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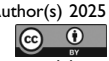

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Beyond swipes: Navigating COVID-19, dating apps and life politics

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on dating app users' experiences, revealing how it brought life politics to the forefront. Through 53 in-depth interviews, it investigates the evolution of the dating apps feature, 'I'm vaccinated' badges, from symbols of vaccination status to indicators of political attitudes. Users used the badges for self-representation, seeking political homophily and rejecting those with different attitudes towards the pandemic and vaccines. In this manner, instead of bringing people together and promoting the vaccine on the apps, the badges led to rifts and divisions among users. As the pandemic's severity declined and social restrictions were lifted, the importance of COVID-related attitudes in partner selection diminished. Interviewees expressed a desire to move beyond pandemic politics, a sentiment we termed 'COVID bracketing'. Thus, this study demonstrates how intimate relationships can become politically charged during periods of social turbulence.

Keywords

COVID-19, COVID vaccines, dating apps, life politics, political homophily

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global critical event, reached the UK in early 2020. In response, the UK government enforced a national lockdown by restricting gatherings and movement. For the next year and a half (March 2020–July 2021), social distancing restrictions were in place. At their strictest, people were forbidden to leave their homes, except for essential shopping and solo exercise. Meeting people from outside one's household was also forbidden, and breaching these rules was considered a criminal offence. Such measures caused heated public debates about the science underpinning knowledge about COVID-19, and the necessity and efficacy of lockdowns and social restrictions. The pandemic and associated social restrictions significantly impacted people's lives and led to exacerbated loneliness and anxiety (McPherson et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020).

The ban on meeting others in person made people search for alternative, digital forms of communication. The use of dating apps, which were already a popular platform for finding partners for romance, committed relationships and sexual hookups, increased during the pandemic. In the US, for instance, major dating app businesses reported a sharp increase in dating app use during the early COVID-19 period, with Tinder reporting that users made 3 billion swipes worldwide on Sunday 29 March 2020, the most ever recorded on the app in a single day. In the UK, daily conversations rose by 12% between mid-February and the end of March 2020 (Shaw, 2020). Some dating apps, in turn, took part in risk management by encouraging users to participate in longer courtships online or to take part in digital dates through video-conferencing software (Duguay et al., 2022). Later, and in order to promote the vaccine, dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble and Badoo introduced badges that users could attach to their profile to indicate that they had been vaccinated (Kleinman, 2021).

The increased use of dating apps during the pandemic has led to scholarly interest which explored how their users adjusted to the 'new normal' (Duguay et al., 2022; Gibson, 2021; Portolan & McAlister, 2022). Our research built on such studies by comprehensively examining dating app users' practices before, during and after the COVID-19 social restrictions. In this article, we contend that the pandemic served as a crucial juncture where everyday life politics came to the fore on dating apps. Instead of focusing on common interests or chemistry, as they did before, users prioritised attitudes regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in their partner selection. This focus on everyday life politics was, however, quickly sidelined after lockdown and social restrictions were lifted. In this respect, dating app users engaged in 'COVID bracketing' to move past the COVID-19 era and the challenges that it raised.

Background

Dating apps and COVID-19

Dating apps, which are mobile applications designed to facilitate social connections, have received extensive scholarly attention in recent years (Chan, 2017; Ferris & Duguay, 2020; Koch & Miles, 2021; Reid et al., 2022). Such apps are part of what could be

more broadly categorised as 'online dating', a practice that Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008, p. 149) defined as '[a] purposeful form of meeting new people through specifically designed interest sites'. Earlier forms of online dating included chatrooms and online bulletin boards, and designated dating websites such as eHarmony, Match.com and Plenty of Fish, where users could chat online with potential partners. With the development and increased use of smartphones, newer versions of dating platforms emerged in the form of apps, such as Tinder, Grindr, Hinge and Bumble.

Dating apps are often marketed as enabling romantic matches, but, in reality, they serve a variety of purposes, including facilitating casual sex, networking and friend-making (see Ahlm, 2017; Duguay, 2020; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). In tandem with the expansion of smartphones, some argue that dating apps have reconfigured dating practices and offer '[n]ew forms of intimacy and effective connection' (Gibson, 2021, p. 4). Indeed, dating apps have become emblematic of current-day dating where love, sex and diverse forms of intimacy are seen as fluid, rapid-paced and more accessible than ever (Hobbs et al., 2017; Licoppe et al., 2016; Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). Koch and Miles (2021, p. 1370) suggest that dating apps create possibilities for 'stranger intimacy', where unacquainted individuals form relationships '[t]hrough which affective structures of knowing, providing, befriending or even loving are built'.

The possibility of new forms of intimacy between strangers via dating apps has been both lauded and condemned. On the one hand, dating apps are said to have contributed to the popularisation of casual sex, and providing a gateway for new adventures and excitement. Due to their location-based features, they can be used to expand one's social network; for example, after moving to a new city or country (Ahlm, 2017; Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008; Chan, 2017). They are also thought to be helping in overcoming shyness and improving one's social skills (Chan, 2017) and can be used to 'kill time' and ameliorate boredom (Ahlm, 2017; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). On the other hand, the apps have been criticised for promoting seemingly 'frivolous' relationships that lack emotional depth and commitment (Ahlm, 2017; Hobbs et al., 2017; Reid et al., 2022). The ease with which users can find potential partners has, some argue, diluted intimate relationships, and the relative anonymity of users has made it easier to discriminate against others. Several scholars have pointed out how the practice of filtering, which allows users to detect or ignore other users based on their ethnicity, age and other criteria, divides users rather than bringing them together (Chan et al., 2021; Robinson, 2015; Wu & Trottier, 2022).

During the pandemic and its associated social restrictions, the immediate in-person dating, romantic and sexual adventures that dating apps had previously enabled were suddenly limited. As a critical moment in society and individuals' lives, the pandemic led to a re-evaluation of established motivations for and practices of dating app use. Spending more time at home, sometimes alone, motivated people to fill their need for connection through virtual avenues. Media reports and scholars alike reported on the increased usage of dating app downloads (Borsa et al., 2023; Lehmiller et al., 2021; Lopes et al., 2020; Sonnenberg et al., 2022). Through apps, individuals could participate in practices such as sexting or sharing photos and videos, using 'sexual imagination/fantasy' (Lopes et al., 2020, p. 2736). However, increased use of digital apps for comfort and sexual

pleasure was unsatisfactory for some and was found to be a poor substitution for the 'real thing', according to Borsa et al. (2023).

COVID-19, dating and risk management

In light of national and regional restrictions during the pandemic, dating app users had to navigate between the desire for companionship, the risk of contracting the virus and the potential for breaking the rules. In their paper about the reinvention of intimacy during the pandemic, Lopes et al. (2020, p. 2735) claimed: 'This is not the time to seek a new partnership for sex, but perhaps it can be the chance to meet new people online, create new bonds and maybe, when social distancing is over, get to know others even better.' In contrast to this argument, Williams et al. (2021, p. 1952) noted: 'Daters are more likely to engage in "risky" behaviors if they perceive the potential benefits to be valuable to their social and romantic lives in the immediate and long term.' This suggests that although following stay-at-home measures protected against infection, it could also threaten people's mental health. It fell to individuals to weigh the comparative risks, grappling with the question of which of these posed the lesser harm.

Research found that individuals adopted various risk management strategies for dating during the pandemic (Mercer et al., 2022; Sonnenberg et al., 2022). Such strategies included, for instance, restricting oneself in other life aspects to maintain face-to-face dating or choosing one 'sex buddy' instead of meeting multiple partners (Sonnenberg et al., 2022). Some individuals sought 'COVID compatibility' where they met up with people who followed similar precautions, such as mask-wearing or maintaining physical distance (Williams et al., 2021).

The negotiation of risk involved not only dating app users but also the app businesses themselves. In recent years, dating apps have become increasingly prominent in the public health landscape (Cao et al., 2017; Holtzhausen et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, dating apps adapted to new realities by offering features that promoted virtual connections and supported social distancing. These platforms introduced tools to encourage online interactions, framing staying at home as appealing and even romantic (Duguay et al., 2022). Beyond COVID-19, dating apps have played a significant role in promoting sexual health more broadly. Platforms like Grindr have partnered with public health authorities to provide targeted information and encourage human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing (Cao et al., 2017; Mowlabocus et al., 2016). Furthermore, Grindr emerged as a key player in disseminating health information in light of the Mpox outbreak (Holloway, 2022). A survey in the UK found that 13% of respondents reported dating apps as an important source of information on Mpox, highlighting their utility in reaching underserved populations (Paparini et al., 2023).

However, concerns remain about the ethical implications of relying on dating apps as crucial players in public health policy. Scholars such as Bivens and Haimson (2016) argue that although dating apps present themselves as neutral spaces designed to benefit users, their primary objective is to capture and control user data for profit. This commodification of user data, especially when it includes sensitive health information like HIV testing or treatment history, raises significant privacy and ethical concerns

(Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2024a). Despite these challenges, dating app platforms, which were once primarily associated with casual relationships and hookups, are increasingly recognised for their potential to support public health efforts across various domains, including sexual health and risk management.

Risk negotiation extends even beyond users and apps. Another key scholarly perspective on risk management involves its embeddedness in social and political ideologies, where personal negotiations of risk and health reflect the normative boundaries of a given society (Dean, 2012; Richardson, 1998, 2000). Building on this understanding, we argue that the pandemic served as a moment where risk management was not only a matter of protecting one's health. Discourse surrounding the pandemic also reflected life politics through which the moral and ethical frames for understanding oneself and one's relationships were formed. In the next section, we consider the intersection between dating and life politics in the context of dating app use.

Dating and life politics

In this article, we argue that the pandemic was a critical moment where dating app users negotiated not only health risks, but also life politics. The notion that the personal is political is sociologically well established (Braithwaite, 2002; Rogan & Budgeon, 2018). As Highfield (2017) noted, the enmeshment of the political with the private has grown even stronger due to social media where self-representation and digital interactions are infused with political concerns. Such political issues extend beyond traditional electoral politics and party affiliations, but encompass 'everyday politics' (Boyte, 2004; Highfield, 2017) or 'life politics' (Giddens, 1991), which we define as commonplace issues that directly involve how individuals live their daily lives, ranging from issues such as race, sexuality and religion.

Research has shown that individuals often seek romantic relationships with others who share similar moral, ethical and political attitudes (Easton & Holbein, 2021; Huber & Malhotra, 2017). This desire for 'political homophily' has also been examined in the context of dating apps. Despite the motivation to find like-minded partners, studies indicate that most dating app users refrain from openly displaying their beliefs, fearing that doing so might limit their dating prospects (Klofstad et al., 2011). Even when explicit political views are not revealed on profiles, Chan et al. (2021) found that users employ both covert and overt strategies to gather more information about others' political orientations, either through conversations or by closely examining profile pictures. However, during tumultuous periods, life politics tends to surface more openly on dating apps as users are less hesitant to keep their views private (Chan et al., 2021).

Klofstad et al. (2011) argue that the increasing use of dating apps could contribute to political polarisation. These platforms allow individuals to filter potential mates based on specific criteria, enabling them to align with those who share their beliefs before investing time in courtship or getting to know each other. This raises concerns that the process of selecting partners online may differ from how people choose partners in offline settings, where they may be more willing to engage with others without knowing what views they hold.

After considering the intersection of dating and life politics, we will briefly discuss our method before turning to our findings. Later, we will suggest that the pandemic gave rise to social and personal critical moments, where individuals' choices to abide by social distancing and get vaccinated brought life politics to the fore. This negotiation and politicisation of dating were facilitated by a new feature that was introduced by the apps themselves during the pandemic.

Method

The findings of this research are based on 53 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with dating apps users who live in the UK. The interviews were conducted between May and November 2023 and included 22 women, 28 men (2 of whom were trans), 2 non-binary and one trans person with undisclosed gender. Twenty-four interviewees identified as heterosexual and 29 identified as LGBQ+. Most interviewees were white (43), and others were Black, Asian or mixed. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 74, with the average age being 40.[1] Most interviewees were recruited through an agency, and, after completing a survey, opting-in to participate in a follow-up interview (Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2024b). Several interviewees were recruited later on social media and academic mailing lists to diversify our pool in terms of ethnicity and gender identities. The two main criteria for recruitment to our study were dating app usage and residency in the UK.

Interviews lasted up to an hour (45 minutes on average), on Teams or Zoom, with cameras on or off, depending on the interviewees' preference. Interviews included three sections: experiences using dating apps before, during and after the pandemic. Due to our commitment to a bottom-up approach, we left the 'pandemic period' open for interviewees' interpretation, since people had subjective experiences, but primarily identified it as the time in which lockdown and restrictions were enforced in the UK. Overall, interviewees were asked about the kinds of apps they use, the reasons they use them and the kinds of connections they have made through the apps. They were also asked about changes in their motivations and experiences using dating apps between each time period. Our bottom-up approach revealed that many interviewees actively engaged with the COVID-19 badges. Although this topic was not initially included in our interview guide, it consistently emerged during the discussions. As a result, and with the flexibility to adjust our interviews throughout the fieldwork, we began inquiring about the badge more directly.

The period in which we conducted our fieldwork requires reflexivity. By the time we interviewed our participants in mid-2023, the UK had gone back to 'normal', and, for many participants, lockdown and restrictions were a distant memory. Thus, when asking individuals to reflect on their experiences using dating apps before and during the pandemic, we are aware that these recollections might have been biased or hazy due to the time that had passed. Some studies on dating app usage and dating in general were conducted in real time during the pandemic (Borsa et al., 2023; Gibson, 2021; Mercer et al., 2022; Sonnenberg et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021). This research, however, not only examines users' experiences during the pandemic, but also after lockdown and restrictions, and is able to highlight differences throughout time.

Interviews were fully transcribed and coded on NVivo. Our bottom-up approach guided us in the analysis as well, where some codes were anticipated prior to the fieldwork (such as issues relating to risk and intimacy, as guided by our initial research questions), as well as many that emerged from the interviewees themselves (such as the badge and the discrimination of users during the pandemic). We then implemented a thematic analysis method based on our codes. Since the questions were open-ended, thematic analysis was helpful in tracing the main themes that emerged from the responses (Aronson, 1995; Boyatzis, 1998). The codes that emerged during the analysis were grouped together to form the three main themes which are presented in this article and shape the narrative of our findings, the badges serving as a tool for impression management ('making a statement') and for bringing users together or further apart ('life politics homophily'), but also becoming quickly obsolete once restrictions were lifted ('bracketing COVID-19').

Life politics on dating apps

In mid-2021, dating apps in the UK, such as Tinder, Match, Badoo and Plenty of Fish, signed a partnership with the UK government in which they agreed to promote vaccination and motivate their users to get vaccinated for COVID-19. Users were able to add a badge saying 'I'm vaccinated' to their profile in exchange for incentives such as access to premium features (Kleinman, 2021). Another incentive to get vaccinated and add the badge, according to the apps themselves, was that this would attract more potential suitors and increase one's matches[2] (Porter, 2021). In the following sections, we demonstrate that the badges were not mere tools for dating app users to gain premium 'perks'. These badges served as a means of self-representation and a way to facilitate the quest to connect with compatible individuals. They became integral to dating app use during the pandemic, allowing users to engage in life politics and to gain insights into the perspectives of others.

Making a statement.. Emilia (aged 35) has been using dating apps on and off for several years. When she returned to dating apps during COVID-19 and after a hiatus, Emilia was surprised by how the inclusion of the vaccine badge turned the apps into a platform to discuss life politics:

> You could put like, a little badge on your profile to say if you were vaccinated or not. Loads of people did […] Obviously, on Facebook and things like, that's what a lot of people were posting about. But it was kind of like, you think maybe a dating app, you wouldn't see as much of that. But then, I suppose people use their profile as a place to get their opinions across.

Emilia's comment implies the common perception of dating apps as spaces where personal connections are made, rather than one where opinions are displayed or debated as on other social media platforms. Nevertheless, she acknowledged that users' profiles can function as a space where personal-political opinions could be exhibited. One conspicuous option to do so during the pandemic was adding the badge to one's profile. When asked about his motivation to add the badge, Mark (aged 44) replied:

> I put mine on there because I thought it was important […] it was the responsible thing to do […] Everyone's got different opinions about it, but if the information out there was that it was better to have it and not be able to, and not necessarily to pass things on, or to lessen your impact, or the impact on you, I thought it was the right thing to do. So, I was sharing that. Yeah, that was on my profile.

In their study on morality during COVID-19, Ekberg et al. (2021, p. 667) define mundane morality as practices of everyday life that mix 'a sense of right and wrong, blame, culpability, etc.'. Such mundane morality, they explain, is usually implicit and unnoticed as it contributes to the social order of everyday life. However, in unprecedented times like the pandemic, mundane morality is brought to the fore, when suddenly everyday life practices, such as socialising with others or working from the office, are sanctioned or scrutinised. Thus, by adding a new dating app feature, in the form of a vaccine badge, to his profile, Mark asserted a moral conviction that ethically, he was 'doing the right thing'. The advocacy for protecting physical health, combined with the moral value of self-responsibility and the ethics of care for others, shaped how Mark presents himself to others through the badge.

As Goffman (1956, 1967) noted in his seminal work, individuals act as if in a play, continuously performing their identities for various audiences. His insights have been taken up in studies on dating apps (and social media as a whole) wherein individuals meticulously labour on their image online to attract potential suitors through different visual cues (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Whitty, 2008). This impression management was also evident in our study, where users utilised their vaccine information as evidence of their desirable character traits. Max (aged 65), for example, said:

> If there had been, let's say, a tick box, which would have been interesting, 'how many vaccinations have you had?', and I've had four now, I would be happy to tick the box, because I would want people to think 'oh, this is a sensible man […], maybe I'd like to meet him if he ticks the other boxes'.

Max's interest in displaying his vaccination status emphasised that the quantity of vaccine doses mattered as well. He believed that multiple rounds of the vaccine served as a stronger indicator of a sensible self. The same sentiment was also expressed by Erik (aged 38), who commented: 'I would happily add it to my profile. I believe in science and vaccines, and I'll take any vaccine offered.' Thus, by indicating that they had been vaccinated, participants were engaged in impression management and displayed, according to them, qualities such as rationality, morality and ethics.

Some interviewees, however, especially gay men, were more conscious of the badge's role in impression management, arguing that it might be a meaningless symbol. Roy (aged 44), for instance, commented:

> Yeah, people put on their profiles, you know, 'I've been double jabbed' or whatever […]. But then, there's also that thing of, it doesn't say that they actually have. They're not going to show you their COVID pass or anything.

Roy pointed out that none of the dating apps required a verification process for users who wanted to add the badge to their profiles, making the badge more performative than meaningful. Indeed, one interviewee, Paul (aged 32), disclosed that he performed actions of risk management rather than actually taking them: 'In the beginning, you just had to project that you were bit scared of covid and stuff, just to give them the impression that you haven't been with many people so that means you're not infected, and that always worked.' Perhaps, because gay men have longer experience with understanding dating apps' role as sexual health players (Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2024a), they have learned to be more suspicious of them than other users.

Thus, the vaccine badge – a feature introduced on dating apps to promote awareness and encourage users to get vaccinated – held greater significance for users than merely serving as a tool for assessing infection risks. Our interviewees used the badge, along with other profile features, to enhance their image to other users. They believed it helped portray them as individuals who trust science, embrace personal and social responsibility, and are committed to the ethics of care. The badges also served as life politics indicators that assisted users in findings like-minded people, as demonstrated next.

Life politics homophily. The badge and other pandemic-related markers not only involved impression management but were also deployed to weed out unwanted suitors. In her interview, Ellie (aged 43) described the importance of potential partners' attitudes regarding the pandemic:

> In fact, on Hinge, […] when you search, when people are coming up, it says if they're vaccinated or not. And if they weren't vaccinated, I didn't match […] I have been on dates with people where I thought they're a nice person. And then they've started talking about COVID, and how it's not real, and how they don't believe in COVID, and I've just thought, 'you're a nutter', and I've gone in and blocked them.

For Ellie, opinions about the reality of the pandemic and the vaccine reflected an individual's character. Like other participants, Ellie chose only to engage with those who visibly displayed that they were vaccinated. Another participant, Emma (aged 39), recounted that she 'thought better of a person if they'd actually selected that they'd been vaccinated'.

Although the majority of interviewees claimed that they were looking solely to date those who had been vaccinated, one interviewee, Guy (aged 35), rejected users who *had* been vaccinated: 'There were all these people there who wrote, "if you're not vaccinated don't message me" that kind of thing, and to tell the truth, I'm not, I wouldn't be interested in anyone that was vaccinated.'

The reluctance that some dating app users had towards interacting with vaccinated users was discussed by Hannah (aged 40), who noticed that

> [o]nly later on, when the injections came out, because people put on whether they were vaccinated or not, and some people would even go so far to say, like, 'if you've had the vaccination, go the other way', and it's like, that's fine, because I don't wanna look at you, either.

On one hand, it is understandable that dating app users sought like-minded companions, particularly during a challenging time marked by significant health risks, some of which were life-threatening. For instance, in their article about dating during COVID, Williams et al., (2021) described how people sought 'COVID compatibility' – similar views and practices around COVID prevention – with potential partners.[3] Although our own participants' desire to only date vaccinated or non-vaccinated people could be read as merely 'COVID compatibility', this inclination went beyond risk management. Whether interviewees were in favour of or against the vaccine, they openly sought life politics homophily on dating apps. Dating apps provided users with what they believed to be an indication of other users' (ir)rational, (a)moral and (un) ethical characteristics and allowed them to fine-tune their partner selection. The importance interviewees placed on their own and others' views about the reality of the pandemic and vaccine use symbolised, then, shared beliefs in expert knowledge, a common moral compass and a shared ethical identity.

Chan et al. (2021) reviewed the various tactics dating apps users employ to infer other users' morality and life politics. These included a variety of implicit and explicit forms of 'partner-vetting'. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, dating apps themselves provided an easy and accessible way to veto potential partners with the badges. Unlike pre-COVID times, when expressing life politics attitudes was less openly articulated (Chan et al., 2021), heated debates on the pandemic and the vaccines permeated the dating apps arena. This made it easier for users to sort out their preferred partners.

The ability to filter other users based on their COVID-19 badges was both a hazard and an advantage. For instance, although dating app users tended to avoid political discussions, some interviewees like Max (aged 65) were critical of this practice. He described meeting a woman who expressed opposing views to his. He argued that knowing that in advance, through dating apps filters, would have saved him time and trouble:

> I can think of one girl like that […] her political [view]… is bent, for lack of a better word […] and I'm thinking, if you put down, let's say, 'I'm a proud labour person, I'm terribly anti Brexit' on your profile, I wouldn't have come, we wouldn't have met and gone for a meal.

In contrast to Klofstad et al.'s (2011) argument that individuals might be less polarised when meeting a potential partner in real life, Max was keen to save his time meeting people from the opposite side of the political spectrum by fine-tuning his requirements on the apps. Similarly, Guy (aged 35), who openly rejected users who were vaccinated, recounted:

> Straight away, it put a divider up there, do you know what I mean? It's like, segregated a group of people, if you will, like, the vaccinated with the unvaccinated and that, and like, not a lot of people are willing to cross over.

In their study on morality and the COVID-19 vaccine, Rosenfeld and Tomiyama (2022) found that perceived moral judgement – being labelled as immoral for not being vaccinated – can lead individuals to further resist vaccination, as happened to Guy. Thus, rather than encouraging vaccination, the badge may have alienated some

users and further widened the divisions between them and those who were in favour of the vaccine.

The advantages and challenges of filtering on dating apps have been much discussed in previous studies. Discussing the issue of HIV status on Grindr, Shield (2018), for example, noted that although the notification of HIV status could be helpful in raising awareness and keeping users safe, it could contribute to an already simmering culture of discrimination and stigmatisation on the app. At the same time, Zhou (2022), who argued that ethnicity-based filtering on Grindr could promote discrimination, also argued that such a filter also allows users to connect with similar individuals and can help in providing a sense of community. Thus, filtering based on life politics attitudes might allow users to find like-minded people, but at the same time could also contribute to rifts and polarisation among dating app users (Chan et al., 2021; Klofstad et al., 2011).

Bracketing COVID-19. Our research examined participants' dating app usage over three time periods: before, during and after COVID-19 social restrictions. This approach allowed us to explore how expectations, practices and dating patterns shifted or persisted over time. Post-restrictions, we observed that filters deemed crucial during the pandemic, such as vaccine status and attitudes, quickly became irrelevant. Once COVID-19 was no longer seen as life-threatening and no longer relating to mundane morality (Ekberg et al., 2021), life politics debates faded on dating apps as well.

The shift in attitudes was echoed by many interviewees. For example, Hannah (aged 40) had previously rejected individuals who were against the vaccine or flouted lockdown rules, remarked that 'people who were being a bit reckless, and if they were putting that on their profile, then I just don't, I've no time for that'. However, reflecting on dating apps today, she admitted: 'I don't think now it's as big a deal because people are trying to forget that it ever happened.' Similarly, Emma (aged 39), who once viewed vaccination badges positively, noted:

> I thought, 'well, that's not really relevant anymore', people don't really want to know whether I'm vaccinated or not (chuckles). But it's definitely still an option on one of them, but probably not an option people really look at anymore. So, it's still there. Does it still need to be there? I don't know.

We define this motivation to leave behind the pandemic and its restrictions as 'COVID bracketing'. This term refers to the desire to compartmentalise and disregard the pandemic's impact, both socially and personally, as individuals move forward without integrating the experience into their ongoing lives and partner selection. As Kamala (aged 27) expressed: 'I was like, "oh, I sort of don't care about the virus", you know, I'm sort of over it.'

During the pandemic, when users were unable to meet in person, there was a shift towards dialogical intimacy (Yodovich et al., forthcoming). As Sharon (aged 52) described: 'It was slightly different because they weren't ready to jump in your knickers, because, like, you can't see, you weren't allowed to meet. So, basically, I think the men seem to be more chatty.'

This deeper level of interaction, particularly embraced by heterosexual women, allowed for a greater focus on compatibility before in-person meetings or sexual engagement. Because interactions were more conversation-based, life politics, such as vaccine attitudes, played a significant role. However, once restrictions were lifted, many were eager to return to old habits and pursue more physical, in-person intimacy. Barry (aged 39) explained:

> Yeah, it felt like everyone became a teenager then. And when the lockdown was lifted, everyone wanted to see each other, and, you know, let go of their pent-up desires and demands. It felt like you had put the cattle in a place, and now the gates are open.

This urge to return to a pre-COVID state diminished the importance of life politics issues in partner selection. Yadid (aged 39) similarly noted:

> I met a lot more people. A lot of people had the same perception as myself: we have gone over the rough part of COVID. It didn't really bother people anymore. More people wanted to meet, people who had spent all that time in solitary, lockdown, and were irritated by being on their own. They just wanted to be out, wanted to go and just be happy.[4]

These individual accounts align with national surveys in the UK. For instance, a YouGov (2022) survey showed a drop in fear of contracting COVID-19, from 46% in December 2021 to 32% in June 2022 (the last time the survey was conducted). Additionally, an Ipsos (2023) poll in December the following year found that whereas 51% of the UK public believed the government mishandled the pandemic, 87% felt confident they had personally adhered to the rules. This decline in fear, coupled with growing scepticism about how the pandemic was managed in the UK, underscores a broader desire to move past COVID-19: the public fulfilled its obligations, felt let down by leadership and now seeks to live without the weight of the pandemic on its shoulders.

Thus, as the critical moments of COVID-19 and its threats receded (Chan et al., 2021; Klofstad et al., 2011), users became eager to revert to pre-pandemic norms and partook in COVID bracketing. They steered away from life politics discussions, such as trust in science and ethical practices, and returned to a collective longing for normalcy. Over time, badges that once represented moral stances and personal ethics became obsolete, no longer playing a role in partner selection.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic was a period marked by widespread anxiety, isolation and uncertainty, driving many people to seek connection through dating apps. However, as public debates about the virus and vaccines permeated online spaces, users were led by political homophily and began selecting potential partners based on their COVID-related views. Vaccine badges on dating profiles, initially intended to help mitigate infection risks, evolved to reflect users' broader life politics. Yet, as the pandemic's severity lessened and restrictions were lifted, the relevance of these badges quickly faded. Users partook in COVID bracketing, a concept we introduced that expresses a desire to

move past the pandemic and return to social interactions free from COVID-related political judgements.

Our study invited participants to reflect on their experiences with dating apps before, during and after the pandemic's restrictions. This retrospective approach revealed how dating apps became arenas for political and ethical negotiation during times of social upheaval. It also highlighted the fluidity of such political expressions, showing how life politics on dating apps proved to be intense but fleeting, as users quickly discarded moral and ethical-driven discourses when the perceived risks declined. As people usually seek for political homophily (Easton & Holbein, 2021; Huber & Malhotra, 2017), our findings suggest that life politics like those seen during COVID-19 may resurface in response to future social crises.

Our research also underscored the role of dating apps as health actors, specifically examining how their efforts to promote public health can fall short. Vaccine badges, introduced in collaboration with the government, were intended to encourage vaccination through social media. However, our study found that the badges had little impact in persuading users. Those already supportive of vaccines did not need the badge as a prompt, whereas those opposed to vaccination were further alienated by its presence, seeing it as an unwelcome intrusion of politics into their dating lives. Instead of fostering public health awareness, the badges served as tools for users for impression management and to draw boundaries between themselves and others. This highlights how dating app features can inadvertently lead to moral judgements (Rosenfeld and Tomiyama, 2022) and potentially polarise users, reinforcing pre-existing beliefs rather than influencing behaviour. Nevertheless, dating apps remain unique environments for navigating issues of viral safety and risk. Unlike in-person interactions, apps provide users with mechanisms to block, filter and screen potential partners, granting them greater control over their engagement. As dating apps continue to play an essential role in facilitating connections, their potential to shape public health responses should not be overlooked.

Looking forward, further research is needed to explore whether risk management practices and political discourses observed during COVID-19 will persist in other contexts of viral risk or social change. Investigating whether life politics discussions emerge similarly during other tumultuous periods, such as the implications of Brexit or the cost-of-living crisis, will help determine whether this pattern of acute but temporary politicisation is a recurring phenomenon that can be avoided or ameliorated. Additionally, understanding how users navigate health concerns on dating apps beyond the COVID-19 crisis is crucial for developing strategies that foster safer and more inclusive interactions on these platforms.

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Notes

1. According to a 2023 Ofcom report, the age range of dating app users varies depending on the platform. For example, most Hinge users are aged 25–34, whereas apps like Badoo and Plenty of Fish are more popular among those aged 35–54. Since our study did not focus on a specific app and the interviewees used a variety of platforms, the average age of our participants may appear slightly higher than expected but still aligns with common age brackets of dating app users (Global Dating Insights, 2023).
2. A 'match' happens when both users swipe right on each other's profiles, indicating mutual interest and allowing them to start messaging and conversing within the app.
3. In our study, participants also discussed other 'COVID compatibilities' beyond the vaccine. These included discussions with potential partners regarding physical distancing, wearing a mask, testing for COVID prior to the date, etc. These are described and examined in a separate article (Garcia-Iglesias et al., forthcoming).
4. This was particularly true for gay and heterosexual men, but, as seen above, women were also eager to leave the pandemic behind.

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