

Love And Barriers: Exploring The LGBTQ+ Experience on Dating and Hook-Up Apps

Kirti¹, Ritika²

^{1,2}Indira Gandhi National Open University

Abstract—In the relationships of LGBTQ+ individuals, dating and hook-up applications have created an entirely different alteration and thus a plethora of challenges. The research looks closely into users' experiences on the most popular online dating such as eHarmony, Grindr, OKCupid, and Tinder in order to excavate the hindrances for the most authenticistic, meaningful connections. In-depth interviews reveal several different obstacles to a positive and safe online dating experience for LGBTQ+ individuals. Misrepresentation of one's identity or gender, fear of rejection and social barriers seem to be the most significant barriers for users trying to create authentic relationships. Other issues mentioned by participants revolve mainly around harassment, discrimination, and privacy concerns. The study also reveals that the additional problems exacerbating those from LGBTQ are misrepresentation, fetishization, and lack of inclusiveness on these platforms. The findings thus highlight the imminent need for better app design and stricter protocols for safety to provide a more inclusive and friendly environment to all identities from the LGBTQ+ community. Improvement of option diversity and features that assure safety and authenticity may help mitigate such challenges. It would be possible to create safer online spaces in which LGBTQ+ individuals would connect with others without feeling threatened or even discriminated against, harassed, or harmed by creating these barriers. In other words, this study reveals the dilemma of being both complex and simple during a true dating and hook-up experience for the LGBTQ+. It begs the need for well-founded sites whose safety nets disallow users to go about their personal lives not quite in keeping with their true selves.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of online dating and hook-up apps has revolutionized how people form romantic and sexual connections. For LGBTQ+ individuals, platforms like Grindr, Tinder, OKCupid, and eHarmony have created new opportunities for socializing and connecting with potential partners who share similar interests or

identities (Davidson, 2019). However, these apps also present unique challenges for LGBTQ+ users, as they must navigate a digital space that is often fraught with misrepresentation, discrimination, and privacy concerns (Duguay, 2017). While these platforms are designed to facilitate connection, they can inadvertently hinder the formation of meaningful, authentic relationships, especially for individuals seeking deeper connections rather than brief encounters or transactional interactions (Berlatsky, 2019).

Research shows that LGBTQ+ users frequently face barriers such as harassment, fetishization, and limited identity options on dating platforms (Berlatsky, 2019). These users often have to engage in a delicate balancing act between presenting an authentic identity and protecting themselves from potential harm, especially in environments where privacy and safety may not be fully guaranteed (Duguay, 2017). The need for privacy is compounded by the fear of rejection or outing, which further exacerbates the challenges in navigating online dating spaces (Fox et al., 2020). In some cases, LGBTQ+ individuals are also subjected to a lack of inclusivity and recognition of their diverse identities, with many apps still offering limited options for users to express themselves beyond the binary gender and sexual orientation norms (Davidson, 2019).

This study seeks to explore the complex experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals using dating and hook-up apps, focusing on the barriers they face when trying to form genuine connections. Through interviews with users, this research investigates the impact of these barriers on users' ability to form authentic relationships, emphasizing the urgent need for more inclusive, safe, and user-friendly platforms. By identifying the key obstacles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals on these apps, this study aims to contribute

to the broader conversation on how digital spaces can better accommodate the diverse needs of the LGBTQ+ community (Fox et al., 2020).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several studies have examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals on dating apps, focusing on issues such as harassment, discrimination, and safety. Fox et al. (2019) demonstrates that LGBTQ+ users often face discrimination on dating platforms, particularly those from marginalized subgroups. This discrimination can be explicit or implicit, manifesting as rejection, exclusion, or harassment based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or race. These experiences hinder the ability to form meaningful connections and contribute to a sense of exclusion from the broader dating pool.

Additionally, privacy and safety concerns are major issues for LGBTQ+ individuals on dating apps. Reisner et al. (2016) highlight the risks associated with inadequate privacy protections, including identity theft, personal data breaches, and physical harm. Many LGBTQ+ individuals also worry about being "outed" unintentionally or being exposed to hate speech. These concerns underscore the need for enhanced safety protocols on dating platforms.

Byron, Albury, and Pym (2020) explore the role of dating apps in fostering friendships within the LGBTQ+ youth community. The study suggests that for many young LGBTQ+ people, dating apps are not only used for romantic connections but also as platforms for building friendships and seeking social support. This dual-purpose use of apps emphasizes the importance of designing platforms that support both social and romantic interactions, particularly for younger LGBTQ+ users. The research also emphasizes the significance of safety and security, especially in online spaces where users' identities and personal information are at risk. Studies suggest that apps need to prioritize safety mechanisms to protect users from online predators, harassment, and emotional harm. These insights suggest that dating apps must evolve to better serve the diverse and complex needs of LGBTQ+ individuals.

(Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022) conducted a study on Dating Apps: The Uncertainty of Marketised Love and finds that the rise of dating apps has changed how

people interact romantically by incorporating commercial forces into the need for closeness. The monetization of love has been studied by academics like Illouz (2012) and Bauman (2003), who contend that romantic interactions are increasingly framed through consumerist logics. Dating app users regard love connections as transactions made possible by gamified interfaces and efficiency-driven algorithms, engaging in self-branding and curating activities (Hobbs et al., 2017). Because dating apps like Tinder and Bumble employ opaque techniques to recommend matches, algorithmic mediation is crucial in determining how users engage with one other. Despite their claims to maximize compatibility, these algorithms frequently put user engagement and retention first, creating ambiguities and sustaining socioeconomic, racial, and gender inequalities (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). Additionally, dating apps have promoted tailored self-presentation that mixes authenticity and performativity, normalizing casual relationships and hookup culture, especially among younger populations (Ward, 2017; Paul, 2014). According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), these changes are a reflection of larger cultural trends toward liquid modernity, which is defined by transient and transactional interactions. This collection of works demonstrates the significant influence dating apps have on the sociocultural dynamics of intimacy, love, and desire, exposing both the advantages and disadvantages of negotiating commercialized romantic environments.

Screened Intimacies and the Swipe Logic

(David & Cambre, 2016) conducted a study on Screened Intimacies and the Swipe Logic and finds that due to the introduction of a "swipe logic" that gamifies romantic relationships, dating applications such as Tinder have changed how people currently perceive intimacy. According to David and Cambre (2016), Tinder's design encourages a transactional approach to intimacy in which users make snap decisions based on visual clues. This reasoning, which emphasizes effectiveness, self-promotion, and consumer choice in romantic relationships, is consistent with larger neoliberal values. By encouraging the commodity of desire, the "swipe culture" turns the pursuit of intimacy into a similar activity to perusing merchandise (Illouz, 2012). A performative approach to self-presentation is

encouraged by dating apps that prioritize convenience and rapid pleasure over emotional connection and match optimization (Hobbs et al., 2017). Furthermore, Tinder's algorithmic design influences user experiences by selecting matches not on suitability but on opaque, engagement-driven factors. This creates uncertainty as users negotiate the platform's design's limitations as well as its opportunities (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). In addition to mediating romantic interactions, the swipe logic reflects and supports societal movements toward digital, market-oriented modalities of intimacy, as demonstrated by David and Cambre's 2019 work. This corpus of work encourages more investigation into how these changes affect interpersonal relationships.

(MacKee, 2016) conducted a study on social media in Gay London and Tinder as an Alternative to Hook-Up Apps and explains the incorporation of dating apps into London's gay culture demonstrates how Tinder and other similar platforms differ from conventional hook-up apps. This change is examined by MacKee (2016), who finds that Tinder strikes a balance between the possibility of more significant connections and casual encounters. Tinder's swipe-based design and algorithmic matching provide a more curated and possibly less transactional experience than applications like Grindr, which are frequently linked to instant, location-based hookups. The impact of platform design on user interactions and behaviors has been studied in research on gay dating apps. A culture of immediacy and sexual objectification is frequently reinforced by hook-up apps such as Grindr, which place an emphasis on closeness and real-time connection (Race, 2015). On the other hand, Tinder's larger user base and emphasis on longer profiles provide users the chance to showcase more complex identities. They work toward various relationship objectives (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). But there are some criticisms of Tinder's design. Its gamified interface and algorithmic biases reinforce normative norms of desirability, such as racially and gendered hierarchies, as part of the larger commodification of intimacy (Bivens & Hoque, 2018). This calls into question how homosexual men use these platforms to strike a balance between their own appearance and standards unique to their community. In order to broaden the possibilities of connection beyond the hook-up culture, MacKee's work positions Tinder as a hybrid platform inside homosexual London, fusing aspects of

social media and conventional dating. This study adds to a larger conversation on how modern queer intimacy is shaped by digital platforms.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the common challenges faced by LGBTQ+ users on dating apps.
2. To study the outcomes of using dating apps, including the formation of relationships, friendships, and transactional interactions.
3. To examine the extent to which dating apps prioritize the safety and privacy of LGBTQ+ users.
4. To explore the risks faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, such as data breaches, catfishing, and outing.

Research Field

Delhi, one of India's most populous cities, has a growing LGBTQ+ community. This vibrant yet complex setting provides a unique opportunity to explore how dating apps influence and are influenced by the real-life experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative research design, employing in-depth interviews to gain a nuanced understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals on dating apps. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their stories in detail, while still covering key themes relevant to the research objectives.

IV. DATA COLLECTION

The sample was selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods, ensuring diversity in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity, and app usage experience. Participants aged 19-26, who identify as LGBTQ+ and use dating apps, were recruited from Delhi. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted in December 2024 and January 2025, either in person or via phone calls, depending on the participants' preferences. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

V. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The interviews revealed several recurring themes, including barriers to forming meaningful

relationships, negative experiences with app users, privacy risks, and safety concerns.

1. Barriers to Meaningful Relationships

One of the most significant barriers faced by LGBTQ+ individuals on dating apps is the issue of trust. Many respondents mentioned that even when using dating apps, it is difficult to determine whether the other person is genuine or merely seeking casual encounters. One participant, *Nisha* (24, queer woman), explained, "It's hard to know who's actually interested in something real and who just wants a quick hook-up. I've had people tell me they want something serious, and then just disappear after a few conversations."

The anonymity of online dating is another challenge. As *Avi* (25, gay man) shared, "There's a constant trade-off between staying anonymous for safety reasons and revealing enough to connect with someone. If I don't show enough of myself, I might miss out on potential matches, but if I reveal too much, I risk being outed." This creates a dilemma for users trying to balance privacy and authenticity.

2. Experiences on Dating Apps

Many participants shared negative experiences, including dishonesty and ghosting. *Ravi* (22, bisexual man) described, "It's frustrating because people often lie about what they're looking for. Some say they want something serious but ghost you when it turns out that they don't." Another participant, *Kriti* (23, pansexual woman), explained, "I get matched with people, but it's often just for casual hookups. I think people need to be more upfront about what they're looking for from the start."

However, positive experiences were also reported, especially when interacting with individuals from more progressive countries. *Mohit* (26, gay man) shared, "It's nice when people from more inclusive communities make you feel normal, even if they aren't LGBTQ+ themselves. I once met a guy from Canada who had LGBTQ+ friends and was super respectful and open. That felt really reassuring." This highlights the potential for more supportive and understanding environments on dating apps that prioritize inclusivity.

3. Intentions and Outcomes of Using Dating Apps

The mismatch between users' intentions and outcomes is another key finding. *Aditi* (25, lesbian woman) mentioned, "I've been on these apps hoping to find a

long-term relationship, but it's so hard even to get a match, let alone something serious. The odds seem stacked against me." This discrepancy highlights the difficulty LGBTQ+ individuals face in achieving their dating goals through these platforms.

Additionally, respondents noted the heightened risks faced by individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who may be more vulnerable to blackmail or exploitation. *Tanu* (19, non-binary person) explained, "People from poorer backgrounds are at greater risk of being blackmailed when their LGBTQ+ identity is discovered. I've heard a few stories where that happened to people, I know."

(*Rhea*, 24, Bisexual, Delhi) "I've had some really disappointing experiences with offline meetings, especially after using dating apps. I once met someone in person after chatting online for a while, thinking it would be different, maybe even something meaningful. But honestly, it was a disaster. After a few weeks of meeting and talking, they completely ghosted me. I felt really rejected and, to be honest, it hit me harder than I expected. It felt like all that time I spent getting to know them was wasted."

Things only got worse after that. My ex-partner started disturbing me even after the breakup. They would send messages, try to manipulate me, and even threatened to spread personal information if I didn't respond. It got to a point where I was constantly anxious, and I couldn't focus on anything else. The emotional toll was unbearable, and it left me mentally drained. I ended up seeking therapy and counselling because I just couldn't handle it anymore.

In general, I feel like a lot of people on these apps are just looking for something casual or even transactional—sex, mostly. They pretend to want more, but they're just in it for the thrill. It makes you doubt people's intentions and wonder if anyone is really interested in forming a genuine connection. It's so hard to trust anyone in that environment. I wish people would be more upfront about what they're looking for, because it would save a lot of us from the pain and confusion."

4. Privacy Risks and Safety Concerns

Privacy and safety emerged as significant concerns. Several respondents mentioned that they are hesitant to share their real identities or upload photos due to the risk of blackmail or outing. *Suraj* (26, gay man)

recounted, “My ex-partner used my photos and threatened to expose me. It was mentally distressing. It felt like I couldn’t trust anyone online, especially with all the privacy breaches that happen.”

While some apps offer features like blocking or restricting users, respondents felt these protections were insufficient. *Kriti* (23, pansexual woman) shared, “It’s easy for someone to create a fake profile and bypass the safety features. If there was a way to authenticate users and verify identities, it could reduce the risks.”

5. Recommendations for Improving Safety

Participants offered several suggestions for improving safety on dating apps. *Avi* (25, gay man) suggested that apps should introduce a system to verify the authenticity of users’ identities to reduce the risk of fraud. “Something like an identity verification tool could really help. It would ensure that the person you’re talking to is who they say they are,” he said. Another recommendation came from *Ravi* (22, bisexual man), who proposed restricting the sharing of nude content. “There should definitely be a ban on sharing nudes on these apps. Too often, people use them as a way to blackmail others or create fake profiles. It would make the platform safer for everyone.”

VI. CONCLUSION

The experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals on dating and hook-up apps reveal a complex interplay between opportunity and challenge. While these platforms offer unprecedented avenues for connection, they also present significant barriers that hinder the formation of meaningful, authentic relationships. From issues of misrepresentation, privacy concerns, and fear of rejection to the risks of harassment and exploitation, LGBTQ+ users navigate a landscape where safety, trust, and inclusivity are often compromised.

The findings of this study underscore the pressing need for dating apps to evolve in ways that better serve the diverse needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. Misrepresentation—whether through anonymity or the pressure to conform to certain identities—continues to be a central challenge, as users struggle to balance privacy with authenticity. Furthermore, the prevalence of dishonesty, ghosting, and superficial encounters undermines users’ efforts to build genuine

connections, especially for those seeking long-term relationships.

Safety remains a paramount concern, with many participants expressing fear of being outed, blackmailed, or exposed to harm. Despite some safety features such as blocking and reporting tools, these mechanisms often fall short of providing the protection users need. Additionally, the lack of inclusivity on many platforms further marginalizes certain LGBTQ+ identities, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing exclusionary practices.

To address these issues, dating apps must prioritize privacy, security, and inclusivity through more robust safety protocols, identity verification, and diverse options for self-expression. The introduction of features that promote transparency and protect users from harm will not only foster safer spaces but also encourage more authentic and meaningful connections. Furthermore, by designing apps that reflect the full spectrum of LGBTQ+ experiences and identities, developers can ensure that no one is left feeling invisible or marginalized.

In conclusion, the future of LGBTQ+ online dating lies in platforms that are safer, more inclusive, and more responsive to the unique needs of their users. Only through such systemic changes can dating apps become true spaces for connection, where LGBTQ+ individuals can interact, form relationships, and express their true selves without fear of discrimination or harm. By embracing these changes, dating apps can fulfill their potential as tools for building supportive, meaningful, and authentic connections within the LGBTQ+ community.

REFERENCES

- [1] J. Fox *et al.*, “Digital discrimination and social exclusion on dating apps,” *J. Digit. Commun.*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 34–52, 2019.
- [2] S. L. Reisner *et al.*, “Privacy concerns and the LGBTQ+ community: A digital safety study,” *Privacy Technol. Rev.*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 142–156, 2016.
- [3] P. Byron, K. Albury, and M. Pym, “Hooking up with friends: LGBTQ+ young people, dating apps, friendship and safety,” *J. Youth Stud.*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 415–429, 2020.
- [4] N. Berlatsky, “The limits of inclusivity: The challenges of LGBTQ+ representation on dating

- apps,” *J. Social Media Stud.*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 58–73, 2019.
- [5] P. Davidson, “Navigating the digital landscape: LGBTQ+ experiences on dating apps,” *New Media Soc.*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 1194–1211, 2019.
- [6] S. Duguay, “LGBTQ+ users of Tinder: The intersection of online dating and queer identities,” *Sexualities*, vol. 20, nos. 5–6, pp. 589–610, 2017.
- [7] U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1995.
- [8] R. Bivens and E. Hoque, “The algorithmic biases of dating apps: Social inequalities in matchmaking systems,” *J. Sociol.*, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 392–407, 2018.
- [9] E. David and C. Cambre, “The swipe culture: The commodification of intimacy in Tinder,” *social media + Society*, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 1–10, 2016.
- [10] M. Hobbs, J. Owen, and L. Gerber, “Dating in the age of apps: The role of mobile technology in changing dating practices,” *New Media Soc.*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 567–584, 2017.
- [11] E. Illouz, *Why We No Longer Love: The New Culture of Affection and Desire*. Hoboken, NJ, USA: Wiley, 2012.
- [12] J. MacKee, “Social media and dating in London’s gay community: Tinder as a new space for queer intimacies,” *Sexualities*, vol. 19, no. 5, pp. 586–603, 2016.
- [13] J. Paul, “Casual sex and hookup culture: The impact of dating apps on young adults’ sexual behaviors,” *J. Sex Res.*, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 199–208, 2014.
- [14] K. Race, “Grindr, sexuality, and the commodification of intimacy,” *J. Social Pers. Relat.*, vol. 32, no. 7, pp. 102–117, 2015.
- [15] G. Ranzini and C. Lutz, “Online dating in the age of the algorithm: How Tinder is changing the game of romance,” *Media Cult. Soc.*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 246–267, 2017.
- [16] L. M. Ward, “The role of self-presentation in dating apps: A study of Tinder and social norms,” *Media Psychol.*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 25–45, 2017.
- [17] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2003.
- [18] G. David and C. Cambre, “Screened intimacies: Tinder and the swipe logic,” *social media + Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016.
- [19] C. Bandinelli and A. Gandini, “Dating apps: The uncertainty of marketised love,” *Cultural Sociol.*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 423–441, 2022.