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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
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More than You Bargained for: Care, Community, and Sexual Expression through Queer Women's Dating Apps during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Stefanie Duguay

The COVID-19 pandemic raises questions about the safety and relevance of location-based dating apps in light of physical distancing guidelines. This essay draws on research into dating apps' responses to the pandemic to share preliminary findings about how apps for queer women, in particular, are re-constructing their meaning, use, and services. The apps Her and Lex have taken steps to position their technologies as facilitating self-care and the care of others, enabling community and political dialogue, and allowing for responsible sexual expression. However, these aims are shaped by, and often in tension with, dating apps' business models and the broader commercialization of health and wellbeing by digital technologies. Nonetheless, such apps can serve as digital queer alcoves, offering new possibilities for connecting people during times of crisis.

"…s'en tenir à un ou une conjointe seulement." Quebec's Premier François Legault responded to a question about dating during a COVID-19 press conference in April 2020. English media outlets translated this as, "Stick to one partner only" (Moore 2020). The province's National Director of Public Health, Dr. Horacio Arruda, agreed: "Oui, oui, disons que la monogamie est préférable à ce temps-ci," confirming jokingly that monogamy is preferable at this time. This was not the only instance of governments and health officials attending to questions of partner-seeking during the pandemic. Newfoundland's health minister warned, "If you use Tinder and Grindr and you swipe right, you might get more than you bargained for" (Belmonte 2020). With officials asking people to remain mostly at home and stay two meters apart in public, the proximity and interpersonal contact associated with dating raises red flags in light of attempts to contain the virus.

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic presents several challenges for dating apps, as mobile technologies used to facilitate romantic and sexual encounters. Dating apps are designed to catalyze in-person interactions among nearby others. They harness smartphones' geolocational capacities to organize users and their activities according to proximity. Further, their use is intertwined with mobility, granting the freedom to browse partners across city landscapes and arrange spontaneous face-to-face encounters. When meeting in-person suddenly becomes a dangerous act, these apps' mandates, features, designs, and business models are called into question. App companies run the risk of being perceived as facilitating virus transmission, and users disbanding without the promise of potential in-person encounters.

Queer Dating in Pandemic Times

This essay outlines themes I observed in the responses of two dating apps for queer women to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although apps like Tinder and Grindr are well known for targeting large user bases, heterosexuals and men seeking men respectively, less familiar apps cater to a niche of women seeking women as well as transgender and non-binary users. One such app, Her, originally launched in 2013 as the lesbian dating app *Dattch*, has been embedded in start-up culture and sustained by venture capital, reinforcing its focus on a narrow lesbian market instantiated in the app's "aesthetic of white femininity" (Murray and Ankerson 2016). However, Her has undergone substantial rebranding in recent years to open its user base to a broader, yet undefined category of "queer womxn." Her reports uptake by four million women worldwide (Apple Inc. 2020a) and includes swipe-based profile browsing, similar to Tinder, with an emphasis on visual content.

In contrast, Lex is a text-based app modelled after print media personal ads (Apple Inc. 2020b). Originating as an Instagram account circulating user

submissions, the standalone app launched in 2019, allowing users to submit and respond to personal ads and, optionally, link an Instagram account to supplement ads with images. Lex is crowdfunded and its userbase is specified in Apple's app store as "womxn, trans, genderqueer, intersex, two spirit and non-binary" people. While it also adopts the fluid but nebulous term "womxn," the further specification provides a sense of inclusivity toward a range of users.

As global response to COVID-19 began to mount in 2020, I worked collaboratively with other scholars to collect dating apps' press releases, blog posts, and social media while conducting non-participant observation of in-app messages and design changes from March until June. The following sections describe findings from a preliminary thematic analysis of these materials and discuss the bargains inherent in these different apps stepping into roles that appear to support forms of care, community, and sexual expression during crisis.

Discourses of Care

Following suit with other dating apps, Her and Lex circulated in-app messages advising users to change their behavior in light of COVID-19. Her stated, "Your safety is our priority. We recommend to keep things online, for now" while suggesting users *meet* through video calling apps and providing a link to the World Health Organization's website. "We encourage virtual lover + friend connections during this potentially isolating time," noted an in-app message on Lex, pinned to the top of the browse screen. These safety warnings were paired with further messages and imagery that positioned dating apps not as posing a risk but as a means of promoting healthy behaviors while caring for oneself and others.

Accordingly, these companies presented their apps as a remedy for social isolation and loneliness. Lex later pinned a message prompting users, "Check on all your friends!" while sharing users' stories on Instagram about connecting with each other for support. Her's Instagram account spotlighted a photo documentary series, *Queerantine*, to share queer people's stories of resiliency. Building on the notion that dating apps are central to connecting socially while distancing physically, Her offered a time-limited free trial of its premium features while Lex increased the number of posts users could make on the app. These changes to features and functionality reflect business-oriented decisions, with the capacity to attract more users and activity, as well as material reinforcement of discourses about app participation as an expression of care.

These app messages and material updates reflect the multiplicity of roles that care assumes within neoliberal capitalism. The framing of digital apps on individualized devices as mechanisms for self-care is tied to a broader ecology

of digital technologies sold as integral to the self-management of health (Hobart and Kneese 2020). In this sense, swiping on profiles may be akin to other individualized strategies peddled by wellness industries—from bubble baths to fad diets—to give a semblance of agency and distract from broader structures that constrain individual action. Such structures are steered by powerful actors, such as government and health institutions, which provide authoritative instruction during crisis that can overlook individualized needs, especially the needs of queer and other marginalized people. On the other hand, Hobart and Kneese (2020) remind us that care of the self and others can serve as a form of survival in light of institutional disregard and neglect. The apps' showcasing of horizontal and grassroots initiatives that provide caring bonds and resources in absence of institutional apparatuses for supporting queer resilience indeed publicizes and reinforces these more radical forms of care.

Community Support

The notion of dating apps as the solution to pandemic loneliness was further reflected in encouragements for users to connect as a community. Her's mobilization of community discourse resonates both with the strategies of popular platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which appeal to community to promote rule-abiding participation, and the app's existing approach to bolstering engagement by hosting queer events. Her redirected its ambassador network, comprised of volunteers and paid individuals who host events in urban centers, toward hosting a high volume of gatherings over the video-conferencing platform Zoom. Although some events were regional and others catered to North American time zones, all were free and open for anyone to attend. While many events replicated themes of speed dating and nightlife, common across Her's in-person events, the addition of stress management, financial education, and wellbeing workshops recognized the strain users could be experiencing while also providing individualized solutions (e.g. yoga, cooking class) for enacting self-care.

Coordinating and hosting affective, community-building events involves not only the dedication of time and energy but also emotional labor, especially in times of crisis. Her's job postings for paid ambassadors, "City Leads," indicate that these contracted individuals receive 50% of the profits they generate from events.[1] This raises questions as to whether and how much individuals are paid for hosting free, online events when emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) and immaterial digital labor often go uncompensated (Jarrett 2015), especially in the name of doing good or serving community.

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1   Described in the online application form: https://her.typeform.com/to/rfea2f.

Alternatively, Lex let users develop their own sense of community, publishing user-led initiatives to its Instagram account. These ranged from regional Zoom brunches to pen pal systems and the circulation of "mutual aid" resources. Lex also highlighted users' experiences and efforts to help others through an Instagram series called #QueerantineStories. Both apps contributed to political discourses and grassroots initiatives, circulating calls of support for rent relief as well as aid to local businesses and individuals affected by job loss. Such efforts promote decentralized initiatives led by existing communities and not artificially grouped under Silicon Valley's discursive umbrella of "community." They support the kind of longstanding coalitional care work organized by groups of queer, feminist, and racialized people (Cohen 2005), which draws strength from existing community connections to quickly redirect help and resources during crisis.

Sexual Expression

In a series of Instagram posts with the caption "WE👏STAN[2]👏ESSENTIAL👏 WORKERS," Lex shared users' posts expressing thanks to essential workers and offering to send nudes as a form of stress relief, bridging the app's community-related communication with an acknowledgement that sexual desire endures even in crisis. Both Her and Lex posted content related to sex, including Instagram images featuring vibrators, and encouraged masturbation as a way to access sexual pleasure without physical contact. Her accentuated this message through a Zoom workshop on "Masturbation and Self Love" as well as Instagram photos of women in bikinis or underwear captioned "day-dream material" to help users pass time in quarantine and as inspiration for "sending socially distant pics." Lex circulated user requests for "nude swaps," identifying sexting as a viable means of connecting.

The apps' encouragement of sexual activity that respects physical distancing recognizes the role of these technologies in facilitating the fulfillment of sexual needs. Such a stance is more realistic than campaigns by apps targeting more mainstream audiences, such as Tinder and Match, whose blog posts discussed the postponement of physical contact as a means to deepening emotional relationships, messaging akin to abstinence-only approaches. This builds on mainstream apps' promotion of heteronormative courtship narratives, where marriage is the ultimate success story, to dislodge connotations of immorality and risk associated with being perceived as hook-up apps for casual sex (Albury 2018). Such contrasting approaches to sexuality reflect the association of apps like Her and Lex with queer histories of digital technologies as useful mediators in sexual encounters, especially by men seeking men leading the early uptake of mobile media and apps for partner-seeking (Mowlabocus

2   A term indicating enthusiastic support.

2010). Her and Lex helped users to identify modes of solo and partnered sexual expression, acknowledging sexuality as part of preserving one's overall health during crisis.

It is notable, however, that commercial arrangements intertwine with sexual content and permissible user activity. Her's sexual material often included product placements and brand sponsorships. Durex sponsored the self-love workshop, followed by a blog post recap with prominent placement of the brand's logo and links to product pages. Sexy Instagram posts tagged stores selling lingerie and sex toys. While this accords with Her's frequent product placement in its blog and email newsletters, and inclusion of ads in-app, it points to the uneasy tension that has long existed between commercialization and community-building in queer spaces, including online spaces (Campbell 2007). Commercialization can contribute to the mainstreaming and de-politicization of queer communities, reducing them to a market niche, but it is also often a necessary means of sustaining queer initiatives. Like many apps and platforms, Her carries a dual responsibility to its tech investors and users. However, its responsibility to not allow commercial content to crowd out community exchange is heighted by the app's aim to be welcoming for sexually and gender diverse "womxn." Although Lex's crowdfunded model has enabled it to be free from advertising, this raises questions as to how long such a model can endure. Further, Lex's reliance on app stores and its connection with Instagram render it unusable as a conduit for the sexts and nude exchanges the company supports, with these other businesses imposing restrictions that safeguard their ability to profit from pornography-averse advertisers and investors.

Digital Queer Alcoves with Tensions Heighted by Crisis

While monogamy may be preferable in terms of physical contact during the pandemic, isolation is not. As these apps play a role in care, community-building, and supporting sexual expression, their purpose deviates from being merely dating apps to serving as alcoves for queer connection and life. The diversification of these apps resembles the multiple queer uses of past digital technologies, from email to chat rooms and web portals, for forming social networks as hubs of overlapping sexual, social, and political action (see O'Riordan and Phillips 2007). However, these apps function within existing platform ecologies and social, political, and economic structures that raise tension with regard to their role in such activities that are vital to the survival of often-marginalized people. The embedding of these apps within neoliberal capitalist structures means that the kind of care and community-building they seek to reinforce may also perpetuate individualized, illusory solutions,

initiatives reliant on unpaid and under-recognized labor, and commercial interests disguised as sex-positive politics.

Nonetheless, these apps also have the capacity to support existing initiatives of coalitional care. They can provide technological scaffolding for meaningful connection and the reinforcement of efforts to address gaps in institutional and normative responses to crisis. For this reason, we must hope that such digital queer alcoves find ways of sustaining both their operations and their diverse communities, as they provide an alternative to the monopoly of mainstream platforms narrowing our outlets for interpersonal, social, and political connection. As their responses to COVID-19 progress, these apps have the opportunity to reinforce this shift from a focus on location-constrained dating toward serving as digital queer alcoves for restoration, mobilization, and thriving both in times of crisis and the everyday.

> *This essay reflects elements of a larger research project conducted with Dr. David Myles (Affiliate Professor, Université du Québec à Montréal and Postdoctoral Researcher, McGill University) and Christopher Dietzel (PhD Candidate, McGill University).*

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and Antonio Somaini (eds.)**
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**With its unprecedented scale and consequences the
COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new con-
figurations of media. Responding to demands for infor-
mation, synchronization, regulation, and containment,
these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces,
and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration
of media technologies and the cultures and polities with
which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptabil-
ity, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of
a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and
analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in
response to the global crisis and provide elements toward
an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.**

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