



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:
The 25th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Sheffield, UK / 30 Oct - 2 Nov 2024**

“TO BE QUEER, TO BE IN DATING APPS, TO BE QUEER IN DATING APPS”: THE ON-LIFE INDUSTRIOUSNESS OF CREATING STRATEGIES BEHIND STIGMAS AND FEARS OF ONLINE DATING OF ITALIAN AND AUSTRALIAN QUEER YOUNG ADULTS

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Introduction

Online dating practices and experiences in apps and digital spaces have been studied in social sciences under several different lenses, particularly if focussing on the intersection of mobile apps, gender, and sexualities (Reschiglian & Usachova, 2023).

They portray these multidimensional phenomena as either positive and empowering practices (for example, Parisi & Comunello, 2020; Ranzini et al., 2022, Byron, 2021), but also as stigmatising and violent on-life encounters (Miles, 2017; Lamont, 2021).

The sociocultural context in which these are implemented greatly affects not only the scripts and practices of personal interactions (Comunello et al. 2021; Miller, 2020; Broeker, 2021; MacLeod & McArthur, 2019) but also the perception of security with(in) dating apps for specific individualities (Tao, 2022; Conner, 2022; Geeng et al., 2022, Stardust et al., 2022).

Theoretical Framework

In particular, queer and LGBT+ people have been navigating in diverse ways online spaces (Robards et al., 2020; Fox & Ralston, 2016; McKenna & Chughtai, 2020).

Suggested Citation (APA): Reschiglian, R., Robards, B., Scarcelli, C.M. (2024, October). *“To be queer, to be in dating apps, to be queer in dating apps”: the on-life industriousness of creating strategies behind stigmas and fears of online dating of Italian and Australian queer young adults*. Paper presented at AoIR2024: The 25th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Sheffield, UK: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Robards et al. (2018) discuss the lasting impact of the internet on young LGBTIQ+ individuals over two decades. It explores how online spaces have provided avenues for community-building, identity exploration, and support for this demographic group, emphasising the enduring importance of the internet in facilitating connections and empowerment within the LGBTIQ+ community.

Nevertheless, more and more they recognise that while social media platforms offer opportunities for connection and belonging, they can also become problematic or dangerous, with many respondents reporting experiences of isolation, exclusion, or harassment. This challenges the idea that cyber-queer spaces are solely productive and highlights the complexities of digital social interactions and the queer communities and movements. Additionally, they note the intersectional challenges faced within cyberqueer spaces, such as racism on platforms like Grindr and the exclusion of trans women in certain feminist online communities.

Recognising the fundamental role of online dating within the framework of cyber-queer discourse for individuals within the LGBTIQ+ spectrum, these diverse subjectivities have actively pushed the boundaries of societal norms, stigma, and risk mitigation through their resourcefulness and industriousness (Byron et al., 2021; Harkness et al., 2021).

The Research

As one delves into the complexities of this phenomenon, the unique cultural contexts of both Italian and Australian settings underline the necessity of comprehending how marginalised and minority identities, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community, navigate their digitally mediated intimate connections in diverse socio-cultural circumstances (Masullo & Coppola, 2021; Albury et al., 2020).

These environments serve as distinct cosmos, each offering nuanced challenges and opportunities for individuals pursuing companionship and connection online. Within these landscapes, the resilience, and adaptive strategies of LGBTQ+ communities come to the fore, as they negotiate the details of digital spaces to assert their identities and establish meaningful relationships among social pressures and prejudices.

This qualitative study aims to investigate how risks and fears in online dating experiences are perceived, navigated, and creatively challenged by queer young adults (from 18 to 32 years old) in the Italian and Australian contexts. The research aims to understand variances and similarities in perceptions, attitudes, and responses between the two culturally diverse groups. The nuanced dynamics of online dating practices among queer young adults in Italy and Australia are presented here, shedding light on the complexities of navigating stigmatisation and fears within digital intimacy spaces.

To traverse the intricate landscape of Italian and Australian queer dating online practices, we adopted an explorative qualitative approach through a combination of online and offline focus groups. These focus groups served as a dynamic platform for engaging with participants and gaining insights into their queer digital intimacy experiences, especially online dating security perception and strategies.

The focus groups were conducted over a period spanning from January 2023 to January 2024. This timeframe allowed for a comprehensive engagement with participants across various locations and contexts, ensuring a rich and diverse collection of data.

We conducted eight Focus Groups in Italy and seven focus group in Australia (for a total of 15) trying to cover various regions in both Australia and Italy to ensure the inclusion of respondents from diverse cultural backgrounds. This strategic approach was integral to capturing a broad spectrum of perspectives, facilitating a rich and comprehensive dataset. The deliberate selection of diverse settings within these two countries enabled us to conduct a more holistic and inclusive analysis, ensuring that our findings reflect the complexity and variety of human experiences within and across these cultural landscapes.

The empirical material collected has been meticulously analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analytical approach allowed for a deep dive into the rich, detailed, and complex dataset collected from the focus groups. By systematically coding the data and identifying themes, the research team was able to unravel the underlying ideas, beliefs, and experiences shared by participants. Through this method, the research team was able to construct a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives, offering valuable insights into the subject matter of the study.

Results

In Italy, findings underscore pervasive anxieties regarding the risks associated with online dating for young adults, including the fear of being outed in conservative hometowns or namely facing stigma for utilising dating apps. Participants expressed apprehension about encountering judgment based solely on appearance, as well as concerns about catfishing and fetishization (as in Albury et al., 2020; Filice et al., 2022), particularly relevant for transgender women and bi/pansexual identities (in particular, female-presenting) by cis heterosexual men.

Moreover, the study unveils distinct hierarchies of intimacies (Scarcelli, 2022) and rituals of transitions (Broeker, 2021), with individuals employing varied strategies to safeguard their well-being, such as scrutinising social media profiles for authenticity and relying on face verification. Notably, safer experiences were reported on platforms like Tinder, where profiles are verified, compared to Grindr, where concerns about aggressive behaviour and unsolicited explicit content were prevalent.

At the moment the research group is analysing Australian Focus Groups, and it will have some preliminary results by the end of March.

Across both contexts, strategies, and industriousness for mitigating risks during offline encounters emerged, including sharing location updates with friends, arranging meetings in public spaces, and establishing check-in protocols.

Conclusions

These findings highlight the resilience and resourcefulness of queer individuals in navigating the complexities of online dating, while also pointing to the ongoing challenges and disparities faced within digital spaces and socio-cultural contexts. As digital intimacy continues to evolve, understanding and addressing these concerns are paramount in fostering safer and more inclusive online environments for queer individuals.

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