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"It's Gone from More of Convenience to Necessity at This Point" Exploring Online Dating Use in the UK during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Thematic Analysis

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Article

"It's Gone from More of Convenience to Necessity at This Point" Exploring Online Dating Use in the UK during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract: There were reported increases in negative emotions such as boredom and loneliness during lockdown; simultaneously, there was a notable increase in new users and activity on online dating platforms (ODPs). While motivations for using ODPs vary widely, there is limited understanding for users' motivations to engage with ODPs in a time when restrictions were in place. To explore users' motivations and the impact COVID-19 had on their online dating experiences during the pandemic semi-structured interviews ($N = 12$) were conducted in the UK during December 2020–July 2021. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Motivations for using ODPs during the pandemic included addressing negative emotions such as loneliness, but, crucially, they became a necessity for meeting new people and making romantic and non-romantic connections in a time of social isolation. Lockdowns had negative effects on creating and sustaining online connections; however, where online connections were made, lockdowns restricted contact through social distancing and tier systems, limiting the ability to progress a relationship by moving it offline. Online interactions provided a relationship building foundation; however, there was ultimately a need to move the interaction offline in order for the relationship to develop. Findings related to motivations fit with prior literature; however, there was a shift in priorities, with importance being placed on online spaces to meet social needs that were limited due to the pandemic. ODPs were important for society, they provided a space for connection and socialising, which was vital in helping people navigate the solitude of lockdown.

Keywords: online dating platforms (ODPs); lockdown effects; online dating; relationship building; pandemic; motivations

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared that the COVID-19 pandemic was a global public health concern (World Health Organization 2022). Governments around the world took unprecedented measures to attempt to contain the spread of the virus, such as implementing social distancing and periods of lockdowns, where individuals were instructed to stay at home and prohibited from meeting people they did not live with. Non-essential shops, entertainment, and hospitality venues were closed (GOV.UK 2021), and, as a result, there was a considerable reduction in in-person social contact. While lockdowns were important to help reduce the spread of the virus, people's mental health was reportedly negatively affected (e.g., Brodeur et al. 2021; Caroppo et al. 2021; Owens et al. 2022).

1.1. Loneliness and Boredom

Rates of loneliness during the initial phase of lockdown were high (Groarke et al. 2020); Google Trends data showed changes in well-being related topic searches between January 2019–April 2020 and a search intensity for loneliness towards the end of this timeframe (Brodeur et al. 2021). Loneliness is an emotional state that can be associated with feeling a lack of social connection and separation from other people; it reflects a subjective experience of suffering from social isolation (Weiss 1987; Mushtaq et al. 2014). As social beings, humans have a basic need to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995), and, prior to the pandemic, the United Kingdom (UK) government identified loneliness as a public health issue (Groarke et al. 2020). General population data found that 10.5% of people reported some degree of loneliness (Beutel et al. 2017), and this number is reported to have increased in the UK during the pandemic to 35.86% of people rating that they sometimes or often felt lonely (Li and Wang 2020). Risk factors of loneliness in the UK included being young, separated, or divorced, whereas protective factors included being married or cohabitating (Groarke et al. 2020), suggesting that higher levels of social support act as a protective factor against loneliness. Similar findings were found in Europe, with Santini and Koyanagi (2021) reporting that 29% of participants reported feeling lonely, and 40% reporting that they felt lonelier since the start of the pandemic in comparison to before. Individuals with increased loneliness during the pandemic were at a higher risk for anxiety symptoms, worsened depressed moods, and sleep problems (Santini and Koyanagi 2021). Social support is vital for well-being and loneliness (Saltzman et al. 2020; Son et al. 2022), and, with the restrictions in place, this removed the social support for many people. The negative impact on mental health highlighted the seriousness of loneliness during the pandemic.

Google Trends data also showed between January 2019–April 2020 an increase in the search intensity for boredom (Brodeur et al. 2021). High risk environments for boredom include those with low stimulation, high-anxiety, and frustration, which corresponded to everyday life for most individuals during the pandemic (e.g., Bench and Lench 2013; Sreenivasan and Weinberger 2020). Research suggests that individuals prone to boredom were more likely to break COVID-19 rules such as adherence to social distancing and isolation rules (e.g., Boylan et al. 2021; Drody et al. 2022). Boredom has been found to be associated with negative emotions and is predictive of loneliness, sadness, anger, and worry (Chin et al. 2017), which highlights the potential negative impact on well-being boredom had during the pandemic.

1.2. Loneliness, Boredom, and Online Dating

Rising levels of boredom and loneliness has been linked to online dating, as there was a notable increase in new users and activity on online dating platforms (ODPs) during the pandemic (Sigalos 2020). Users may have turned to ODPs as a cure for loneliness: at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, daily conversations on Tinder rose by 12% between mid-February and the end of March in the UK (Shaw 2020). UK lockdown measures were announced on the 23rd of March 2020, and, shortly after, on the 29th of March, Tinder users made 3 billion swipes worldwide, which is the most the app has ever recorded in a single day (Shaw 2020). The increase in dating app activity at the beginning of the pandemic was further supported by Dating.com, reporting that global online dating increased by 82% in March 2020 (Sigalos 2020).

The Users and Gratifications Theory (U&G; Blumler et al. 1974) originally concerned with understanding why people use different types of media, what needs they had to use them, and the gratifications they obtained from using the media, which could be applied to online dating and understanding online daters motivations. Users had an understanding of their social and psychological needs, which they sought to fulfil (e.g., Miller 2015; Van De Wiele and Tong 2014), and, prior to the pandemic, a range of motivations had been identified as to why people use online dating. The most common motivations for using ODPs include for sex (e.g., Bryant and Sheldon 2017; Licoppe et al. 2016; Ranzini and Lutz 2017; Timmermans and Alexopoulos 2020), for entertainment (e.g., Aaron 2017; Kallis 2020;

Sumter and Vandenbosch 2019; Timmermans and De Caluwé 2017b), to find romantic relationships (e.g., Foster 2016; Kallis 2020; Lenhart and Duggan 2014; Sumter et al. 2017), and to find friendships (e.g., Byron et al. 2021; Kallis 2020; Ranzini and Lutz 2017). However, online dating users are also motivated by wanting companionship (e.g., Watson and Stelle 2021), to escape from their real lives (Wang and Chang 2010), among other reasons.

Dating apps were designed for users to find potential partners in their vicinity (Timmermans and De Caluwé 2017a), and apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge all share the common goal to bring people together in real life after meeting online. However, during the pandemic, in-person contact and intimate relationships were restricted, which led online dating apps to offer safer alternatives to getting to know people (Gibson 2021). For instance, many apps such as Bumble allowed virtual dating features such as video calls (Meisenzahl 2020), and there was a 70% increase in video calls during the pandemic (Fortune 2021); many dating apps removed location restrictions so people could connect with people all over the world (OkCupid 2020). While dating apps introduced new features to allow people to date safely during the pandemic, motivations of users during the pandemic may not align with the intentions of the developers of the app to find potential partners in their vicinity. It is not well known why there was such a large increase in activity and new users during lockdowns, but what is known is that humans have a desire for social interaction, particularly during stressful situations, where it is used as a coping mechanism (Dezecache et al. 2020). During periods of lockdown, people were being deprived of feeling close and connected to those around them (Joshi et al. 2020). Thus, it may be possible that individuals turned to ODPs to fulfil their social and psychological needs that were not being fulfilled as a consequence of the lockdown and restrictions put in place by governments. For instance, Williams et al. (2021) viewed the pandemic as a communication disruption, which, in turn, led to a rise in feelings of loneliness. As a result, it has been suggested that this has led to people being motivated to use virtual forms of contact such as ODPs to reduce feelings of loneliness (Joshi et al. 2020; Williams et al. 2021). Furthermore, to combat boredom during lockdowns, users may have turned to ODPs, as they are perceived to be like a game (Davis 2015; Ward 2017). The swiping feature has mutual principles of a phone game; hence, individuals keep coming back to online dating even if they are not looking for a committed relationship (Davis 2015). The swiping feature involves exploring various pictures of people and their profiles (Bryant and Sheldon 2017). There is an entertainment value within online dating; therefore, some individuals may use ODPs if they are bored from having nothing to do; ODPs act as a distraction from boredom, have a fun purpose (Joshi et al. 2020; Tanner and Huggins 2018), and help burn spare time (Davis 2015).

1.3. Current Study

There is limited understanding for users' motivations to engage with ODPs in a time when restrictions were in place; the trends show this notable increase in new users and activity on these platforms. However, it is unknown why individuals were seeking out new connections; therefore, our aim is to explore motivations during the pandemic and the impact COVID-19 had on their online experiences. The research has two research questions: (1) what were the motivations that drove individuals to engage with ODPs during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) and how did the pandemic impact their online experiences on these platforms?

Interviews were chosen because they allowed for open and direct questions to be asked in order to produce detailed narratives and stories (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). The pandemic affected each individual differently. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow for flexibility to probe beyond the interview schedule questions in order to understand the independent thoughts participants had. As the pandemic was unprecedented, it was important to allow for flexibility should the participant discuss a topic that we did not expect and fell outside the scope of the interview schedule.

2. Methodology

The study took a qualitative approach to explore the impact of COVID-19 on online dating and the motivation to use online dating during the pandemic. The two analysers took a critical realist approach, approaching the first wave of coding semantically, followed by latent coding to allow for deeper exploration and interpretation. To maintain reflexivity, consensus coding was implemented, which prompted discussion of any preconceived ideas and personal interpretations and promoted consistency of judgement (Boyatzis 1998). A completed COREQ (Tong et al. 2007) can be found in the Supplementary Material.

2.1. Participants

A total of 12 participants took part between the dates of November 2020 to July 2021 (4 females and 8 males), aged between 20–59 (*Mean* = 25 years, *Standard Deviation* = 10.87). All participants lived in the UK prior and during the pandemic, were over the age of 18, and identified as single in their relationship status. Individuals who had previously used ODPs but were not currently active users were not eligible to take part in the study; all participants were active users of ODPs before and during the pandemic. Table 1 provides the demographics for each participant, their associated pseudonym, the date participants took part in the interview, and the COVID-19 restrictions at the time of interview.

Participants were recruited through two options: (1) via convenience sampling the SONA system, which allowed undergraduate Psychology students at the University of Sheffield to obtain course credits for their participation ($N = 4$); and (2) via opportunity sampling through the researcher's social media platforms (e.g., Twitter). However, the reader should note that any participants recruited through social media may have been known to that researcher, and, therefore, the interview was conducted by a different researcher on the team.

2.2. Procedure

Participants read the information sheet and consent form via Qualtrics (Version November 2020–July 2021, Qualtrics, Provo, UT, USA) where they gave consent, demographic information collected, and generated their unique code to allow for the interview and demographics to be matched. Interviews were conducted online over the Google Meet platform and were audio recorded. Participants were given one week to withdraw from the study. Overall, each individual interview took no longer than 40 min.

2.3. Analytic Procedure

A semi-structured interview was designed with four sections (see Supplementary Material for copy). The first section aimed to explore the participants' general perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., *Can you tell me a little bit about your day-to-day life before COVID-19?*). The second section aimed to establish the participants' online dating history and what platforms and features they utilised (e.g., *Can you describe your experiences with online dating before COVID-19?*). The third section aimed to look at the participant's motivations to use ODPs during the pandemic (e.g., *Can you describe why you have used online dating websites during the COVID-19 pandemic?*). The last section encompassed the closing questions (e.g., *have you talked about what you expected to be talking about?*) and gave the participants an opportunity to ask any questions.

The interviews were transcribed using basic Jeffersonian transcription (Jefferson 2004), and the extracts were analysed using an inductive and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). After analysis of the 12 interviews, no new codes were developed, hence the sample size of 12 participants in total.

2.4. Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Sheffield's Psychology department, reference number: 037169.

Table 1. Participant demographics and pseudonyms.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Education	Employment	Nationality	Date of Interview	COVID Restrictions
Alexa	21	Female	Straight	UG degree or equivalent	Unemployed	British	8 December 2020	Second lockdown ended 2 December 2020, and returns to a stricter three-tier system of restrictions.
Louisa	23	Female	Straight	Masters or equivalent	Unemployed	British	9 December 2020	Within a strict three-tier system of restriction.
Ralph	20	Male	Straight	UG degree or equivalent	FT Student	British	10 December 2020	Within a strict three-tier system of restriction.
Kenneth	20	Male	Straight	A Levels or equivalent	FT work	British	10 December 2020	Within a strict three-tier system of restriction.
Asha	22	Female	Straight	UG degree or equivalent	FT Student	Malaysian	11 December 2020	Within a strict three-tier system of restriction.
Dan	20	Male	Gay	UG degree or equivalent	FT Student	British	16 December 2020	Within a strict three-tier system of restriction. The Prime Minister encourages the public to keep Christmas celebrations short and small.
Molly	22	Female	Straight	UG degree or equivalent	FT work, PT Student	British	17 December 2020	Within a strict three-tier system of restriction. The Prime Minister encourages the public to keep Christmas celebrations short and small.
Jack	59	Male	Straight	UG degree or equivalent	FT work	British	17 December 2020	Within a strict three-tier system of restriction. The Prime Minister encourages the public to keep Christmas celebrations short and small.
Samuel	20	Male	Straight	A Levels or equivalent	Apprentice	British	18 Decemer 2020	Within a strict three-tier system of restriction. The Prime Minister encourages the public to keep Christmas celebrations short and small.
Liam	24	Male	Bisexual	UG degree or equivalent	FT work	British	13 July 2021	Within Step 3, as the Prime Minister confirmed Step 4 is delayed for four weeks, as the government focuses on the vaccination programmes. Restrictions on weddings and funerals are no longer.
Gary	27	Male	Gay	UG degree or equivalent	FT Student	British	14 July 2021	Within Step 3, as the Prime Minister confirmed Step 4 is delayed for four weeks, as the government focuses on the vaccination programmes. Restrictions on weddings and funerals are no longer.
Xavier	26	Male	Straight	UG degree or equivalent	FT work	British	22 July 2021	Step 4 of the roadmap to abolish lockdown was enforced 19/07/2021. Now, most legal limits on social contact are removed, and closed sectors of the economy are now open.

Note: UG = undergraduate; FT = full-time; PT = part time.

3. Analysis

A total of three themes were found, and a summary of these can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of main themes.

Theme Title	Theme Summary
Theme 1: "Everyone just talks about COVID": Challenges in establishing an online relationship.	COVID-19 was a dominant and oppressive topic, not having an active personal life, resulted in stilted and restricted conversations, affecting the ability to form more meaningful and interesting online interactions. While app usage was initially high, usage decreased after a few weeks, as there was little opportunity to meet offline.
Theme 2: "where do you go from there? It's like a bit of a grey area"	The restrictions provided many barriers to establishing any form of offline relationship. Some were concerned about the potential of contracting the virus while living with vulnerable family or friends. Others were concerned about legalities, and wanting to follow the tier systems rules and social distancing which complicated meeting offline.
Theme 3: "it's gone from more of convenience to necessity at this point"	There was an increased need to talk to others in a non-romantic sense. Participants felt lonely, depressed, or sad. Dating apps allowed for a way to meet people when meeting offline was not possible. Somewhat uniquely to lockdowns, one participant talks of diminished opportunities to meet new people in a romantic sense and dating apps move from being a convenience, where it is possible to meet new people, to a necessity, where it is the only available space to meet new people.

3.1. Theme 1: "Everyone just Talks about COVID": Challenges in Establishing an Online Relationship

One of the main challenges when attempting to establish an initial relationship online through lockdown was that people's lives were essentially on hold and that "everyone just talks about COVID".

> *"it was a lot like simpler so you could end up meeting quite a few people erm and it kinda gave people stuff to talk about whereas now everyone just talks about COVID"* (Molly)

COVID-19 was a dominant and oppressive topic and not having an active personal life, resulted in stilted and restricted conversations, affecting the ability to form more meaningful and interesting online interactions.

> *"So, it is one of the reasons why things don't work out because the conversations and topics are so much more interesting before the pandemic, so it just takes so much effort to bring out new topics"* (Molly)

Participants discussed the idea that conversations they were having with others online required a lot of effort compared to before the pandemic and that conversations were both limited and consisted of the same topics of conversations. The repetition of the topics and the lack of interesting and engaging new topics of conversation meant that, for some, breaking the ice was difficult.

Samuel talks below of the difficulties with breaking the ice and the idea that if the conversation does not flow online then this might indicate that someone would be "boring" in real life.

> *"so if you're first talking to someone and they've got nothing on their profile and it's just a blank slate if you just say something generic because there's nothing to there's no talking points erm then you're seen as boring but in real life if you know if you're actually going and doing something you can comment on what's going on until you know them better and then you can ask about those things like the breaking the ice is so much harder"* (Samuel)

Samuel talks of not having a talking point, or just talking in generic terms, which links to Molly's discussion of not having anything new to say. The COVID-19 pandemic

restricted people's lives in a way that led them to have little new or interesting to talk about, making breaking the ice and engaging a prospective match much more difficult.

While app usage was initially high, this usage decreased after a few weeks. Louisa, like other participants, talked of being bored of dating apps and that

"people started getting bored of being on dating apps all the time it was like a massive like er peak and then everyone was like this is boring I need something else to do" (Louisa)

Louisa talked of a "massive peak", where dating apps were something that initially were very popular and in high demand. This could have been due to the ability to initially connect with others; however, after a short period of time, these apps became less appealing, in part, possibly due to the lack of stimulating, new topics of conversation discussed by Samuel and Molly. This ultimately led to dating apps being unfulfilling and a sense that the app usage was boring, so people looked for other things to occupy their time, and app usage decreased.

This sentiment was echoed by Dan, who talked about a period of 3 weeks where there was an initial peak of dating app usage, as it provided connection to different people, but, after a few weeks, app usage fell, ultimately because this interaction could not be moved offline.

"during corona, it was more people were online at the start of it so erm it was then easier to like talk to people and then maybe after a couple of weeks, three weeks er I know myself, I just kind of I was just fed up I was like I'm not its nothing's going to be fruitful from this. I'm sorry. I'm not going to meet anyone during these months so what's the point?" (Dan)

This inability to meet offline negatively affected the ability to make meaningful online connections which could be sustained over a period of time. For some, the dominant and oppressive topic of the COVID-19 pandemic left little new to say, creating a challenge in developing initial online interactions. While dating app usage may have "peaked", participants felt that app usage fell after this initial peak due to limited conversation and the inability to move connections offline into the real world. Crucially, online interactions appeared to have a shelf life without the chance to meet face to face. Theme 2 will investigate the idea of challenges around moving the online relationship offline.

3.2. Theme 2: "Where Do You Go from There? It's Like a Bit of a Grey Area": Challenges in Moving a Relationship Offline

Participants discussed the challenges they faced in terms of moving their relationship from the online world into reality, as well as barriers which were specific to the pandemic and how such barriers impacted the way in which they were able to develop their relationship. Sub Themes within this theme include: online interactions vs. meeting in person, considerations unique to COVID-19, and making difficult decisions whilst dating.

3.2.1. Online Interactions vs. Meeting in Person

When meaningful online interactions are established, and a connection is made, moving this interaction offline is important to sustain the relationship and move it forward. For some participants, online interactions reach an interactive peak, where meeting is a natural next step, but the COVID-19 pandemic restricted or prevented this next step.

"there's a point where you talk for so long without seeing someone it's almost like you've reached like a peak and then it comes back down again out of interest and yeah I think I'm way past the peak ((laughter)) so you get excited and then it's been so long it's like ehhh I'm no longer that bothered" (Samuel)

"I've clicked with some people and usually we'd meet up straight away we'd see if the connection we had was real in person but it gets to the point where you wait for so long you get bored and then it fizzles out. I get why we can't meet but I think it has taken an effect because I've lost because I've not been able to hang out with certain people because of the restrictions . . . it hasn't taken the direction it could have you never know I could've been in a relationship right now ((laughter)) . . . there's only so much you can do online" (Louisa)

For Molly, the pandemic lockdowns meant that she was able to meet more people online because there was a surge in usage, but, much like Louisa and Samuel, Molly talked about the idea of moving the interaction offline as difficult.

> *"it's probably easier matching with people because more people are on there but it's a lot harder to actually form anything from it because realistically if you can't meet them you're just gonna get bored of them"* (Molly)

For Molly, turning a match into meaningful interaction and to form some kind of relationship online was difficult without the prospect of meeting offline. The notion of continuing an online interaction was not one that was exciting. Online interactions became boring without the prospect of an offline meeting.

One of the main challenges for online interactions during COVID-19 was moving this online interaction offline in order to sustain the interaction and maintain interest. For Samuel, he found that meeting offline was not an option with his COVID-19 interactions, and, therefore, he went "way past the peak" and became disinterested in matches that he had made and the people he was interacting with online. This undefined "peak time frame" was important in sustaining interest in the interaction in the longer term, and, when this peak time frame was passed, it led to what he described as a "grey area".

> *"before it was very okay let's try and get to know them as quickly as possible but more importantly meet them versus now it's very talk to them for like two months and then very unsure as to where you go from there it's like a bit of a grey area"* (Samuel)

For Samuel, the aim of talking to someone online was to meet, and, for him, doing this sooner rather than later was ideal. The COVID-19 restrictions caused his online interactions to fall into a "grey area", where the prospect of meeting offline was put off for an unknown amount of time. Without the prospect of meeting online, sustaining the online interaction almost became moot. Doing this online work ordinarily had an offline goal, and COVID-19 caused a lot of uncertainty about the prospect of moving this interaction offline.

Expectations and the differences in how people act in person vs. online are an additional challenge in moving the interaction offline. While these could have been barriers that were faced by platform users prior to the lockdown, the COVID-19 lockdowns extended the period of talking online, and, when meeting offline, this can lead to a greater sense of disappointment.

> *"we just meet up and then it's just like a completely different from what I thought, or it is just completely different from my expectation, and you are just like oh shock, this is not the person that I am talking to, and it is kind of disappointing"* (Ralph)

3.2.2. Considerations Unique to COVID

Participants discussed barriers that were specific to the fact that they were living and dating during a pandemic. Molly felt that the tier systems made meeting people offline harder, specifically during the winter months, when her area was in "tier two", meaning that socialising was limited to outdoors.

> *"it's definitely a lot harder to meet with people and as well because at the moment obviously like where I live it's tier two and it's december so I'm not gonna sit outside with somebody in a pub in the middle of December"*. (Molly)

One of the physical barriers was social distancing, and participants were not able to become physically and intimately close unless they were in agreement about not conforming to the COVID-19 rules.

> *"you're not sure if the other person will be comfortable actually doing anything or like you know even just going for drinks or something cos technically it's illegal"* (Samuel)

For many, there were rules that prevented people from meeting, especially where tier systems were in place or where people were in different tier systems. Samuel highlighted how, for some, to meet, it was against social distancing rules imposed by the government,

and some negotiation of personal morals and adherence to government rules was required. While this is the case, not everyone had the same approach to adhering to government roles, and, while some might be happy to bend or break the rules, this was not the case for everyone. This, in itself, created a barrier for meeting where personal attitudes are not aligned.

There were also practical reasons as to why online interactions could not be moved offline and why meeting in person was challenging, such as not wanting to put other family members at risk of catching COVID-19, and, therefore, this impacted upon their dating experience.

> "*the start of lockdown I wasn't going on dates cos I was back at home with my parents and they were classed as high risk so didn't want to put them in danger*" (Gary)

Some participants, such as Gary, stated that they had to be very careful about who they socialised with for fear of contracting COVID-19 and passing this on to vulnerable family members. Cohabiting with parents and others who were high risk created a further barrier for moving online interactions offline, and the safety of others, for some, was paramount and more important than dating and potentially putting themselves and others at risk of contracting COVID-19.

Many participants established that moving an online connection into an offline space was a logical and necessary next step, and the inability to do so led to a "grey area", where participants may not know how to progress and proceed. Some of the key barriers to moving online interactions offline specific to the COVID-19 lockdowns included government restrictions and the tier systems, which were not always the same for everyone and changed based on location; this provided a legal barrier to meeting, especially for those in different cities or locations. Furthermore, physical barriers included social distancing rules, which prevented people from meeting in proximity. Lastly, the risk of infection was a further barrier for some, especially where individuals lived with an at-risk family member or friend; thus, the risk of spreading the virus was high.

3.3. Theme 3: "It's Gone from More of Convenience to Necessity at This Point": Motivations for Online Dating during COVID-19

Within the interview, participants spoke of numerous motives, which encouraged them to use or continue using ODPs during the pandemic, some motivations are likely similar or the same to what they would have been prior to the pandemic and others more specific to the circumstances of that time.

3.3.1. Meeting People of the Same Sexuality (LGBTQ+)

For some of the participants, using ODPs was an opportunity to meet people of the same sexuality, and people were motivated to use apps for this reason. Gary discussed the idea that this was his main motivation for using such apps and suggested it could be difficult to meet potential partners when you do not identify as being heterosexual.

> "*There isn't a lot of LGBTQ+ venues so like when you're heterosexual it's probably a lot easier to go up to someone you find attractive and flirt with them whereas for me without LGBTQ+ venues it's very difficult to know if someone is homosexual or not so online dating made it so much easier as you can obviously tailor your profile to suit you so like I obviously set it as being interested in men which is easier than trying to guess someone's sexuality whilst you're out in town or whatever so erm yeah that was the main motivation really to meet people of the same sexuality as myself*" (Gary)

However, Dan suggested that, even when using ODPs, it can still be difficult to meet or "match" with a person of the same sexuality.

> "*it would kind of go off and on only because Tinder erm because they don't like because there's not many gay people close by it would like show me 4 people and then be like you're out of matches, cool, great, nice ((laughs))*" (Dan)

Dating apps can be integral to connect with others, but especially for LGBTQ+ people. This was the same both pre-COVID-19 and during the pandemic. ODPs are a connective tool that can help filter prospective matches in order to tailor the experience of dating and make it easier for people to match with like-minded people, in this case people of the same sexuality.

3.3.2. Boredom

Both Sam and Molly explained that boredom was their main motivation for using ODPs.

> *"mainly just boredom ((Laughs)) just not having anything to do just kind of wanting to kind of speak to people erm yeah that's that's the very sad truth of it ((Laughs))"* (Sam)

> *"pure boredom if i'm honest it's not as if I'm looking for anything or anybody I'm just really bored and it gives me something extra funny to do"* (Molly)

ODPs are commonly used as a boredom buster, and, for Sam and Molly, this was also the case. They used apps to fill their time and to entertain themselves when they had nothing better to do. While the use of ODPs to solve boredom was common pre-pandemic, it was also a key feature of dating app usage during the pandemic as well. Alexa suggested that ODPs were used to address boredom in the lockdowns; however, it was difficult to meet prospective matches because of social distancing restrictions.

> *"honestly it's been harder. I feel like a lot of people are on there out of boredom. Erm so again with the intentions thing is a bit unclear, and also not knowing if you can actually meet them, whether it's safe to. So yeah it's almost like is there a point at the moment."* (Alexa)

3.3.3. Meeting New People

Not all participants used or downloaded ODPs prior to and during the pandemic for romantic reasons, and there was an increased need to talk to others in a non-romantic sense. ODPs allowed for a way to meet and connect with new people when meeting offline was not possible.

Interestingly, Gary talked of meeting new people online for non-romantic purposes. He talked about feeling isolated, and the use of ODPs helped to combat this. He also talked of using apps that are extensions of traditional ODPs such as "Bumble BFF", which allow users to meet people for non-romantic purposes and is an extension of the "Bumble" dating app

> *"I think instead of using online dating to find romance people just used it to connect with others so they had people to talk to and not feel so isolated"* (Gary)

> *"I'm not sure if it counts as online dating but I have Bumble BFF which I don't know if you've heard of it it's like online dating but for making friends"* (Gary)

For Gary, the use of ODPs is not just about making romantic connections but also about connecting with a wider range of people for different purposes and for making friends in a time where social connection is restricted, and meeting new people faces distinct new challenges through lockdowns and social distancing.

Gary also suggested that, as well as meeting people for non-romantic connection, dating apps allowed him to meet new people for romantic connections when the physical and social barriers prevented him from doing so. It created an ease to meeting new people that mitigated problems such as social distancing.

> *"when you go out to bars and pubs with your friends before you could obviously go up to someone you found attractive whereas now you have to sit at your table half the time with a piece of plastic barricading you from the table next to you ((laughter)) so you can only really give someone you fancy the eye from across the room erm so I think it's just easier now to use online dating apps than meeting someone out and about"* (Gary)

3.3.4. Diminished Opportunities

Somewhat uniquely to lockdowns, one participant talked of diminished opportunities to meet new people in a romantic sense, and ODPs moved from being a convenience, where it was possible to meet new people, to a necessity, where it was the only available space to meet new people.

"I think it's probably just opportunities have diminished at the moment" (Samuel)

Prior to the pandemic, ODPs were not Samuel's preferred option of meeting new people; however, during the pandemic, it was difficult to meet people face to face. Therefore, ODPs had more of a purpose.

"It's gone from more of convenience to necessity at this point so it's more like I think the last time I used it before the pandemic really took off I wasn't really a big fan of the platform and I'd rather use other means of finding people like you know go to events and stuff and then er I sort of got slapped round the face by covid now I'm back to this so erm it's not I think I don't think it's my preferred way of doing it nowadays but erm you know it has its benefits" (Samuel)

Samuel talked about the idea of apps prior to the pandemic as a convenience, as a tool that you could employ alongside other tools for meeting new people; however, the pandemic and the restrictions that this brought turned ODPs into a necessity, as there were very traditional ways of meeting new people.

For some, the motivation to use ODPs during the COVID-19 lockdowns were no different from the motivation to use ODPs outside of this lockdown context. Meeting new people and meeting people of the same sexuality is an important function of ODPs; however, for some, ODPs held a new meaning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Tackling boredom and loneliness was important during a time of social isolation, and it also became a key platform for making non-romantic social connections when meeting new people using other methods was prohibited. The dating app comes to the forefront of socialisation, and making connections with new people during the pandemic lockdowns and apps hold great importance for making new connections beyond the existing social networks that people already hold.

4. Discussion

The current study found that: (1) establishing an initial relationship during lockdown was challenging because people did not have an active personal life, and COVID-19 dominated the conversations that led to restricted and stilted conversations. The high app usage initially decreased after a few weeks mainly due to the inability to meet offline, which negatively impacted the ability to form and sustain meaningful online connections. (2) The restrictions provided many barriers to establishing any form of offline relationship, which is considered to be an important and necessary step to sustain and move relationships forward. (3) There was an increased need to talk to others in both a romantic and non-romantic sense, participants felt lonely and isolated, and dating apps allowed for a way to meet people when meeting offline was not allowed. ODPs moved from being a space that was considered a convenience to a necessity for single people during lockdown, as they provided a platform to connect with new people and to socialise.

Throughout COVID-19 lockdowns, sex was not a motivation for using ODPs, which was not consistent with previous motivation literature (e.g., Bryant and Sheldon 2017; Timmermans and Alexopoulos 2020). However, this was unsurprising, due to the restrictions in place, users instead had a need to connect with others to combat boredom, loneliness, and isolation. This was consistent with other studies observing behaviour during the pandemic, who found that ODP's were often used to reduce feelings of loneliness (e.g., Joshi et al. 2020; Williams et al. 2021). Furthermore, within the current study, participants reported that ODP's were used to combat boredom during this period. This supported findings published prior to the pandemic that suggested that users turned to ODPs as a form of entertainment, as they were perceived to be like a game (e.g., Davis 2015; Ward 2017).

Our data suggests that users are still motivated to find romantic relationships, which is consistent with the literature (e.g., Kallis 2020; Sumter et al. 2017). Furthermore, our findings are consistent with pre-pandemic literature, which found that users use ODPs to seek non-romantic partners (e.g., Byron et al. 2021; Watson and Stelle 2021) and to socialise (e.g., Timmermans and De Caluwé 2017a; Tanner and Huggins 2018). However, these motivations did appear to be more pronounced during the pandemic, as individuals prioritised the need to socialise, as this was restricted by lockdown. Feelings of isolation were widespread during the pandemic, and loneliness levels increased in the UK (e.g., Li and Wang 2020; Power et al. 2023). Our findings can help explain why there was an increase in app users and usage during lockdown, as individuals were using ODPs to socialise and form social connections (Wiederhold 2021). ODPs provided an online platform where users could engage in safe ways to connect with others and meet their needs while adhering to lockdown regulations. Thus, this would suggest that online spaces during lockdown are important for single people, as they provide a space to connect with new people and to socialise.

Fundamentally, while the pandemic and the restrictions in place were a shared experience, offline interactions were still considered to be an important element to sustain and move a relationship forward. The restrictions provided many barriers to establishing any form of offline relationship, and some participants in this study were concerned about the potential of contracting the virus while living with vulnerable family or friends. Others were concerned about legalities and wanting to follow the tier system rules and social distancing implemented by the government, which complicated meetings offline. Our findings align with previous work, which found that protecting vulnerable family members and friends from the virus increased compliance with the government guidelines (e.g., Burton et al. 2022; Denford et al. 2021). However, our findings do suggest that these online interactions paired with government restrictions formed a grey area, where the beginnings of some form of relationship had been established online, but it was not always possible to build on these foundations by meeting offline, which was seen as a necessary step.

4.1. Limitation and Practical Implications

There is an important limitation to our sample: we did not collect information about participants' living statuses. It is important to acknowledge that individuals who lived alone during the pandemic had increased rates of loneliness, compared to those living with another person, which acted as a protective factor to loneliness (e.g., Groarke et al. 2020; Census 2021). Therefore, living arrangements may have influenced individuals' needs for social interaction, with those living on their own using ODP to meet their social needs.

The findings of this study do, however, have practical implications for individuals, dating app developers, and policy makers in the context of lockdowns and beyond. For individuals, it has shown that there is an increased importance for online spaces; we should embrace these platforms as valuable tools for socialising and forming connections, especially in challenging times. However, individuals should know that maintaining connections can be challenging. Creative ways to interact virtually should be considered, such as online events or virtual dates. Many dating apps did indeed develop features such as a call function, and features such as this may provide a more engaging virtual experience, fostering connections even when physical interaction is restricted. Developers should invest in these platforms to continue improvements and safety measures to ensure that ODPs remain a secure and reliable means of socialising and connecting with new people, even when offline interactions are restricted. Furthermore, each app could consider incorporating features that facilitate safe offline interactions while respecting government guidelines and individual preferences, for instance, by providing tips on socially distanced dates. The apps should be encouraging and promoting responsible dating practice and safety guidelines. For policymakers, they should continue to provide clear and updated guidelines on social distance and safety measures to address concerns related to offline meetings while protecting vulnerable populations. Overall, this study highlights the evolving significance

of ODPs during the pandemic and the importance of adapting both individual expectations and dating app features to help navigate these unique circumstances effectively.

4.2. Concluding Remarks

There were consistent motivations to use ODPs compared to previous literature prepandemic; however, our findings would indicate a shift of priorities during lockdown. Focus was taken away from motivations such as sex, and importance was placed on online spaces being used to meet social needs that were limited due to restrictions, for example, combating loneliness and boredom and making social connections in a non-romantic sense. Online interactions provided a foundation for relationship building; however, forming online relationships was challenging with a lack of stimulating conversations and new topics. Where online interactions were successful, there was, ultimately, a need to move the interaction offline in order for the relationship to develop. Thus, while restrictions and social distancing acted as a barrier in moving to an offline relationship, single individuals still sought refuge in the digital world. ODPs offered a virtual space for connection and socialising, which, for some, became a necessity in helping to navigate the solitude of lockdown; these platforms are an essential part of society.

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