"They Were Talking to an Idea They Had About Me": A Qualitative Analysis of Transgender Individuals' Experiences Using Dating Apps

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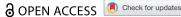Daniel A. Griffiths (iD) and Heather L. Armstrong (iD)

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ABSTRACT
Dating app use is common and has become particularly relevant for transgender and non-binary people seeking platonic, romantic, and sexual connections with others. In this qualitative study, 15 transgender and non-binary individuals (M = 22.67 years, SD = 3.09 years) were interviewed to explore their experiences using dating apps. Thematic analysis was used to generate themes and subthemes. Six themes were identified: 1) connection to queer community; 2) expression of gender identity on dating apps; 3) fetishization on dating apps; 4) impacts of dating apps on sexual experiences; 5) safety on dating apps; and 6) recommendations for dating app developers. Results show that dating apps are an important tool used by trans/non-binary individuals to connect with others in the queer community and find platonic, romantic, and sexual partners. However, there are concerns about their use such as fears for safety and experiences of fetishization. More research, education, and implementations of app development, including the involvement of trans and non-binary people, are needed to address these concerns.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom, approximately 260,000 individuals aged 16 years and older identify as a gender different to the one assigned to them at birth (i.e., *transgender* or *trans)*, equating to 0.5% of the overall population (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013; Office for National Statistics, 2023). Further, those who identify outside the binary of male/female may identify as *non-binary* (Richards et al., 2016). Due to societal stigma and a reduced dating pool, transgender and non-binary individuals may have significant difficulties finding romantic or sexual relationships within their local communities (Iantaffi & Bockting, 2011; Riggs et al., 2015). Thus, dating apps can be useful for filtering potential partners and expanding dating opportunities (Beauman, 2020).

Dating apps allow individuals to seek romantic, sexual, and/ or platonic connections with others through geolocative features, filters, and algorithms (Orchard, 2019). There has been exponential growth in dating app use, with total users increasing from approximately 198 million in 2015 to 323 million in 2021 (Curry, 2023). Additionally, dating apps were primarily pioneered by LGBTQ+ individuals, with apps such as Grindr and Scruff launching in 2009 and 2010, with more cisgender (i.e., identifying with the gender assigned at birth (Thoma et al., 2019)) and heterosexual focused apps such as Tinder and Hinge being launched in 2012 (Fetters, 2018). LGBTQ+ individuals also tend to report using dating apps more than their cisgender and heterosexual peers, with approximately 55% of LGBTQ+ American adults using dating apps, compared with 28% of straight individuals (Pew Research Centre,

2020). Additionally, a survey of 1613 transgender individuals found that 75.3% had used dating apps in the past, and of these, 79.4% had met at least one person for a date and 70.2% had met someone for sex (Callander et al., 2019). Greater use of dating apps may reflect how, historically, there has been little physical space for LGBTQ+ individuals, and transgender individuals in particular, to congregate safely. Thus, it is important to better understand the challenges and benefits transgender individuals face when using dating apps.

Transgender individuals may face challenges when seeking romantic and sexual partners. External relationship stigma against those in cisgender/transgender relationships may lead to public concealment of the relationship, which has been significantly associated with lower relationship quality (Gamarel et al., 2014). Furthermore, rejection because of transgender status within both heterosexual and LGB communities is high. Within a sample of 958 Canadian adults, 96.7% of cisgender heterosexual men, 98.2% of cisgender heterosexual women, 88.5% of cisgender gay men, and 71.2% of cisgender lesbian women stated "no" when asked if they would consider romantic or sexual relationships with transgender individuals of any gender identity, while cisgender bisexual and queer individuals were more likely to state that they would (55.2%; Blair & Hoskin, 2019). Additionally, individuals were more likely to favor transmasculine individuals over transfeminine people, perhaps through masculine privileging as feminine identities are often devalued within queer (defined as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender (Whittington, 2012)) communities (Blair & Hoskin, 2019; Hoskin, 2017). Thus, digital

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intimacies through websites and apps may expand dating pools by increasing the number of potential connections and allowing filtering options to fine-tune matching (Orchard, 2019).

Dating Apps as an Agent of Gender

Dating apps allow individuals to curate their profile to reflect themselves, including profile photos, biography, and gender marker. However, many dating apps have historically or currently excluded diverse gender identity options and filters (MacLeod & McArthur, 2019). The decision to include just male and female categories on dating apps may reflect Butler's (1990) concept of *universal rationality* – individuals are presented with choices deemed socially acceptable by both dating app developers and their primarily heterosexual and cisgender userbase. However, this lack of inclusion limits accessibility for transgender and non-binary individuals, especially those who do not conform to binary conceptualizations of gender identity. Socio-cultural norms of gender define our expectations of how men and women should behave, look, and interact with one another, especially within heterosexual romantic and sexual relationships (Albright & Carter, 2019). These Western socio-cultural scripts of gender dictate how society and technology mutually influence one another. Developers utilize universal rationality to impose socio-cultural norms of gender onto app affordances, and thus affect how users interpret, acknowledge, and interact with gendered features on apps (Comunello et al., 2020; Parisi & Comunello, 2020).

However, transgender individuals' mere existence challenges pervasive *cissexist* norms – the unconscious and automatic belief that all individuals identify with the gender assigned to them at birth and that this is normal (McGeorge et al., 2021). Additionally, cissexist norms rely upon binary and bio-essentialist conceptualizations of gender. These norms suggest that all individuals with a penis and XY chromosomes identify as male, and all individuals with a vulva and XX chromosomes identify as female, and there is little to no room to accommodate other identities (Barcelos, 2019; Jun, 2018). These cissexist notions of gender and limited gendered app affordances may impact how transgender individuals interact with apps and disclose transgender status and how other users perceive them. Online spaces may allow those who are not out to express their gender and/or sexual minority status to receive social support and validation of their identity (Selkie et al., 2020). However, transgender individuals have reported feeling that their gender was not respected, both by the app itself and other users (Callander et al., 2019). Open disclosure of transgender status may create tension between the desire to present one's identity authentically and possible experiences of fetishization and risks to safety.

Fetishization and Sexual Objectification

The *fetishization* of transgender individuals may be defined as the "sexual investment in transness as an overvalued sexual object rather than holistic individual" (Anzani et al., 2021, p. 2). This may include the sexualized focus on a transgender individual's identity or physical anatomy from predominantly cisgender individuals. Among a sample of 466 transgender individuals, 64.2% reported being fetishized in the past, with 53.2% of these experiences occurring on dating apps (Anzani et al., 2021). Gender differences were noted, such that transmasculine individuals were often sought by cisgender, heterosexual identified men who may view transgender men with vaginas as a covert way to have sexual relationships with men and still claim their heterosexuality (Anzani et al., 2021). While many participants in this sample reported feelings of disgust, particularly when they felt sexually objectified, others felt positive and sexually desired when being fetishized (Anzani et al., 2021). Literature on the effects of objectification in sexual minority individuals has highlighted associations with negative self-esteem and body image (Tiggemann et al., 2007), and psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, and general discomfort (Serpe et al., 2020). However, very little research has examined additional psychological effects of such experiences of fetishization within transgender populations.

Transgender Individual's Safety on Dating Apps

Transgender individuals may experience specific challenges and advantages to their safety on dating apps. Open disclosure on dating app profiles may be a double-edged sword – allowing an individual to present authentically whilst also opening the door to targeted transphobic comments and harassment (Scheim et al., 2019). Powell et al. (2018) reported that gender diverse individuals reported significantly more online harassment compared to cisgender men and women. For example, 63.3% of transgender individuals in this sample had ever been threatened with physical harm, as compared to 10.0% of cisgender women and 23.3% of cisgender men. Additionally, 56.7% of transgender individuals reported digital sexual harassment and 46.7% reported receiving unwanted sexual requests. However, this study homogenized all gender diverse individuals into a single category, so it is impossible to compare differences between transgender men, transgender women, and different non-binary identities.

Additionally, most apps provide mechanisms to increase an individual's safety. For example, blocking and reporting is widely used on social media and dating apps to revoke an individual's access to someone's profile and restrict their means of communication, particularly when an individual has perpetrated online harassment (Jhaver et al., 2018). Verification signifiers, often represented with a checkmark by the user's profile to show a staff member has verified their identity, may also heighten feelings of safety (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). However, these systems may provide challenges for transgender individuals if they do not conform to dating app staff's ideas of "appropriate" gender expression and gender identity, or if the user's name on social media platforms, such as Facebook, does not align with their name on the dating app (Albury et al., 2021).

The Current Study

Due to the exploratory and descriptive nature of the topic, and the limited existing research, a qualitative interview method

was used to explore the following questions. Our primary research question was: what are transgender men's, transgender women's, and non-binary adults' experiences using dating apps? Secondary research questions included:

(A) How do transgender and non-binary individuals navigate safety on dating apps?
(B) How do dating apps affect transgender and non-binary individual's sexual experiences?
(C) If barriers to use are identified, how can dating app developers improve transgender and non-binary individuals' experience?

Method

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through online advertising on social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook) and several participants were recruited through snowball sampling via participant recommendation to contacts and friends. The advert specifically requested the participation of transgender and non-binary individuals 18 years and older who had used dating apps within the past 12 months. Participants received no financial or other incentive for the completion of this study.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between February – July 2021 over Microsoft Teams or Zoom on a mutually agreed time and date. Interviews were conducted online as in-person interviews were not possible due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and this also enabled greater participation across wider geographic area. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to read the participant information form and return a consent form via e-mail confirming their informed consent for the study and for having their video and audio recorded. At the interview, the interviewer (first author) introduced himself and explained the rationale of the study, then asked participants to provide verbal consent to being audio/video recorded. Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any point, and that they could refuse to answer any questions for any reason. A semi-structured interview topic guide was used which allowed for flexibility to omit or ask in-depth follow-up questions based on the participant's responses. The first seven questions were intended to obtain demographic information (e.g., gender identity, sexual orientation, dating apps use), as well as develop a level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee. Subsequent questions were open-ended and asked participants about their experiences using dating apps. Participants were allowed to look at their dating app profiles on their phone if required to prompt them or expand on their answers; however, they were instructed that they could not show the researcher their phone or provide any identifying information about other app users to protect confidentiality. When the researcher reached the end of the topic guide questions,

participants were asked if they had any additional thoughts about their experiences using dating apps as a transgender or non-binary person which may have not been already covered. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked, asked if they had any remaining questions regarding their participation, and were emailed a copy of the debriefing form. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored on a password protected computer and were accessible only to the researchers. Recordings were deleted following analysis. Participant confidentiality was respected and all identifying information such as names or places were omitted from transcripts. Ethical approval was obtained by the University of Southampton Ethics Committee, ERGO-II (ref: 62476.A2).

Reflexivity

The first author who conducted the interviews and led the data analysis is a gay transgender man. The researcher's own transgender status and lived experience as a transgender man may have influenced observations and interpretations of the data due to having similar personal experiences. Furthermore, the researcher had previously used dating applications, which may have further influenced interpretations of the participants' responses.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo (QSR, 2020) as per Braun and Clarke's (2019) method. Initially, the first author familiarized himself with the data through transcribing the interviews. Next, within NVivo, the first author generated codes by coding anything that was relevant within the scope of the project, using an open coding approach. A bottom-up, or inductive, approach was primarily taken to group codes together into separate themes and subthemes to summarize transgender individuals' experiences using dating apps. An a priori approach was simultaneously used when understanding and organizing themes due to the researcher's prior theoretical knowledge of the topic. Once initial themes were grouped together, the authors reviewed the supportive data for each theme to determine the appropriateness of individual quotes for each theme. Finally, themes were named and defined prior to write up.

The epistemological position when analyzing the data was social constructionist, thus allowing for exploration of participants' experiences and the wider context around these, as this position deems all knowledge to be "socially produced and reproduced" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). This is in comparison to an essentialist, or realist, approach which considers that there is there is a single unitary observable world, and language simply is a tool to express and articulate knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85).

Results

Participant Characteristics

Fifteen transgender and non-binary individuals participated, including four transgender men (26.67%), two transgender

women (13.33%), three non-binary individuals (20.00%), and six participants who reported other trans and non-binary identities. The mean age was 22.67 years (SD = 3.09 years). Participants from any geographic location were included; however, the majority (80%) were from the United Kingdom. Demographic details are reported in Table 1. Mean interview length was 37.37 minutes (SD = 17.22 minutes).

Results of Thematic Analysis

Six themes describing transgender and non-binary individuals' dating app experiences were identified. The first, connection to queer community, includes using dating apps to form platonic relationships with other sexual and gender minority (SGM) individuals, and to facilitate trans4trans (T4T) romantic and sexual relationships. Second, dating apps allowed participants to express their gender identity through their bio, pictures, and disclosure of their transgender status. In addition, this theme encompasses how transgender individuals often felt "othered" on dating apps due to being transgender. Third, transgender individuals described experiences of fetishization, and the assumptions of sexual preferences made by cisgender users

on dating apps. Fourth, participants discussed the positive and negative impacts dating apps had on their sexual experiences and how they preferred to negotiate potential sex practices with others met through apps. For the fifth theme, participants described features within apps that increased or decreased their feelings of safety. In the sixth theme, participants expressed several recommendations to improve transgender individuals' feelings of safety and overall experience using dating apps. A summary table of themes, subthemes, and additional summary description is reported in Table 2. Additionally, whilst participants were internationally sampled, no notable differences were identified in dating app experience between participants from the UK, US, and Germany.

Connection to Queer Community
Using Dating Apps to Expand Queer Community Circle.
Participants reported that dating apps were often used to form platonic connections with others in the community, particularly others with similar sexual or gender minority categorizations, as there is often a lower prevalence of visibly LGBTQ+ individuals in local communities:

> I think just like they are quite a good way to, I think, especially as a queer person to find other queer people (P6, trans man, 21, US)

Dating apps were also an important tool for those who were disabled or had limited capacity to socialize, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic where vulnerable individuals were required to shield in place:

> I don't like using them. But I'm also disabled, and I don't really know where else I would meet queer people. Because my, like outward places aren't particularly accessible for my needs. So, it's kind of a bit like, I either have to put up with it, or be alone. (P13, agender, 26, UK)

Using Dating Apps Primarily to Have Romantic and/or Sexual Relationships with Other Transgender People Specifically.
Participants often expressed a preference for dating within gender minority groups, often called trans4trans, or T4T, due to comfort and a shared understanding of being transgender:

> Primarily I'm T4T, so like, other transgender individuals … it just felt more comfortable for me at the time. (P9, genderqueer, 22, UK)

Much of this preference appeared to stem from commonalities of experiences, as well as being a defense strategy to avoid transphobic persecution from cisgender users on dating apps who may have a biased or reductive understanding of transgender individuals' identities.

Additionally, transgender individuals utilized trans-specific filters in the app's user interface (UI) to seek out other transgender users. However, participants also expressed discomfort with cisgender users seeking relationships with transgender individuals who use this filter as it made it difficult to seek out other gender minority individuals.

Expression of Gender Identity on Dating Apps
Disclosure of Transgender Status.
Some participants expressed a preference for stating that they are transgender in their bio, with some noting that they wanted to claim space on dating apps as a transgender person:

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of sample.

Demographic Characteristics	n (%)
Gender	
Transgender man	4 (26.67)
Transgender woman	2 (13.33)
Non-binary	3 (20.00)
Demi male	1 (6.67)
Trans-masc	1 (6.67)
Genderqueer	1 (6.67)
Non-binary transgender woman	1 (6.67)
Non-binary transgender man	1 (6.67)
Agender	1 (6.67)
Sexual Orientation	
Queer	7 (46.67)
Pansexual	2 (13.33)
Gay	2 (13.33)
Demisexual	1 (6.67)
Lesbian	1 (6.67)
Polysexual	1 (6.67)
Bisexual	1 (6.67)
Genders sought on dating apps *	
Men	11 (73.33)
Women	2 (13.33)
Non-binary individuals	6 (40.00)
All	2 (13.33)
Relationship structure	
Monogamous	9 (60.00)
Polyamorous	6 (40.00)
Dating apps used *	
Tinder	12 (80.00)
Grindr	9 (60.00)
OkCupid	5 (33.33)
Taimi	5 (33.33)
Bumble	5 (33.33)
Hinge	3 (20.00)
Her	2 (13.33)
FetLife	1 (6.67)
Planet Romeo	1 (6.67)
Field	1 (6.67)
Nationality	
United Kingdom	12 (80.00)
United States	2 (13.33)
Germany	1 (6.67)

*Participants were able to select more than one dating app used and more than one gender identity sought on dating apps.

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes Summary.

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Connection to Queer Community	Using dating apps to expand queer community circle	Participants often met other queer individuals on dating apps.
	Using dating apps to primarily have romantic and/or sexual relationships with specifically other transgender people	Some participants used dating apps to date other transgender individuals.
Expression of Gender Identity of Dating Apps	Disclosure of transgenderstatus	Discussion around preference of transgender identity disclosure.
	Using dating apps to convey gender identity	Discussion of how participants expressed gender on dating apps.
	Feeling 'othered' on dating apps for being transgender	Participant's experiences of double discrimination for transgender identity.
Fetishisation on Dating Apps	Fetishisation on Dating Apps	Discussion of fetishisation from others on dating apps.
	Assumptions of sexual preferences	Participants reported other users assuming their sexual preferences due to transgender identity.
Impact of Dating Apps on Sexual Experiences	Positive impacts of sexual acts facilitated through dating apps)	Discussion of positive outcomes of sexual experiences with others met through dating apps.
	Negative impacts of sexual acts facilitated through dating apps	Discussion of negative consequences of sexual experiences with others met through dating apps.
	Negotiation of sexual practices with others on dating apps	Participant's reported various ways they negotiate boundaries and safety prior to sexual encounters.
Safety on Dating Apps	Feelings of increased safety	Participant's described features on dating apps that increased their feelings of safety.
	Feelings of decreased safety	Participant's described features on dating apps that decreased their feelings of safety.
Recommendations for Dating App Developers	Additional filtering options	Additional filtering to allow participants to further curate their dating app experience.
	Clarity of blocking/reporting procedures	Participants wanted clarification of blocking/reporting procedures on dating apps.
	Increased education about transgender identity on dating apps	Participants wanted dating apps to educate others on transgender identities.
	Dating apps having transgender people on their development and management teams	Participants felt there should be more transgender individuals internally within dating app management.

I'd rather just tell people ... like I'm a trans person and I like being a trans person, and I'm very happy as a trans person and I'm not quiet about it. (P3, transgender man, 22, UK)

Additionally, some participants who openly disclosed their transgender status also stated the gender-affirming medical interventions they had undergone to avoid answering additional questions or rejection from others.

However, other participants chose not to disclose on their profile or when first speaking to others. The context of the app and their target demographics mattered for some, primarily due to previous experiences of transphobia on certain apps:

I don't have my gender on Hinge, because that's where I get a lot of cis straight men pop up ... But on like Her, I'm a bit more upfront of like, I like astrology, and I'm nonbinary, they/them, and things like that. (P13, agender, 26, UK)

Participants also expressed how disclosure of transgender status in their bio sometimes felt unsafe, as it often led to unwarranted scrutiny from other users, such as questioning their identity as a transgender person:

I got a lot of random guys on Grindr who thought they could message me and try to argue with me about if trans people are real. (P8, transmasc, 20, UK)

Finally, one non-binary individual stated that they did not feel a need to disclose their identity due to being cisgender-

assumed and having a flexible relationship with their gender identity and expression.

Using Dating Apps to Convey Gender Identity. Dating apps allowed individuals to, for the most part, curate their profile in a way that expresses who they are, including their gender identity. However, some apps presented more restrictive options for gender identity categories and expressions, whilst others allowed users to be much more flexible. Apps that participants reported as feeling more restrictive were often apps that catered more toward cisgender and heterosexual users; this led to some participants feeling as though they needed to perform cisnormativity and heteronormativity to get attention. For example, P10 described herself primarily as a lesbian but wished to experiment further; however, she felt pressured to perform heteronormativity to have her gender identity affirmed:

I feel like I'm currently navigating the minefield of how heterosexuality is pushed onto us. So, I, I've had moments where I've thought like, I need to like men to feel more like a woman. (P10, transgender woman, 22, UK)

Additionally, P8 expressed how they felt they should reach standards of cisnormative, conventional ideals of masculinity in order to gain attention on dating apps:

With like cis men, especially if they're like super tall, or like muscley, and like, particularly macho, I feel like there's a certain expectation of me to live up to that, because I'm trans, and therefore should be trying hard to be like, cisnormative. (P8, transmasc, 20, UK)

Here, P8 highlights the intersections between gender expression and sexuality as he was primarily attracted to other men and used the gay dating app Grindr. Cisgender masculine privileging within gay male-focused apps often reinforces the idea that individuals must adhere to certain physical traits, such as tallness or musculature, to be sexually desirable. Individuals who do not fit within this particularly narrow view of masculinity and/or who choose to express (or suppress) their gender identity in different ways may experience negative effects, such as the pressure described by P8.

Some participants also felt that app-provided gender categories limited them from accurately expressing their gender identity, which often impacted how other users perceived them:

With like, Tinder, it's like, you have to put yourself as man or woman, and like, if I put myself as a woman, I come up on people who are looking for a woman, and my experience is that straight people tend to use that, and it tends to be quite that like, woman is vagina. (P7, transgender woman, 20, UK)

However, some apps, such as OkCupid, had more inclusive labels, which were preferred by participants as they allowed for a more authentic expression of gender. Additionally, participants reported feelings of gender euphoria when correctly gendered by others, which was often facilitated by being able to use the correct terminology for their identity and expression within their profile.

Feeling Othered on Dating Apps Due to Being Transgender.

Some participants highlighted their experiences of double discrimination on dating apps, in which they were rejected by both cisgender heterosexual people, as well as others from the LGBTQ+ community. Experiences of double discrimination were often reported with a sense of frustration due to the expectation that other individuals within the LGBTQ+ community would have a more thorough understanding of transgender identity.

Additionally, some participants reported feeling disparaged by others stating that if they were cisgender, they would be interested in them, highlighting the idea that others view their transness as a flaw:

I've also had a few people saying things like, "If you were 'blank' then I would date you" … I feel a little hurt by this gender-conditional attraction. I can't pinpoint or justify why but being told by straight girls that if I were still a guy, they'd be interested, it just feels a little wrong and hurtful. It's even worse when it's an "if you were cis … " coming from a lesbian. (P10, transgender woman, 22, UK)

Additionally, many participants reported experiencing rejection based upon their transgender status which negatively affected their self-esteem. Participants also reported a sense of otherness when they compared their experiences with cisgender peers, often citing a perceived ease of access to relationships and sexual encounters through dating apps. This perceived disparity between cisgender and transgender users'

experiences of dating apps led to one participant feeling as though it was more difficult to form platonic, romantic, or sexual connections with others:

I guess it can invalidate you, it can make you feel a bit like, you're not worthy of being noticed in a way? Like that society hasn't sort of accepted that you are there. (P7, transgender woman, 20, UK)

Finally, participants often experienced discomfort when cisgender users asked intrusive questions about their bodies or gender identity, most frequently regarding what genitalia they had. Participants also added that they felt overwhelmed and fatigued by having to educate others. Several participants additionally expressed that these intrusive questions were the catalyst for them to stop using these apps.

Fetishization on Dating Apps

Experiences of Fetishization. Participants reported that cisgender users would describe their fantasies about transgender individuals, often leading to them feeling objectified and depersonalized:

A lot of these assumptions a lot of people had about me, especially on Grindr, and the language they would use, the way they would talk to me, I just found, even when I was, even when I consider myself like a bottom, and like a submissive, I found that it didn't fit who I was, I just felt like they weren't talking to me. They were talking to an idea they had about me. (P3, transgender man, 22, UK)

Additionally, P2 expressed how she felt these individuals explored their fantasy around transgender people through pornography and then later projected these stereotyped ideas onto transgender individuals in-person or on dating apps:

I think people assume what they see on their Pornhub or on their Onlyfans is what they're going to see in their local area. (P2, non-binary transgender woman, 21, UK)

Furthermore, participants reported that some cisgender app users viewed transgender individuals and their anatomy as an object for their own desire, and often did not express interest toward getting to know the transgender individuals further.

Finally, some participants expressed using cisgender users' fetishization for personal or financial gain, for example, for sexual gratification:

I feel like I've really developed like a kind of more like, trans-specific like degradation kink … No one had ever called me the T slur before like going on a dating app and now I'm into that. (P4, non-binary transgender man, 20, UK)

Assumptions of Sexual Preferences. Participants reported that some cisgender users made overarching assumptions of their sexual preferences. For example, some transgender women in this study expressed that other app users assumed they were cross-dressing for recreation or sexual expression, rather than dressing in a way that affirmed their gender identity.

P10 additionally expressed where she believed these misconceptions came from, and the harm this may have on transgender women as a community:

I think it 100% comes from the idea that someone born male, wearing women's clothes is humiliation … when the humiliation comes from the idea of wearing women's clothes, it then transfers

over and effects the trans community. (P10, transgender woman, 22, UK)

Participants across gender identities also expressed experiences of cisgender users assuming they were submissive and would take the role of the "bottom" during sexual activities, with some transgender men feeling as though cisgender men saw them as a woman because of these assumptions:

> Because I'm a trans woman, people instantly assume that I must be this massive bottom, that loves to wear a maid outfit, and just take the biggest dick in the world ... I'm the literally opposite of that, I'm not a bottom. (P7, transgender woman, 20, UK)

> There's these like, weird stereotypes around trans men, especially on dating apps, that all trans men are like small, cute, fem, bottoms, submissives ... it's usually like slightly older cis dudes ... they just see you as a spicy woman. (P3, transgender man, 22, UK)

Impacts of Dating Apps on Sexual Experiences
Positive Impact of Sexual Acts Facilitated through Dating Apps.
Having an increased frequency of sexual partners and access to a variety of individuals on apps was reported to increase exploration around sexual activities:

> I think a lot more of that has been like me experimenting and figuring out new ways to do things, especially before I was mostly with straight men, Yeah, queer people are generally a lot better about thinking about sex in less linear terms, which is what I need. (P8, transmasc, 20, UK)

Additionally, one participant enjoyed engaging in sexual activities that did not involve her genitalia to alleviate gender dysphoria:

> She struggled with vaginismus ... so we didn't actually have any penetration, but that was fine because I didn't really want it anyway ... it boosted my confidence and self-esteem and made me feel more like a woman. (P10, transgender woman, 22, UK)

Another participant also highlighted how engaging in casual sexual encounters from dating apps required her to consider sexual health and wellness more.

Negative Impacts of Sexual Acts Facilitated though Dating Apps.
Some participants reported feeling coerced into sexual acts (including sending explicit photos), or that they felt unable to say no, primarily with cisgender male partners due to systemic power dynamics:

> He started undressing himself and I was like "OK, I don't feel comfortable". The thing is with me ... I should have said no, but I couldn't. (P2, non-binary transgender woman, 21, UK)

Sexual activities that caused feelings of gender dysphoria were also reported to impact how transgender individuals negatively engaged with sex. For example, one participant expressed discomfort around activities that involved her genitalia, and the impact this had on her psychologically afterward:

> I didn't know how I felt about that because it was it was very oriented around my plumbing ... negative experiences can trigger a bit of dysphoria, and dysphoria can last ... .I don't know how long, you never know how long it will be ... .Sex life wise, it affects my confidence and also like, like ability to like finish by myself. (P10, transgender woman, 22, UK)

Previous negative experiences made some participants less likely to seek out future sexual relationships with people from dating apps. Furthermore, P3 expressed how the combination of fetishistic assumptions and negative experiences during sexual activities in the past has made them less comfortable with casual sexual encounters:

> I think it's another thing that's made me kind of afraid to kind of sleep with people that I've not gotten to know for very long time ... because it's just like, bringing these assumptions into the bedroom, not really having a proper conversation beforehand, not communicating during sex. (P3, transgender man, 22, UK)

Negotiation of Sexual Practices with Others on Dating Apps.
Transgender participants reported that they often expressed boundaries about touching specific body parts or what terms to use to help reduce gender dysphoria during sexual encounters:

> There's a lot I'm uncomfortable with, like telling them like not to touch my chest, or like, grab certain places, that kind of thing ... It's just like, these are the things you must absolutely not do, but we can like figure the rest of it out later." (P8, transmasc, 20, UK)

Additionally, some participants expressed that when other individuals specifically asked for their boundaries about their body, it made them feel more at ease with that partner as they knew the partner was taking steps to ensure they were comfortable.

Negotiation of sexual positions (such as bottom, top, versatile) and activities (such as kinks or behavior) was also an important aspect in getting to know others and assess compatibility before a new sexual encounter.

Some expressed additional comfort when negotiating with other transgender individuals due to a shared understanding of gender dysphoria. Additionally, participants differed in their preferred environment to negotiate. Some participants preferred to have these conversations over dating apps, as the app acted as a physical barrier to prevent possible uncomfortableness or embarrassment, whilst others preferred to have these conversations in-person.

Safety on Dating Apps
Feelings of Increased Safety.
Participants reported that cisgender app users who expressed allyship to the transgender community through signifiers, such as having the pronouns in their bio, helped to indicate who may accept and understand transgender identity, leading to increased feelings of safety.

Additionally, participants expressed feeling safer when interacting with others within the LGBTQ+ community as opposed to those who were cisgender and heterosexual. For example, P7 reported that attributes that are often associated with LGBTQ+ individuals made them feel safer when using dating apps as they may signify the individual would be more likely to understand transgender identity.

Apps that are solely advertised to LGBTQ+ people or have features designed specifically to increase the comfort of LGBTQ+ individuals were also preferred:

> I feel safer on Her, because it's, it's for queer women and trans people generally. (P13, agender, 26, UK)

P15 also cited OkCupid as feeling safer as they were able to stop straight individuals from viewing their profile:

> Especially on OkCupid, again, like, I don't want to see or be seen by straight people is helpful. Like, because you just, that is, a helpful peace of mind thing. (P15, non-binary, 31, UK)

Participants also frequently reported that matching systems on apps such as Tinder or Bumble made them feel safer as they could choose which individuals to interact with and vet out potentially dangerous users. OkCupid was cited by participants as providing additional comfort because it has implemented a percentage match system to indicate similarity between users. Participants also expressed that having control over the quantity of personal information that they shared on dating apps was important to avoid potentially unsafe situations.

Finally, participants reported that blocking and reporting users who caused discomfort was important to control their experience and they felt that this makes dating apps feel safer than in person social situations, such as bars or clubs:

> I've had people be creepy, but most of times I've experienced, like, that has been at clubs and just been out and about and, you know, environments I can't manipulate and can't take control of, whereas on a dating app, if somebody starts being a weirdo, I'm just like, "Okay, I'm gonna block you." (P3, transgender man, 22, UK)

Feelings of Decreased Safety.

Participants reported that they felt particularly unsafe with apps such as Grindr that utilize precise geolocation functions, as this increased fears of stalkers or transphobic assault:

> Someone came up 10 metres away, I was thinking, Grindr, why the fuck are you telling them that I'm 10 metres away? . . . they can like walk around and try and find me, and like I didn't like that (P10, transgender woman, 22, UK)

Participants additionally expressed fears of transphobic violence facilitated through their use of dating apps, often due to news reports or others' anecdotal experiences:

> Because it is always in the back of my mind of like "oh, is someone gonna like get mad that I'm trans and like go wild and like try to find me." (P6, transgender man, 21, US)

These fears of transphobic persecution and assault often stopped participants from meeting with individuals met on dating apps.

Additionally, one participant recounted his experience of having his address leaked because he refused to answer intrusive questions about his transgender identity:

> I had this person on Bumble message me . . . it was all the classic shit like "what bits do you have?" . . . and I was like, "hey, like, I'm not really comfortable answering these, so, would you mind not talking to me about it?" . . . . he just sent me back my address, and it wasn't my address, because I had just moved to the apartment that I'm in now, but it was my family's address . . . I was scared out of my fucking mind (P1, transgender man, 20, US)

Participants also reported that Grindr's lack of a matching system caused discomfort because anyone using the app was able to start talking to them without any vetting process.

This frequently left participants vulnerable to unsolicited uncomfortable messages, despite the potential benefit of this open-access form of communication for other users.

Recommendations for Dating App Developers
Additional Filtering Options.
Participants reported that it was important for dating apps to add additional gender markers and implement them into the app's algorithm so that users are not required to place themselves into a binary gender option that does not reflect their identity. P12 also noted that this is also important to allow for gender minority individuals to claim space on these apps and to send the message that the app will not only contain cisgender men and women:

> I guess that highlights to other people on the app, as they enter it, that there is going to be a range of people there, and that they're not going to be . . . there's not majority men and women. (P12, demi-male, 26, UK)

Many participants across gender identity groups also expressed that their negative experiences on dating apps were due to cisgender men; thus, they felt that the ability to filter out cisgender or heterosexual users was preferable to allow them to interact only with other LGBTQ+ individuals. This was especially relevant for those who had an intersection of minority identities as they felt it would be safer and more comfortable for them to have more control over who they interacted with on dating apps:

> The majority of the interactions I have with cis men on dating apps are just shit, full stop. It's mostly because I'm queer, trans, disabled . . . can I have less of them pop up? That'd be nice. (P13, agender, 26, UK)

Finally, one participant expressed the desire to choose specific words to restrict when viewing other's profiles or messages as this may help to reduce distressing experiences.

Clarity of Blocking and Reporting Procedures.
Participants reported that they often received no outcome from reports of discriminatory and abusive behavior they received from other users:

> I usually report/block. I don't know if ever anything is done about it. (P2, non-binary transgender woman, 21, UK)

This often left participants feeling that their concerns were not taken seriously or that there were no repercussions for the perpetrator; thus, some form of communication about the outcome was preferable. Participants also expressed wanting to speak to someone who worked for the dating app when completing a report form as they had no human contact to relay important information.

Furthermore, participants expressed the need for increased clarity on why they have been banned from apps in the past. This often occurred as they received a message stating they broke the terms of service but were uninformed about what they had done. Participants often speculated that dating apps banned transgender accounts en masse due to many individuals reporting being banned for seemingly no reason simultaneously:

Either there are people employed by Tinder, who are actively making what are ultimately transphobic decisions against their users, or there are enough users of Tinder unchecked that just feel that they can report with impunity, anybody that doesn't meet their standards of what they think somebody should look like, and both of those are extremely bad. (P15, non-binary, 31, UK)

Increased Education about Transgender Identity on Dating Apps. Participants felt that many problems faced on apps, particularly uncomfortable questions, were due to a lack of education about transgender identities. Thus, participants suggested that educational materials and pop-ups on the apps themselves may help mitigate some of these issues. Additionally, P6 noted that Grindr already does this successfully, and thereby may be useful for other apps to implement:

I haven't been on Grindr in a bit, but they they've done like sort of information things were like something will pop up or like you can tap the little question mark and that tells you what like cis and trans and non-binary mean. I think that's really good like getting education out there is really important. (P6, transgender man, 21, US)

Dating Apps Having Transgender Individuals on Development and Management Teams. A common recommendation was the inclusion of gender minority individuals in app development and management teams:

Have there be lots of trans people on board, because once again, one trans person isn't everyone's bloody experience ... different trans people who all have different experiences and different expectations and wants and needs, helping you develop this app. (P3, transgender man, 22, UK)

Some participants felt this may help mitigate many issues, such as the lack of inclusive gender options, as these may be overlooked or deemed as unimportant by cisgender users:

All these apps that kind of are in use really, that are popular, or not made with trans people's experiences really, at the centre of development. They're all made from like a cis, binary, heteronormative kind of point of view, and then vaguely adapted, so then nothing really works properly. (P13, agender, 26, UK)

Discussion

Using 15 qualitative interviews, we sought to explore: what are transgender men's, transgender women's, and non-binary adult's experiences using dating apps? Six themes were identified: 1) connection to queer community, 2) expression of gender identity on dating apps, 3) fetishization on dating apps, 4) impacts of dating apps on sexual experiences, 5) safety on dating apps, and 6) recommendations for dating app developers. Overall, participants noted both positive and negative aspects of dating app use and highlighted some key considerations which would improve their dating app experiences. The experiences of transgender individuals using dating apps remains relatively under researched compared to the experiences of cisgender individuals. Thus, identifying strategies and barriers of use may aid dating app developers and those who work with transgender individuals.

Connection to Queer Community

Using dating apps to cultivate a connection to queer communities was essential to many participants, with some citing that they would not use dating apps otherwise. Furthermore, a pattern of preference for intra-transgender community dating was conveyed among most participants. However, limited literature has explored the T4T dynamic. Aizura et al. (2020) expressed how for some, T4T may be an active form of separatism from cissexist norms of "subjectivities, perceptions, and erotic economies" (p. 129) and may allow individuals to reject pathologizing norms that assume transgender people have to be fixed (Aizura et al., 2020; Suess Schwend, 2020). Our participants expressed this as they often felt additional comfort when interacting with other transgender individuals, especially when negotiating sexual activities, as there was a mutual understanding of transgender identity. Additionally, similarity to oneself is a significant determinant in attraction (Montoya & Horton, 2013; Wetzel & Insko, 1982). For example, *implicit egotism* is the unconscious preference for those who are like oneself (Pelham et al., 2005), as similar individuals are more likely to reinforce our beliefs (Mayer & Puller, 2008) and reduce the likelihood of conflict in a relationship (Burleson et al., 1994). Thus, dating apps can be an important tool for transgender individuals to seek relationships, particularly with transgender partners, which may be difficult to access in physical spaces.

Expression of Gender Identity on Dating Apps

Participants discussed how they navigated gender expression through dating app allowances and restrictions, disclosure of transgender status, and the experience of feeling otherness. Disclosure of transgender identity is often a cost-benefit analysis, with users having to juggle the risk of adverse outcomes such as being a target of prejudice, with the benefit of social support, self-expression, and validation (Fernandez & Birnholtz, 2019; Omarzu, 2000).

Comunello et al. (2020) described dating apps as "socio-technical assemblages" (p. 1142), whereby society and technology mutually shape one another, as different features convey specific cultural meanings, and these cultural meanings are also imposed onto the app by the developers themselves. Gender is frequently integrated into dating apps in a binary way, as expressed by our participants, with apps such as Tinder and Hinge requiring users to be seen as male or female (Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Szulc, 2019). However, these binary and cissexist conceptualizations of gender limited transgender participants' ability to express themselves, especially as users are often assumed to be cisgender by default (Albury et al., 2021), perhaps in part due to the inaccessibility for transgender and non-binary individuals to claim space on such apps. Nevertheless, dating apps can also facilitate transgender individuals to actively challenge hegemonic norms of gender identity through how they present in open-text boxes and their photos, as well as private conversations with other users (Schudson & van Anders, 2019) – thus aiding in "world-making" and increased gender minority exposure.

Finally, these cissexist conceptualizations of gender often resulted in experiences of double discrimination (Doan Van et al., 2019) when rejected by both cisgender heterosexual and cisgender LGB users, even though LGB users were often assumed to be more understanding due to shared community space (Morrison, 2010). Such rejection has been shown within our sample, and in the broader literature, to decrease transgender individuals' self-esteem and increase negative affect (Rood et al., 2016). This was especially the case when participants were rejected after having expressed significant interest and establishing a good rapport with the other individual before they disclosed transgender status, highlighting that the reason for the rejection was their transgender identity.

Fetishization on Dating Apps

Participants highlighted their discomfort with other users making sexualized and fetishistic comments about their gender identity and physical anatomy whilst using dating apps. Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) considers how individuals are dehumanized when others use them as a method of obtaining a particular goal (such as the attainment of sex) and objectify them due to a particular trait. Additionally, Albury et al. (2019) highlighted transgender participants' discomfort with individuals on gay dating apps, such as Grindr, objectifying them and asking intrusive questions about their genital anatomy. Furthermore, Flores et al.'s (2018) participants expressed how sexual objectification frequently negated their gender identity. Gender stereotypes that dictate a woman's submissiveness were thrust upon transgender men and non-binary individuals, thus communicating that the individual is viewed as a cisgender woman despite identifying otherwise, in both ours and Flores et al.'s findings (2018). However, Serano (2007) described how consensual and invited sexual desire for a transgender person can be both empowering and affirming for transgender individuals, as expressed by P4 and P10 in our study as they enjoyed feeling sexually desirable. In contrast, objectification often does not uplift the individual and instead is used to leverage power and dominance over another as they are viewed as just sexual objects. Our participants often expressed negatively feeling as though they were an object, or a commodity, for the consumption of a subset of typically cisgender men, frequently dubbed "chasers" (Albury et al., 2021). This may in part contribute to psychological distress (Flores et al., 2018) and experiences of sexual abuse and assault (Barrett & Sheridan, 2017). Understanding the experiences and consequences of fetishization within the transgender community may be important for those working with transgender clients, particularly in clinical or sexual health settings.

Impacts of Dating Apps on Sexual Experiences

Participants described both positive and negative impacts of dating apps on their in-person sexual experiences and how they approached sexual negotiation with new partners. Increased exploration was a frequently noted positive by our participants, as dating apps ease access to a wider pool of potential partners in a geographically close range (Choi et al., 2016).

Furthermore, interviews conducted by Tree-McGrath et al. (2018) highlighted how sexual interest and experiences between cisgender men and transgender men created feelings of gender euphoria and validation in their masculine gender identity. This sentiment was expressed by one of our participants as she felt validated in her gender identity as a woman when engaging in sexual acts that increased her feelings of gender euphoria and decreased gender dysphoria. Furthermore, this increased exploration within sexual encounters may facilitate transgender individuals to partake in "queering sexuality" (Vidal-Ortiz, 2005) through blurring the lines between cissexist and heterosexist sexual scripts, as described by P8's desire for less linear and queer sexual experiences.

However, while dating apps allow for additional exploration, they also open the door for a higher frequency of negative sexual encounters (Hobbs et al., 2016). Lauckner et al. (2019) interviewed a mix of cisgender and transgender sexual minority individuals who expressed experiences of feeling coerced into sexual acts with others through dating apps. Such coercion was also reported by our participants, as they often felt unable to say no to unwanted sexual advances, both on and off dating apps. While sexual coercion can happen to anyone, one's minority identity may uniquely impact how this occurs and/or is perceived by both the individual and their peers (Dank et al., 2014). For example, Gaspar et al. (2021) found that sexual minority men often expressed self-blame for experiences where they were sexually coerced by others, both in-person and on dating apps, much like P2 and P6, who expressed feeling that they should have stopped the interaction. Additionally, P2 stated, "I should have said no, but I couldn't," which may highlight how, particularly within a systemic power dynamic (such as a transgender woman and a cisgender man), the inability to refuse sexual advances may frequently be due to the risk of violent escalation, which transgender women are significantly more likely to face (De la Ossa, 2016; Stotzer, 2009). These results may be particularly important for clinicians and researchers who work with transgender individuals and for transgender individuals themselves. Those who work with the transgender population must understand and recognize factors that may contribute to the occurrence or perception of sexual violence and coercion and how these factors may differ from those experienced by cisgender individuals. Furthermore, education on this topic may be implemented on dating apps through pop-ups to aid individuals in identifying when sexual coercion may occur and how they can report those who perpetrate it.

Safety on Dating Apps

Participants described a variety of dating app UI features that increased or decreased their feelings of safety. Grindr was frequently described as the least safe dating app, as participants cited that the precise geolocation measures, and the lack of a matching mechanism allows anyone to message and increases their risk of transphobia and sexual assault through fetishization, unsolicited photos, and uncomfortable comments. Transgender participants within Albury et al.'s (2021) study also expressed a similar lack of safety on dating apps, as

they encountered openly discriminatory profiles. Furthermore, participants often expressed fear for their physical safety as precise geolocative services may allow others to target and assault them (Hoang et al., 2017). This fear was often substantiated by statistics and articles highlighting transgender individuals' disproportionally high rates of victimization offline and online (James et al., 2016; Powell et al., 2018). However, blocking as a form of communication cessation when feeling unsafe or as a method to filter out other users was reported.

Previous research has indicated that dating app users tend to prefer the ability to filter potential partners using matching mechanisms, as it allows them to limit interactions with other users with whom they may not be compatible or who may be unsafe (Parisi & Comunello, 2020). This was an especially important factor for our participants who described that a lack of matching UIs increased their experiences of transphobia and fetishization.

Recommendations for Dating App Developers

Finally, our participants suggested ways for dating apps to improve their services and UI to better accommodate transgender users. Most participants expressed the need for mainstream dating apps to increase inclusivity with additional gender markers and filtering options, especially as more niche LGBTQ+ focused dating apps, such as Taimi and HER, have already implemented these features (Brabaw, 2018; Taimi, n.d.). OkCupid's "I do not wish to see or be seen by straight people" option (OkCupid, 2022) was preferred by some participants and was suggested to be implemented onto other dating apps, in addition to filtering out cisgender users for those who prefer a T4T dynamic.

Furthermore, participants expressed a need for transparent reporting and blocking procedures. This was a predominant concern for participants due to unclear communication from apps suggesting they had been banned from the service due to their transgender identity, with numerous anecdotal stories of this occurring to other transgender individuals adding to this belief (Riotta, 2019; Villarreal, 2015). This seemingly systemic removal of transgender users, either by the dating app staff or reports from transphobic users as highlighted by P15, often created frustration as it indicated dating apps were upholding cissexist norms for their primarily cisgender and heterosexual demographic (Riotta, 2019). For example, Grindr was previously alleged to have banned and censored transgender users' profiles, leading to the subsequent inclusion of transgender profile options being added in 2013, and ultimately an increase in transgender and non-binary users (Lloyd & Finn, 2017), indicating the benefit for such apps to uphold their anti-discrimination promises. Participants also expressed feeling removed from the reporting process and not receiving an outcome report to confirm the action taken against the offending user. Additionally, participants also felt a disconnect between themselves and the customer service staff as they were often unable to directly communicate the situation in their own words rather than selecting dropdown menu options. Many dating apps have e-mail addresses to allow users to do this within their terms of service and on their websites; however, it is unclear how visibly this is presented to the user during the reporting process. Users who report via e-mail may access the outcome; however, this is often not an option due to privacy guidelines and laws (Riotta, 2019; Tinder, n.d.).

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, we did not ask our participants about race or socioeconomic information as this was outside the scope of our project. However, this may have allowed for a more intersectional approach to the analysis of transgender individuals' experiences on dating apps, particularly with the effects of systemic discrimination. Future research should consider the intersection of race and gender identity as cultural and ethnic differences may impact how BAME trans and non-binary people use dating apps. Second, while qualitative research can provide rich, detailed findings from a small group of individuals, their experiences cannot be extrapolated to the wider transgender community. As we recruited participants through social media and snowball sampling, most were in their early 20s and from Western countries such as the UK, US, and Germany. Older individuals and those from other geographic locations may experience different benefits and challenges of using dating apps. Third, four participants were previously known to the first author who conducted the interviews and analysis. Therefore, this may have impacted rapport, the quality of follow-up questions, and interpretations of data. Finally, while the researcher's own bias as a transgender individual was previously addressed and a conscious effort was made to remain objective, their own unconscious biases and personal experiences may have impacted the understanding and analysis of participant interviews.

Conclusion

Participants reported that dating apps were an important way to form connections with others, especially those in the trans community. However, fears of safety, particularly when disclosing transgender status, often reduced the desire to engage with dating apps. Participants also reported experiencing discomfort due to cisgender users' interpretations and fetishization of their bodies and sexual preferences. Our findings provide useful insights by increasing the understanding of the unique needs and challenges faced by transgender and non-binary individuals when seeking romantic or sexual relationships on dating apps. More research, education, and app development, which includes trans and non-binary people, is needed to address these limitations and make dating apps more accessible for trans/non-binary users.

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