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## **AN INTIMATE REVOLUTION: DIGITAL PRACTICES OF INTIMACY DURING COVID-19 AND BEYOND**

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### **Short abstract:**

This paper investigates the changes in digital practices of intimacy during the COVID-19 social distancing period in the UK, and whether these transformations have persisted in the 'new normal'. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, collecting quantitative and qualitative data from 824 adults who used dating apps during the pandemic, and conducting 60 in-depth interviews. The study aimed to understand the digital intimate practices of heterosexual and LGBT+ communities during and after COVID-19.

First, we describe (using both descriptive statistics and excerpts from participant interviews) the changes to practices of digital intimacy during COVID-19. Second, we will explore the distribution of these changes among communities. In particular, we describe the differences between heterosexual and LGBT+ respondents, and between white and ethnic minority respondents. Third, we explore how these changes have endured after COVID-19. In particular, we will explore how changes to what people look for in their app use endured or returned to 'pre-covid'

The paper concludes by arguing that dating app's increasing status as health actors, particularly during a pandemic, necessitates more research in this area. This study provides insights into how digital practices of intimacy have transformed during COVID-19 and whether these transformations have endured in the 'new normal'. Understanding

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these changes is essential to adequately support people's emotional and sexual well-being during and after a time of crisis.

### **Full abstract:**

This paper explores the changes to digital practices of intimacy experienced during the COVID-19 social distancing period in the UK (broadly defined as between March 2020 and July 2021), and examine whether these transformations of intimacy endure in the 'new normal'. It relies on quantitative and qualitative data from heterosexual and LGBT+ communities. Understanding the digital intimate practices of communities during and after COVID-19 is essential to adequately support people's emotional and sexual wellbeing both during a time of crisis (such as COVID-19 or Mpox) and in its aftermath.

COVID-19 has become a critical historic moment because of the risk it presents for illness and death, as well as for how it has profoundly disrupted practices and norms of intimacy (broadly understood as couple, family and friendship relationships that that involve a strong sense of emotional and/or physical closeness) (Jones 2020; Preciado 2020; Scott 2020). Research has already evidenced that the negative impacts of COVID-19 and social distancing have reinforced pre-existing inequalities (Bowleg 2020; Gonzalez et al. 2021; Chang et al. 2021; Hawke et al. 2021; Solomon et al. 2021). In particular, for many people (especially those living alone, those seeking intimate sexual partners, or those for whom interaction with multiple intimate partners is an established aspect of their lifestyle), COVID-19 restrictions have led to a detrimental sense of social isolation with wide ranging and severe implications on mental health (Buecker et al. 2020; Bu, Steptoe, and Fancourt 2020; Hyndman et al. 2021). Research has evidenced that, for some communities, desire for intimacy may have motivated the breaching of COVID-19 regulations (Hyndman et al. 2021; Sonnenberg et al. 2022).

COVID-19 has developed in a time marked by the transformative possibilities for relating and social connection on the internet, particularly by means of dating apps—which have long been the subject of internet and social scholarship (Mowlabocus 2010; Race 2015; Hobbs, Owen, and Gerber 2017; Wu and Ward 2018). However, global dating app use, which was already on the rise before 2020, was reported to have witnessed a steep incline during COVID-19, with several apps meeting historic usage records (Shaw 2020, The Guardian, BBC, FT). Although there have been some discussions about the ways in which COVID-19 social distancing and the expanded use of dating apps might have led to transformations on practices of intimacy (Hakim, Young, and Cummings 2022; Levina 2020; Mercer et al. 2021), there remains important lacunas in this area (Gibson 2021). This is particularly striking given dating apps growing status as actors with significant impacts on sexual and mental health, particularly so during a pandemic (Myles, Duguay, and Dietzel 2021; Huang et al. 2016).

This paper reports on the first study of its kind to explore how dating app use during COVID-19 transformed practices of intimacy, how these transformations were spread among populations—comparing heterosexual and LGBT+ communities—and whether these changes have endured after COVID-19.

This paper relies on a mixed-methods study conducted between January and October 2023 in the UK. The study collected responses to a 125-item survey from 824 adults in the UK who had used a dating app during COVID-19 (defined as between March 2020 and June 2021). The survey, among other elements, explored how participants had used dating apps, what the goals for use were, their experiences of them, and their practices of intimacy through them (e.g. meeting people offline, sexting, attending parties) at three points (before, during and after COVID-19). The survey was followed up with 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews that narrowed down on changes to intimacy, motivations, and emotions related to apps. Participants included a representative sample of the UK population across sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and age.

This paper will report on three key findings.

First, we will describe (using both descriptive statistics and excerpts from participant interviews) the changes to practices of digital intimacy during COVID-19. In particular, we will focus on what users sought from dating apps (e.g. finding a long-term partner, casual sex, friends, networking, etc.), the extent to which these desires were met, and the extent to which app use influenced their practices of meeting members from outside their household face-to-face (e.g. making it easier or helping them navigate COVID-19 risk).

Second, we will explore the distribution of these changes among communities. In particular, we will describe the differences between heterosexual and LGBT+ respondents, and between white and ethnic minority respondents. We argue that the historical higher uptake of dating apps among LGBT+ communities, and the well-established existence of racism in digital dating settings impact changes among these groups (Chan 2017; Zervoulis et al. 2020).

Third, we will explore how these changes have endured after COVID-19. In particular, we will explore how changes to what people look for in their app use endured or returned to 'pre-covid'. Given the long-term transformative impacts of COVID-19 in other aspects of daily life (Iftekhhar et al. 2021), it is unsurprising that practices of intimacy have also changed. However, we will evidence the extent to which change has remained and its spread.

Finally, we will conclude by arguing that given dating app's increasing status as health actors in the global north, understanding people's use of them and their influence during a health crisis is particularly relevant. Furthermore, understanding enduring changes to digital intimacy and app use is a pressing need as we are likely to encounter similar times at which dating apps become key instruments for practices of intimacy during health crises, such as the recent Mpox outbreak or future global pandemics. Understanding people's needs will make it possible to develop targeted, acceptable, and effective support.

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