Abstract
This paper draws on qualitative research conducted with cis men aged 18–35, who used dating apps to meet women both before and during COVID-19 lockdown. Men in our study — which sought to better understand the aspects of app use that make young people feel safer or less safe — offered affectively loaded accounts of app use, which featured racialized and gendered experiences of ‘awkwardness’, shame, and contempt. Our analysis engages with Bollen and McInnes’ concept of ‘sexual choreographies’, which focused on the inter-affective and embodied aspects of cis gay men’s sexual learning practices as a means of reframing our thinking around the ways cis men who date women engage with dating app technologies and cultures. Drawing on Elspeth Probyn’s theorization of shame as a pedagogically productive affect, we argue that the affect-response of shame-humiliation can be turned to a productive, self-reflexive opportunity for improving gendered experiences of app use.

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Foreword

While dating apps are widely used tools for enabling social connection and intimate relationships, many users also express concerns about their impact on feelings and experiences of safety and mental wellbeing. In this paper we investigate young men’s experiences of shame and associated affects, exploring the ways that affective encounters are circumscribed by app features that enable image sharing, profile management and text chat.
We draw on data collected via qualitative research workshops and interviews with young Australian cis men who used dating apps to meet women (n = 22) conducted in regional and urban settings in 2019 and 2020, prior to and during COVID-19 lockdown. Our project, which was undertaken in collaboration with sexual health and youth support organizations, invited app users aged 18–35 to explore the elements of app use that made them feel safer (or less safe), and to share their strategies for ‘doing better’ on apps [1].

Our analysis draws on Bollen and McInnes’ (2006, 2004, 2000) concept of ‘sexual choreographies’, which focused on the inter-affective and embodied aspects of cis gay men’s sexual learning practices, as means of reframing our thinking around the ways cis men who date women use apps. We consider three research questions:

**RQ1**: How are experiences of dating, safety and well-being among cis men who use apps to date women shaped by shame and related affects? In what ways are these experiences and practices gendered?

**RQ2**: What role does image sharing play in intensifying or modulating shame or negative affective encounters through apps (both within the platform and across other social media platforms).

**RQ3**: What are the strategies used by cis men who date women to mitigate, excuse, deflect or modulate shame or feelings of inappropriateness and feelings of danger or discomfort (for themselves and others)?

In contrast to the LGBTQ+ people and cis heterosexual women in our study, cis heterosexual and bisexual men ‘seeking women’ seldom expressed concerns regarding their personal safety — although many acknowledged women’s concerns. However, ‘men seeking women’ were far more likely to describe negative affects relating to apps and app use, including shame, contempt, embarrassment and ‘awkwardness’.

Participants’ descriptions of bad feelings and bad encounters did not primarily relate to situations where they felt physically unsafe, but to their emotional and affective reactions to app use, and to incidents where they were aware they had threatened or harmed others — or had the potential to do so. Drawing on Elspeth Probyn’s (2005) theorization of shame as a pedagogically productive affect, we argue that the affect-response of shame-humiliation can be turned to a productive, self-reflexive opportunity for improving gendered experiences of app use.

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**Background**

Recent qualitative research into ‘straight’ dating and hook-up app cultures has drawn attention to the ways that gendered inequalities can be replicated (and at times amplified) via in-app interactions. For example, DelGreco and Denes (2020); Farvid and Ashir (2016); Gillett (2018); Shaw (2016); Thompson (2018); Vitis and Gilmour (2017) and Pruchniewska (2020) have shown that heterosexual women negotiate and mobilize against masculine discourses of sexual entitlement that play out in men’s abusive and aggressive behavior on apps.

Much of the comparable literature exploring heterosexual men’s own accounts of their digital intimate practices has focused less on app-use and more on image-sharing, particularly in relation to the production
Men seeking women: Awkwardness, shame, and other affective encounters with dating apps and exchange of nude selfies and dick-pics (Lasén and Garcia, 2015; Ravn, et al., 2021; Roberts and Ravn, 2020; Waling and Pym, 2019; Waling, et al., 2020). This body of work has shed light on men’s experiences of consenting to and pursuing flirtation and relationships via image-exchange (Ravn, et al., 2021; Roberts and Ravn, 2020; Waling, et al., 2020). For example, Lasén and Garcia (2015) explored men’s practices of learning how to present themselves as sexually desirable to potential partners, including heterosexual men’s accounts of learning how to ‘self-objectify’ in selfies by referencing gay pornography.

Scholars have also explored heterosexual men’s concerns regarding their physical appearance and sexual desirability in intimate relationships (Montemurro, 2021), and the discomfort experienced by heterosexual male ‘bystanders’ to the non-consensual sharing of intimate images (Harder, 2020). In their study of university-aged men’s negotiation of sexting, friendship, boundaries and ‘respect’ in heterosexual relationships, Ravn and colleagues (2021) found that while their participants reported some pressure from male friends to brag and ‘overshare’ about sexual adventures, they were also aware of the potential to cause harm and distress to female partners by sharing intimate images. Participants in Ravn and colleagues’ (2021) study addressed this ‘darker’ content in the context of group interviews through the use of humor and self-deprecation. This allowed them to simultaneously deflect and acknowledge their negative feelings about their own bodies, as well as feelings of shame or sadness on learning that they — or a friend — had violated the boundaries of a female partner. While study participants described intimate boundary-violations as ‘immature’ and ‘disrespectful’ behaviors, they openly expressed judgement towards women whose image-sharing practices were ‘too slutty’.

These recent studies offer significant insights into heterosexual men’s experiences of sharing sexual pictures, as opposed to using dating apps. As Byron (2020) observes, experiences of dating app use among cis men who date women — particularly heterosexual men’s experiences — have, to date, been under-represented in comparison to studies of heterosexual women and LGBTQ+ people. There has been limited inquiry into heterosexual men’s understandings of heterosexual women’s safety concerns when using apps. Additionally, there is limited evidence to suggest how those men learn to use dating apps, and what counts as ‘successful app use’ for men ‘seeking women’, in terms of constructing profiles, matching and meeting up with new partners.

While there are numerous self-help books and online resources dedicated to online dating and ‘the art of the hook up’ (Wolf, 2019), the use of apps is not taught in formal pedagogical settings. Further, as Byron and Albury (2018) have noted, while interactions on platforms like Facebook and Twitter are (in the main) public and easily observable by newcomers, this is not the case for dating apps. In thinking about how men might learn to use apps, we adapt the idea of a sexual choreography, developed by Jonathan Bollen and David McInnes (2000) which offers a framework for thinking about learning as it takes place in specific cultural contexts which are not addressed in formal sexuality education.

In a series of interlinked studies, Bollen, McInnes and colleagues explored the ways Australian gay men acquire ‘knowledge, skills and capacities’ via their embodied navigation of sexual spaces (Bollen and McInnes, 2000); and through encounters with new sexual settings, practices and partners (Bollen and McInnes, 2004). McInnes and Bollen deploy the metaphor of choreography as a means of moving away from the notion of the ‘sexual script’ (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). Within McInnes and Bollen’s framework of sexual choreography, sexual encounters are neither intrinsically constrained by sexed and gendered ‘scripts’, nor inherently free or transgressive, but rather as “a constrained deployment of improvisational capacities”, which facilitate the development of an embodied and affective sexual repertoire.

Guided by this approach, we understand the capacity for sexual learning as something that accumulates over time, which is constrained and enabled by the material effects of technologies and environments, and is enhanced and enabled by reflection. Sexual learning is not simply the product of planning or rational decision-making — as McInnes and colleagues put it “you can learn by doing and being done to, by watching and being shown, by talking about what to do and recounting what went on”.
While McInnes and colleagues specifically address observation and interaction in physical spaces, we suggest the notion of ‘building a repertoire’ (as opposed to conforming to a script) can be productively applied to practices of sexual learning on apps. However, there are connective logics (David and Cambre, 2016; van Dijck and Poell, 2013) and disconnective features (Light, 2014) of dating apps that make learning-in-interaction more challenging.

Image sharing and visual communication practices; messaging; and cross platform interactions all serve to disrupt the feedback loops that might otherwise help to establish mutual understanding and respectful connection. This disconnection introduces a space for shame and related affects, a situation we explore in more detail in the analysis section below.

In their reflection on their interviews, Bollen and McInnes note that “where men recount sexual experiences that are transforming in some way, those experiences are marked in their telling by particular affects” — particularly relating to surprise and excitement associated with new or unexpected encounters [4]. Similarly, we have observed strong markers of affect in our participants’ accounts of app use. However, the men in our study were more inclined to recount not surprise or pleasure, but experiences of shame, humiliation or ‘awkwardness’.

Michael Kimmel (1994) and Thomas Scheff (2006) argued that shame has come to play a central role in heterosexual men’s negotiation of masculinity, underpinning a homophobic policing of sexuality as well as leading to emotional suppression, silence, violence; and a register of acceptable and unacceptable masculine standards that formulate belonging (or not). Both Kimmel’s and Scheff’s account of shame leads them to frame men’s affective negotiation of masculinity through a wholly negative lens. In contrast, more recent masculinities scholarship drawing on the work of Raewyn Connell (1995) cautions against generalizations, noting that men’s lived experiences of emotion and affect are particular, contextual, and ever-changing (de Boise and Hearn, 2017).

For example, in her study of white men and masculinity in Australia, Waling (2020) identifies a fine-tuned emotional reflexivity that highlights the contingency and fluidity underpinning the differing pressures to realize and reproduce masculine myths. In his ethnographic accounts of heterosexual men’s affective and emotional lives in homosocial sport settings, Clifton Evers (2010, 2009a, 2009b) found that shame was linked to experiences of intimacy, critical reflection, learning, care and emotional literacy expressed in situation-specific ways. These studies remind us that we cannot presume to predict emotion and affect in terms of their outcomes or their capacities to move us (Wetherell, 2012).

Honing in on the affective encounter offers a helpful way of understanding contemporary digital practices and the uses of communication technologies and platforms. Psychologist Silvan Tomkins’ work on affect, and in particular his account of shame-humiliation, has been widely adopted (Ahmed, 2004; Tomkins, 2008; Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Probyn, 2005). Broadly, this theoretical tradition has sought to account for the social and political contexts of different kinds of encounter that seem to originate in embodied feelings, reactions and impulses (see, for example, Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). We draw specifically on Tomkins’ framework, pairing the affects of shame-humiliation and contempt-disgust as a way of elaborating and understanding some of the problematic encounters enabled by the connective and disconnective logic and gendered uses of dating apps.

The shame response is one of disrupted looking and reduced facial communication, in which “the individual calls a halt to looking at another person, particularly the other person’s face, and to the other person’s looking at him [sic], particularly at his [sic] face” [5]. As Amparo Lasén (2013) suggests, asynchronous digital modes of communication can play a role in reducing this kind of shame-response. For Lasén’s interviewees “distance, delay and anonymity, as in the display and exchange of naked pictures of faceless bodies, afford forms of empowering exhibitionism ... and self-deprecating humor” [6]. However, very few men in our study negotiated shame in this way — perhaps because pictures of faces are so central to dating app profiles on Tinder, Bumble and the other apps most used by our participants.
Dating apps structure, manage, modulate (and ultimately profit from) interest. As Elspeth Probyn notes, “interest and shame are intimately connected” [7]. Shame operates only after “interest or enjoyment has been activated” [8]. This is why it is fundamental to the dating app experience — full as it is of so many activations of interest and micro-enjoyment through its matches, interactions and moments of interpersonal connection. For Probyn, “once interest and enjoyment have been felt and when they have been ripped from you. At that moment the sheer disappointment of loss translates into shame that attacks your sense of self: the entrails of who you thought you were are suddenly displayed for all to judge” [9].

In the accounts of dating app use and mediated relationships offered by young men in our study, the transgression and alienation associated with bad encounters was usually — although not always — accompanied by some level of reflexivity. This is what Probyn (2005) sees as the ‘productive’ value of shame. She argues that “shame in this way is positive in its self-evaluative role; it can even be self-transforming” [10].

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### Research design

Participants were recruited via an online survey shared on social media, and via advertising circulated by partner organisations in two states. One-hour interviews were conducted via Skype in 2020 both prior to and during COVID-19 lockdown and physical distancing. As detailed in Table 1, participants were aged between 18 and 28 (mean age = 24). All identified as male and most as heterosexual or straight, with three identifying as heteroflexible or bisexual.

One participant who identified as heterosexual reported using Grindr to meet men, reflecting a not-uncommon disconnection between self-identification and sexual practice (Persson, et al., 2019). Recruitment material specifically invited participants to discuss experiences of ‘seeking women’, and all interviewees focused on this aspect of app-use. Cultural and ethnic affiliation varied, reflecting the multicultural population of Melbourne.

Interviews drew on the ‘media go-along’ method (Jørgensen, 2016), inviting participants to delve more deeply into their own positive and negative experiences of app use, and to reflect on experiences of negotiating personal safety and sexual health. Participants were also invited to open a dating app on their own phone (without showing the interviewer), and reflect on their experiences of matching, image-sharing and chatting on apps.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th>Cultural, ethnic affiliation</th>
<th>Time using dating apps</th>
<th>Main dating apps</th>
<th>Other platforms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bailey</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Tinder</td>
<td>Messenger, Snapchat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lukas</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Heteroflexible</td>
<td>Jewish Australian</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Tinder, Bumble</td>
<td>SMS, Messenger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Chinese Australian</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Tinder, Bumble</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafi</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Tinder</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Group workshops were designed to invite participants to reflect on their history of app and social media use and to share their perceptions of the ‘rules’ for creating and interpreting dating app profiles. Workshops were conducted in face-to-face settings in 2019. As Barker, *et al.* (2012) observe, creative research methods can evoke nuanced reflections on lived experiences of sexuality and gender that may not emerge in the course of more ‘traditional’ focus groups.

Additionally, we were mindful that participants in group workshops were strangers to one another, and we did not want to place them in a situation that seemed to solicit public disclosure of distressing experiences. Consequently, workshop discussion prompts invited participants to discuss their understanding of app cultures from a third-person perspective.

Over the course of two hours, participants undertook several creative activities (including designing profiles for a celebrity ‘friend’) paying attention to the ways that ‘red flags’ were understood in app profiles. Discussion in the group workshops helped to give greater social and cultural context to app use, and targeted norms and dimensions of everyday app use. Through the analysis that follows, we elaborate on negative affective encounters in young men’s dating app use as consequential for gendered experiences of safety and well-being [11].

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**Findings**
Profile pictures, shame and shaming

Profile pictures establish the rationale for initiating contact and further communication. Interview and workshop participants almost universally emphasized the importance of carefully selected profile images in establishing worthiness for further contact, or suspicion of misrepresentation, or judgements of derision and even disgust. For example, in keeping with the broader cultural ambivalence around selfies, profiles featuring this genre (especially mirror selfies) were seen by many heterosexual men as indicators of inauthenticity or ‘shallowness’ (Senft and Baym, 2015). Workshop participants emphasized the informational element as crucial when swiping through others’ profile pics. Multiple personal images in natural settings, conveying interests and activities were seen by all as crucial for engaging any further. However, there was more to this encounter than information sharing. Some male interviewees were reflexive about how they negotiate the risk and uncertainty built into this moment of judgment and connection in their own profile: ‘I have four photos, because I always feel like a profile with one photo looks like a fake, so I always like to have more than one so I can show that I’m the real deal.’ (Demetri). This uncertainty also manifested the shaming of others. For example, Elijah was explicit — but almost apologetic — in fat-shaming a past online match:

Okay, in the photo she looks like, let’s say 60 kilos, and then in real life, she’s more like 90 or 85. [...] So yeah. [...] I feel really bad by saying that, because you know obviously women should have whatever body shape or the way they want, you know naturally. (Elijah)

Several interviewees noted their negative self-judgment and associated it both with the platform arrangements and demands, and their ‘low self-confidence’, as Darsh put it. He speculated on his problems with Tinder: ‘maybe it could be I’m not good-looking enough or something ... I think you need to look really good on your profile. Maybe I just didn’t look good enough’ (Darsh). As we explain more below, these processes of image-oriented judgment of self and other set the scene for uncertainty, awkwardness and significant disparagement, each of which have different kinds of consequences for the encounters that apps establish.

Some of the most explicitly negative personal experiences of image-oriented judgement were expressed by our interview participants who were targeted racially. As Sara Ahmed observes, racism circulates harms via affect — a racist gaze ‘seals’ the bodies of those who are deemed ‘other’ into a circuit of shame and/or fear. Half of the interview participants reflected on experiencing racial shaming and a broader awareness of it happening on the apps.

Not to sound like I’m throwing myself a pity party but it has made me realize the stigma against brown people in dating circles ... So you know, they [women] get exoticized, we get demonized, men. So that’s a huge stigma around us, yeah. (Rafi)

Jai said his worst experience using Tinder was a match messaging and asking ‘which nationality are you’. He explains: ‘I felt very bad when I saw that message, you know. It was like, what’s wrong with people? If you don’t want to talk, that’s fine, just ignore me or whatever you like. But that’s being rude if you’re not know someone and the first message is like, what nationality you are’ (Jai). With no further chance for confronting this sentiment through conversation, Jai is left with a more embodied learning — McInnes and Bollen’s learning by being done to — that shapes a wariness in certain future encounters, along with tacit acknowledgement of disparaging practices.

Shame, disgust and contempt in dating app cultures
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Silvan Tomkins described shame as the “affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation” [13]. It can be imposed through the actions of others or internalized through self-derision, resulting in either case in feeling “naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth” [14]. Recognizing that it is not always easy to distinguish shame-humiliation from contempt-disgust, Tomkins deals with these together, explaining that “in contrast to shame, contempt is a response in which there is least self-consciousness, with the most intense consciousness of the object, which is experienced as disgusting” [15].

Contempt is a defensive response and can follow shame or precede it. The overlap between shame and self-contempt, (or what we refer to as self-disparagement) is common and central to the relational app experience for the heterosexual men in our study. Similarly, shyness, shame and guilt overlap at the level of affect for Tomkins [16], and this is why these and related affects offer a space for tackling safety and well-being in gendered app practices.

**Failure, rejection and self-disparagement: ‘It makes me feel like I’m not good enough’**

Failure and rejection are common and an almost expected experience of dating apps for young male users. Many of our interviewees and workshop participants are very conscious that the ‘odds are stacked against them’, with the feeling of there being far more male than female app users.

There are two standout affective aspects to the experiences of failure we encountered among our participants. The first is where male app users talked about their various experiences of rejection on the app, with varying degrees of reflectiveness about the causes. The second involves a surprisingly common experience that we understand to be a generalized sense of self-disparagement.

Unlike experiences of being rejected, blocked, unmatched or ‘ghosted’, self-disparagement does not have an object or direct cause. Interviewees are less able to pinpoint a cause or reflect on a resolution. This is where the shame becomes most clearly internalized in the contempt-disgust range as self-contempt/self-derision, resulting in feelings of “naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth” [17]. When interviewees talked about these moments, there was some acknowledgement of their contributing role:

> It’s not always my fault. Sometimes they just ghost me. They block after you’ve already been talking. I don’t know why. Or when we meet, we don’t click that well, and that’s it. I don’t know. I’m quite intense. My mind is always elsewhere. Perhaps I don’t fully engage with people enough. (Demetri)

Certain behaviors were understood to affect connection and ongoing interaction. In the regional male workshop, one participant reflected on his preference for sending memes as a form of communication and interaction, even though they were often rejected by his potential matches:

> Facilitator A: So your preference is humor and memes and ...
> Duncan: Yeah, but it’s like I don’t always want to be sending you something stupid if you don’t want that. So you just talk to me ...
> Facilitator A: How do you tell though?
> Duncan: The very few that I’ve had the chance of making funnies [memes] for are just like see ya. Either no response or like ha, and then no response.
> [Laughter]
> Facilitator A: So you’re getting the message.
> Duncan: Yeah, I got the message pretty quick every time.

Overwhelmingly, however, participants expressed a sense of self-disparagement surrounding specific times of rejection, or more generally in response to not getting any matches over time, and to what was seen as
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the frustrations of the platform in enabling successful connections and relationships. As Mason put it: ‘Every day that you do your swipes and you don’t get any matches. It’s always a sad day’ (Mason).

Bailey saw himself as shy and socially anxious, and attributed his successes on Tinder to helping him become more outgoing through his dating experiences. But it also had a heavy effect for him: ‘There was one time where I went three days without one [match] and I was like oh, is there something wrong with how I look?’.

Demetri was explicitly self-disparaging and referred to his failures on Tinder with a degree of self-contempt:

Facilitator: Do you think it’s easy to find something casual? Is it easy to find what you’re looking for on these apps?
Demetri: Not for me, sadly. There’s something wrong with me, I think. I’m always — I don’t know. In general, the apps are definitely useful for that, for other people. (Demetri)

Edward tried to explain the range of painful affects as, ultimately, a more generalized sense of dissatisfaction:

At the beginning you’re more open, you’re ready to experience, you want to experience more things. But at the end you are just there purely for the hook-up. That’s what kind of makes — yeah, it’s kind of sad. [...] Depressed, no, not depressed. Not sad as well, as in really sad. Just more like unsatisfied. (Edward)

In many ways these kinds of self-disparagement played out among each of our participants as the background affect that shapes and underpins the uncertainties and frustrations of dating app use.

These moments signal the role that affect plays in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and capacities, as established by Bollen and McInnes (2000). Most managed rejection or failure through self-reflection. For others, these moments set off consequential responses and troubled affective states ranging from disappointment to frustration and anger leading to aggressive or abusive behavior, as discussed further below.

Unpacking shame and related affects: Consequences for safety, respect and well-being

In analyzing our data, we were struck by repeated examples of shame-related affects including humiliation and contempt-disgust. Interviewees shamed others or were the object of shame. Some were self-reflective, acknowledging their potential cause these forms of negative encounter. Some reported trying to adjust their behavior and the contempt-disgust they may trigger in others through their actions. Experiences of awkwardness, embarrassment, discomfort, frustration and creepiness were seen to explain or justify different levels of impropriety or inappropriateness, from ghosting to direct acts of aggression.

For some, interactions both online and when meeting in person were defined by feeling ‘awkward’. For example, Bailey was ‘not good at socializing’, and often didn’t know what to say when he connected with matches on Tinder: ‘It depends, if I’m vibing with you yeah I’ll get used to it and I’ll stop being socially awkward but if I’m not, then I just keep going because if I’m not vibing with you then what’s the point in staying right?’ (Bailey). He felt this awkwardness was amplified by the restrictions to meeting up brought about by the COVID-19 lockdown.

Asadi used the term ‘awkward’ often to describe the difficulties he had in managing interactions and hookups:
This is a first time where I had I guess my first one-night stand and it was really, really awkward. It was my first time doing it. I guess after the sexual act — we had sex, it was just so awkward ... I didn’t know how to talk to this girl afterwards or anything, so I just blocked her from — I blocked her and just kept it there because I didn’t want to deal with this. (Asadi)

Embarrassment was most commonly discussed in relation to the stigma of being on apps or developing relationships through apps. ‘The stigma I guess. I guess it really is real. I guess because [...] we met online. [...] We had a common friend, so that’s what we use to tell everyone or our parents how we met’ (Edward). Embarrassment about excessive app use is also part of this, and it is related to the shame bound up in the self-disparagement that can result in self-contempt and low self-worth, especially when men saw themselves as ‘failing’ in the connective logic of the app. Zach explains this from his perspective:

I was quite depressed at that time, and I think it made things significantly worse, because if you’re already feeling relative[ly] worthless, being ignored and so on and so forth can make you feel a lot worse [...] Because I was already feeling lonely and alienated, and so I wanted just some kind of validation or company, particularly sexual company, I guess. So I was using the app excessively. I was really desperate, which is kind of tragic. I feel embarrassed about it now. (Zach)

For these participants, affects were bound up in both their expectations for themselves, and their perception of others’ expectations. Both successful matching (in Asadi and Edward’s case) and unsuccessful matching (for Zach) could result in awkwardness, embarrassment and shame, as participants reached the limits of their own repertoires for intimate communication, or the limits of the connective affordances of apps. Learning, in the absence of scripts and rules, involves making use of these moments of experiential learning (McInnes, et al., 2002). Awkwardness and embarrassment can force a rethinking of app use, but these affects can also establish a range of negative responses and practices.

**Awareness of triggering discomforting affect in others**

Many participants articulated an awareness of their own capacity to cause their matches to feel not only awkward, but unsafe and ‘creeped out’. Darsh explained that he always meets new matches in a public place with lots of people, ‘just to make the girl a bit more comfortable, I guess. I think that’s sensible’ (Darsh). Asadi’s awkwardness also manifested through an awareness of his potential to create situations of discomfort:

Apparently, some people tell me I look intimidating and I just don’t — and from that, I guess I try my best not to give up any kind of negative vibe. [...] Even if things don’t pan out to a relationship, dating or anything, even if that person doesn’t want to see you again, I think that having that level of respect and to making the person feel comfortable and not creep them out, I think it should be there. (Asadi).

These micro (visual) cues are crucial elements of the sexual choreographies made possible through the app interface. They are often sites of potential intervention and adjustment, as much as they are the cause of feeling unsafe. Creepiness — a term that carries a fair degree of shame — was frequently invoked when participants described their efforts to avoid provoking discomfort in potential matches:

I wasn’t creepy, I was really good, I tried to be. Many women
didn’t reply, to be fair, but I don’t think it was my fault. They just didn’t like my look or they were busy or something. I tried to be funny, I tried to incorporate jokes that I could use within their profile. Sometimes they don’t reply, you can’t help that. They didn’t fancy me physically, or maybe they were busy. What are you going to do? (Darsh)

Yeah, public areas. That’s one — I wouldn’t just meet up at their place because that would be creepy. I wouldn’t invite them over to my place immediately. That would be a bit creepy. (Patrick)

While all participants described strategies they used to avoid being perceived by women as unsafe or creepy, Demetri was also open about past experiences where he behaved aggressively on app and was subsequently banned:

I was banned from OkCupid. Apparently they have a really strict safety — strict rules on harassment. I had a really bad mental health [...] I was quite angry and jealous. If people rejected me or said, I’m not interested, [...] I wouldn’t swear but I’d say, you’re unattractive or I can do better — why do I waste my time?

There’s even one case where [...] I think I said, I saw you on Facebook. You do yoga, that’s cool. She probably felt like I’d been stalking her. I think it’s because her name was the same on OkCupid and on Facebook, so it was easy to find. (Demetri)

Demetri shared this story in terms that indicated an element of shame and regret: ‘I would say to myself, don’t do antisocial. Don’t harass. Just calm down. Honestly, there were a couple of dates where I wish I’d done better, because I really liked that person genuinely’. At the same time, he also observed ‘I got OkCupid back with a different email a couple of years ago, so I bypassed that’. While it was not clear that Demetri completely understood the discomfort or fear he caused, his working through of the affective dimensions signals a potential site of intervention.

**Learning through shame**

The accounts of affective learning and choreographies of shame expressed by our participants included both social and technical dimensions. Bart, a 21-year-old workshop participant, reflected that much of his discomfort relating to app use was triggered by the affordances of apps themselves:

the structure of the app forces us to behave in certain ways that are not necessarily reflective of life. When you’re talking to real people you don’t normally think, oh yeah, this person is a right, this person is a left. Usually you’re somewhere along the scale of between interest and disinterest.

Bart had experienced multiple ‘failures’ of app use. In his words, ‘I would swipe 100 people and no one swipes back and that was just crushing’. However, he attributed his disappointment and bad feelings not to other users, but to his own approach:

I think I went in with perhaps a little bit more of a gamified attitude to it, which probably wasn’t healthy. Because when you’re playing a video game at least you know how to win,
right? Even if you don’t, you go on the Internet and there’s a walkthrough and they’ll tell you how to win. But you can’t—you shouldn’t play this like a game because it doesn’t make sense. You can do everything right and if someone is not attracted to you, it’s not going to work.

In the discussion that followed this comment, Bart and his workshop peers explicitly reflected on gendered cultures of app use, comparing their own experiences with those of non-heterosexual male friends, and of their women friends who were ‘seeking men’. They also compared experiences of using apps which favor profile pictures over text (such as Tinder and Bumble), with those offering the opportunity to present more textual information, such as OkCupid. In these conversations workshop participants displayed evidence of the kinds of reflexive and context-based experiential learning that encompasses ‘sexual choreography’.

For workshop participants, comparing their experiences of dating app cultures with the very different experiences of their female friends sparked empathy and self-compassion, expanding their relational repertoires. For example, George shared his experience of using emoji as an ‘affective signal’ (Gesselman, et al., 2019) that facilitated successful matches on Bumble.

Others described learning from male friends to curate profile texts and images that successfully communicated their preference for specific kinds of sexual encounters and relationships. In these accounts of affective learning, men were able to respond to their experiences of shame and awkwardness without expressing self-disparagement or contempt for the ‘other’. Instead, they reflexively adapted their in-app expressions and elicitations of interest and desire, while acknowledging the specific opportunities and limitations of ‘straight’ app cultures.

Conclusion

Our aim in this article has been to explore men’s accounts of affective encounters with apps. As our project explicitly supports organizational and systemic responses to unsafe and aggressive behaviors associated with app use, we also seek to inform future health promotion and violence-prevention education strategies targeting cis male app users ‘seeking women’.

To this end, we draw on Bollen and McInnes’ metaphor of sexual choreography. As Bollen and McInnes (2006; 2000) explain, sexual learning is not necessarily a product of an understanding ‘rules’ (or scripts), but is shaped in relation to affective responses triggered by observations of others, one’s own bodily desires and capacities, and the desires and capacities of those one interacts with.

In a best case scenario for app users, interest-excitement is mutual. When it is not, the lack of interest triggers shame. As Probyn observes, shame is an “experience of the self by the self”, a reflexive response, and self-awareness “is an integral part of the experience of shame” [18]. Where there is shame, there is the potential to account for actions, norms and practices differently.

As Bollen and McInnes outline in their account of sexual choreographies in sex-on-premises venues, moments of surprise and uncertainty — and even shame — offer opportunities for experiential learning, and the expansion of sexual repertoires. However, there is no guarantee that an experience of shame will be seen as an opportunity for learning, as opposed for a justification for contempt and/or the disparagement of self and others.

By examining aspects of dating apps’ ‘bad encounters’ from the perspective of young male app users, we hope to pinpoint those moments of risk and vulnerability that give rise to acts of frustration, impropriety or harassment, but also to their potential resolution through ‘learning-in-interaction’. While a number of men...
in our study were able to resolve the shame-humiliation that arose in response to a potential match’s perceived lack of interest, others were not. Some developed filtering strategies for matching, but these often relied on externalized expressions of contempt for the profile images of the potential matches they ‘rejected’. Others deleted apps, but this was often seemed to be an expression of frustration at perceived ‘failure’.

In the absence of rules and scripts — or Internet ‘walkthroughs’ as our study participant Bart put it — the affective moments we have detailed offer an important site for ensuring self-disparagement, despair or embarrassment do not turn to depression, anger or harassment. The men in our study primarily negotiated shame and humiliation through technical means (left-swiping, ghosting matches and deleting apps), or by attempting what might be termed ‘emotional blocking’ including expressions of contempt for potential matches, or modulation of interaction explained by ‘awkwardness’.

However, some described practices of learning through reflection: “If someone doesn’t swipe back or doesn’t reply, it shouldn’t piss you off. You can’t help it, it’s such a fickle thing to look at someone’s picture and swipe left or right. It’s not your fault, it’s not like you’re unattractive. That’s something I should have learnt earlier.” (Darsh)

While theories of sexed and gendered ‘scripts’ can go some way to explaining heterosexual app users’ negative and shaming experiences of app use, they do not account for the ways that some ‘men seeking women’ are able to develop new improvisational skills that facilitate mutually pleasurable encounters in digital sexual cultures (Roberts and Ravn, 2020; Waling, et al., 2020). We conclude that further research is needed in order to better understand the ways that men develop the kinds of reflective capacities that support sexual learning practices — particularly in relation to technologically-mediated intimacy.

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Notes

1. The broader project involved an online survey of 382 app users, in addition to in-depth interviews and participatory workshops with 56 dating app users of diverse genders and sexualities.
11. Ethical approvals were overseen by the Swinburne Human Research Ethics committee (2018/159). Three researchers examined transcripts and formulated main categories and subcategories iteratively. Both the coding of the interview data and subsequent analysis moved between the observed patterns of similarity to or variation from the theory described above in a process of abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). We note there are limitations of timespan and place in our sample, although participants were located in both urban and regional settings (non-major cities), and the sample includes international experiences through the mixed race and ethnicity and country of origin of participants.
14. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
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