reflected on his avoidance of users without photos, which he read as 'discreet' (i.e. closeted) profiles:

I understand the 'not out' thing because I was in that stage (when I was growing up) in the country. It was pretty tough... But I don't have the time to be trying to pry it out of someone... If I was in a different stage and I cared more about helping people feel comfortable about coming out, then that would be different. (*gay, cisgender male, regional*)

Here, users negotiate prioritising their own safety and desires with an emerging queer ethics. As noted in prior studies, this tension reflects the way users apprehend the app environment as both an integrated part of their 'real life' social worlds, and a space necessitating different expectations, boundaries and styles of interaction (Byron & Albury, 2018).

In this paper, we explore how a reading of in-app practices - such as messaging, picture-sharing and blocking - through a lens of queer ethics can inform LGBTQ+ young people's 'rules' for app use. As in Duguay's (2017) research on queer women's deployment of in-app affordances as 'identity modulation', participants interacted with other users and interpreted their profiles in relation not only to sexual desires, but also queer politics and identity. In some instances, this was expressed through a need to connect with 'good people' and a heightened sense of responsibility for self-knowledge and self-disclosure. At other times, participants acknowledged the challenges of negotiating politicised responsibility to others while simultaneously pursuing the kinds of pleasurable connections they sought on apps, and limiting their own self-disclosure as a means of guarding their physical and emotional safety.

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