"To be Queer, To be in Dating Apps, To be Queer in Dating Apps": Biographical Queerness and the Creation of Safety Strategies in Online Dating behind Stigma and Fears of Italian LGBTQ+ Young Adults[*]

Rachele Reschiglian[**]
Università degli Studi di Padova

Cosimo Marco Scarcelli[***]
Università degli Studi di Padova

Brady Robards[****]
Monash University

This study examines the experiences of Italian LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer) young adults (aged 19-35) navigating safety in online dating apps in the context of growing sociocultural challenges. Situating itself in the study of digital intimacies, the research explores how platform affordances, societal norms, and individual identity journeys shape digital dating safety practices and their perceptions among LGBTQ+ users. Drawing on eight focus groups with 39 people, in this article we employ thematic analysis to uncover users' experiences of risks, fears, and strategies for navigating safety on dating apps. These findings expand on Babcock et al.'s (2024) Safety Spectrum Theory Model by introducing the concept of "Biographical Queerness," which captures the dynamic and evolving relationship between LGBTQ+ users' identities, their digital practices, and the idea of modality spectrum between offline and online safety practices. The findings reveal that Italian LGBTQ+ young adults frequently face risks such as harassment, fetishisation, unsolicited explicit content, and the fear of being outed in both digital and physical spaces, based on their gender (identity and perception), and sexual orientation.. These risks are compounded by Italy's current sociocultural climate, which often stigmatises LGBTQ+ identities, making digital visibility a precarious endeavour. To mitigate risks, participants report employing a range of safety strategies spanning in-app, multi-app, and offline practices. Users' approaches in the apps to safety are shaped by what we describe as their Biographical Queerness, which reflects their evolving gender and sexual identities and their sociocultural and biographical contexts. These strategies intersect with the Safety Spectrum Theory's (Babcock et al., 2024) categories of strict, fluid, and relaxed safety protocols, demonstrating how users adapt their behaviours based on perceived risks and contextual factors. By examining the interplay between LGBTQ+ identities, digital practices, and cultural contexts, this study nuances understanding of safety negotiation in digital dating spaces for LGBTQ+ users in Italy. This paper seeks to highlight the significance of identity-specific risks, platform affordances, and the sociocultural landscape shaping LGBTQ+ digital intimacy and safety practices.

Keywords: online dating, dating apps, LGBTQ+ young adults, safety strategies

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Introduction

Dating practices and experiences in digital spaces have been studied in the social sciences through various lenses, particularly when focusing on the intersection of mobile apps, gender, and sexualities (Reschiglian & Usachova, 2022). The uses of these technologies have been framed as multidimensional phenomena and often as either positive and empowering (Parisi & Comunello, 2019; Ranzini et al., 2022; Byron, 2020) or stigmatising and violent (Miles, 2017; Lamont, 2021).

While there is considerable research on dating app use around the world, especially among LGBTQ+ people, there is little research on such dating app use in Italy. Given the importance of cultural context, it is vital that we understand the contours of dating app use - and associated risks and opportunities.

In Italy, characterised by traditional cultural norms and persistent stigma against LGBTQ+ identities, the risks associated with LGBT+ and queer visibility are magnified, rendering digital visibility a precarious venture. With the rise of right-wing and 'anti-gender' (and anti-trans) movements and homophobia in Italy (Trappolin, 2024; Lavizzari & Prearo, 2018), more LGBTQ+ young adults are facing cultural backlashes and heightened stigma. These experiences play out in both physical and digital spaces and especially complicate 'dating practices' (Scarcelli, 2020; Coppola & Masullo, 2021; Parisi & Comunello, 2019).

Through a thematic analysis of eight focus groups undertaken from October 2023 to January 2024 with 39 Italian LGBTQ+ young adults (19-35 years old), focusing on the experiences of risks, fears, and safety in digital dating spaces, this article situates itself within the growing body of research on digital intimacy focussed on exploring LGBTQ+ people's experiences with(in) dating apps.

The research questions that guided this project are:

1. What risks and fears are faced by Italian LGBTQ+ young adults in digital dating apps and experiences?
2. How do Italian LGBTQ+ young adults negotiate and manage those risks and fears in digital dating apps and experiences?

Building upon and expanding the Safety Spectrum Theory Model (Babcock et al., 2024), this paper introduces the concept of 'Biographical Queerness' as an element that shapes safety strategies for online dating experiences and the spectrum of online/multi-app/offline strategies. In particular, the construct of 'Biographical Queerness' captures the fluid and evolving relationship individuals have with their sexual and gender identities, particularly as these intersect with digital practices. By examining the risks, fears, and strategies employed by LGBTQ+ dating app[1] users in Italy, this research contributes to understanding how identity and technology merge in a culturally specific context and a biographical moment.

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Academic context

Cyber-queer spaces

'Online' spaces and digital media have long been conceptualised as places where people can explore identities and connections (Turkle, 1999; boyd & Heer, 2006). While we acknowledge the use of the terms 'online' and 'offline' can inscribe a dualism that does not necessarily exist when smartphone users are or can be continuously connected to social media and various apps (Jurgenson 2012) we use these terms at times to align with the way our own participants used online/offline. At other times we users the terms 'digital' and 'physical' (rather than 'online' and 'offline) to note how spaces (apps, platforms, bedrooms, the street, the classroom, forums, etc.) operate differently, requiring adjusted strategies for the presentation of self and the enacting of safety. Non-normative and marginalised subjectivities have long navigated this boundary between digital and physical spaces to discover sexualities (or languages to that map to experiences of sexualities), gender/s, bodies, and interactions which might not be available or visible in physically bounded/'offline' sociocultural contexts like home towns, classrooms, and the family home (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Fox & Warber, 2015; Duguay, 2014; McKenna & Chughtai, 2020).

Robards et al. (2018; 2021) discuss the lasting impact of the internet on young LGBTQ+ individuals over two decades. They explore how digital spaces have provided avenues for community-building, identity exploration, and support for queer and gender diverse people, emphasising the enduring importance of the internet in facilitating connections and inclusion. Early on, digital spaces were imagined as utopic for queer subjectivities (Wakeford 2000) because of their capacity to operate as sites of resistance to heteronormativity. 'Cyber queer' spaces opened up possibilities for queer people who may have been marginalised and otherwise geographically isolated. There, specific groups were conceptualised and studied as a "community" and not as a group of communities with diverse needs and interests.

Pym et al. (2020) further present arguments to emphasise the tension between the role of the imagined and overdetermined "queer community" concept and the individualism performed within the digital arena offered by dating apps, concerning app affordances and subjective agency. More recent research has highlighted experiences of lateral exclusion, harassment, and marginalisation that occur within queer spaces, for instance through sexual racism (Carlson, 2020) and biphobia/bi-erasure (Nelson et al., 2023). Thus, while social media platforms and especially dating apps offer opportunities for identity formulation (Campaioli, 2023), connection and belonging (Baker, 2021; Bonner-Thompson, 2021), they can also at once be problematic and dangerous, with many users reporting experiences of isolation, and exclusion, or harassment in the same queer community (Piluso, 2019; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Albury et al., 2020, Filice et al., 2022).

Dating Apps, Risks, and Safety Experiences for LGBTQ+ People

At the intersection of dating app technologies and LGBTQ+ identities, it is crucial to recognise the fundamental role of platform affordances in promoting safety. However, these affordances must be complemented by individual strategies that protect both online and offline relationships.

Furthermore, the sociocultural context in which dating apps are used greatly affects not only the scripts and practices of personal interactions (Comunello et al. 2021; Miller, 2019; Broeker, 2021; MacLeod & McArthur, 2018) but also the perception of security with(in) dating apps for specific individualities, such as women or LGBTQ+ subjectivities (Tao, 2022; Conner, 2022; Stardust et al., 2022; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016). Dating apps have become critical sites for connection, intimacy, and identity exploration, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals who may have limited physical spaces for intimate interactions. These platforms, however, are not free from societal biases, exposing LGBTQ+ users to risks such as harassment, fetishization, and discrimination. Moreover, queer visibility (Pym et al., 2020; Smith, 2022) and the shame of using online dating apps and sites (Cali et al., 2013; Paul, 2014) build the cultural understanding of the safety phenomena that are to be explored.

LGBTQ+ individuals have historically and in many cultural contexts continued to challenge societal norms, resist stigmatisation, and navigate risks (physical, financial, reputational, familiar, etc.) by employing resourceful and innovative approaches to manage dating app environments (Byron et al., 2020; Harkness et al., 2021). For instance, as for the negotiation of surveillance and etiquette, Byron and Albury (2018) unpack the role of dating apps and the agentic posture and strategies of the users, acknowledging the importance of cultural and ethical practices in such digital spaces. Great focus is given in their work to self-made rules shaped according to the personal ethical practice in dating apps and the transgressions of the other users, as they mould how surveillance is put into action.

Byron et al. (2020) and Byron (2020) highlight how friendships are strategically used to safeguard encounters, such as sharing locations during dates or seeking reassurance and endorsement by consulting mutual online friends about a potential date. Additionally, security practices like rituals of transition (Broeker, 2021) and hierarchies of intimacies (Scarcelli, 2022) play a significant role. These practices include exchanging contact details across different platforms, such as transitioning from dating apps to messaging apps like Instagram or WhatsApp, which serve both as markers of increasing closeness and as protective measures against potential violence. Such strategies underscore the dynamic interplay between self-disclosure, safety, and relationship-building in LGBTQ+ dating contexts.

Nevertheless, reconceptualising safety and risk in young people's online sexual practices is crucial to moving beyond paternalistic and fear-based frameworks. Rather than treating risk solely as a negative or pathological element, it should be understood as a dynamic and potentially constructive force, as one that interacts subjectively with experiences of pleasure and agency (Naezer, 2017). As Naezer (2017) argues, this perspective allows researchers

to decouple risk from outcomes and instead examine how it is navigated, negotiated, and even embraced within the context of digitally mediated sexual expression.

Theoretical Framework

The Safety Spectrum Theory Model

Babcock et al. (2024) focuses on how LGBTQ+ young adults negotiate personal safety when using dating/hook-up apps. Risk is here approached as a multidimensional and context-sensitive concept that extends beyond traditional public sexual health concerns, including physical, psychological, and identity safety. Safety refers in this study to the strategies and practices LGBTQ+ young adults use to mitigate potential harms, whether physical, emotional, or social, when engaging in app-based hookups.

Studying specifically LGBTQ+ young adults in Canada and the USA, the research accesses risk-mitigation protocols employed while navigating online dating were examined using a qualitative approach, leading to the development of the Safety Spectrum Theory Model (Figure 1). This model provides a framework for understanding the nuanced protection strategies adopted by LGBTQ+ young adults during both online and in-person hookups/dates. It has been emphasised how individuals assess and mitigate risks according to their own perceptions, experiences, and comfort levels.
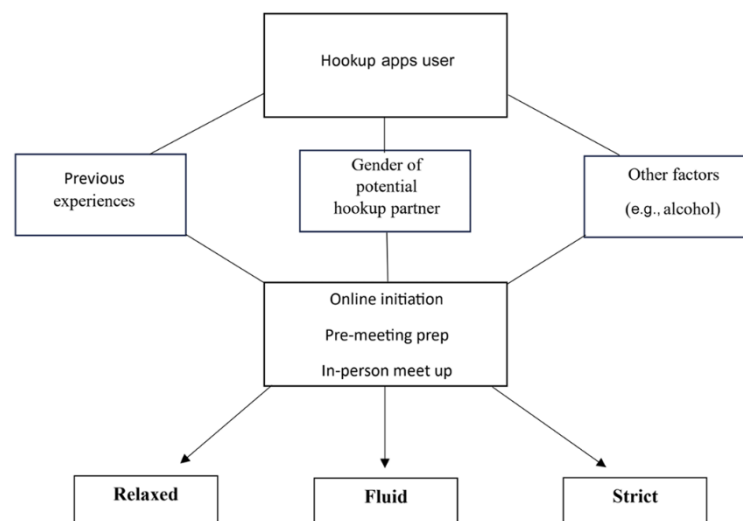

Figure 1 - The Safety Spectrum Theory Model (Babcock et al., 2024)

Informed by previous experiences, broader social structures like gender, and situational factors like alcohol consumption, the framework categorises safety strategies across a spectrum: strict, fluid, and relaxed, avoiding the rigid binary between safe vs. risky. Strict strategies involve strong adherence to personal rules and guidelines when meeting potential

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hookup partners; fluid strategies allow for situational compromises with less rigid practices; and relaxed strategies reflect a lack of engagement in safety protocols.

Importantly, safety is framed as situational and context-dependent, with users adjusting their strategy protocols depending on factors like various levels of perceived risks and trust, based on previous experiences, the gender of the potential hook-up partner, and external influences such as alcohol, drugs, etc. In the context of the paper, they suggest that identity elements of race/ethnicity or disability status and other intersectional characteristics should be further studied in research. These findings emphasise that safety protocols are circumstantial, adapting to the context of each phase – online initiation, pre-meeting preparation, and in-person encounters – rather than being strictly determined by the sexual identity of the user, illustrating how safety considerations manifest differently throughout the hook-up/dating process.

Methodology

The research presented here is part of a joint initiative in education and research between the University of Padova (Italy) and Monash University (Australia) part of the 2023 Seed Fund Scheme called "Young LGBTQ+ people and digital intimacy", engaging in a comparative study of the use of control and safety features in social media platforms and dating apps in Italy and Australia. This paper will concentrate on examining the Italian context and phenomena.

To navigate the intricate landscape, we adopted an explorative qualitative approach by combining online and offline focus groups (FG). These FGs served as a dynamic platform for engaging with participants and gaining insights into their digital intimacy experiences in Italy, ranging from online dating security strategies to sexting behaviours.

Between October 2023 and January 2024, we undertook 8 FGs, strategically distributed across four macro-regions of the country: North-west, North-east, Central, and Southern Italy. This geographical diversity aimed to capture nuanced variations in LGBTQ+ digital intimacies influenced by regional contexts. Each macro-region hosted two FGs.

A total of 39 LGBTQ+ individuals actively participated in the FGs. To ensure a comprehensive representation, participants were recruited through snowball sampling from diverse backgrounds and identities within the queer spectrum to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGTBQ+) people. The inclusion criteria encompassed 18-35 years-old individuals engaging in Italian LGBTQ+ online dating and sexting practices. All the participants received an Amazon voucher for twenty-five euros for their participation.

Given the multifaceted and complex self-identifications of the participants[2], a systematic approach was employed to enhance the clarity and interpretability of the analysis while respecting the richness and diversity within each category. The diverse gender identities were classified into three main umbrella groups: cisgender male (7, of which five are gay and two are bisexuals), cisgender female (20, of which 15 are bi/pansexual, four lesbians,

one not able to label her sexual orientation), and transgender/nonbinary identities[3] (12, five queers, four bi/pansexual, two lesbians, one heterosexual).

Half of the FGs (4) were conducted online using the Zoom platform, allowing participants to join remotely allowing a wider access. The remaining four were organised offline, enabling face-to-face interactions and fostering a deeper understanding of localised dynamics.

As for the content of the FGs, diverse scenarios about experiences of 'safety' in online dating, sexting practices, and queerness in digital spaces were more generally investigated. Moreover, the research subjects were asked to compile a card[4] with user control features of various dating apps present in the Italian panorama, consisting of LGBTQ+-specific apps and more generic ones (Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, OkCupid, Feeld, Hinge, Her). The card collected data about the knowledge, use, and perception of the effectiveness of the app's safety features[5].

The conversations explored participants' familiarity and engagement with dating apps to better understand how these technologies shape experiences, including feelings of risk and fear during use, and the strategies employed to manage visibility and ensure safety while navigating personal queerness.

The empirical material collected has been analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed for a deep dive into the rich, detailed, and complex dataset collected from the FGs. By systematically coding the data and identifying themes, it was possible to unravel the underlying ideas, beliefs, and experiences shared by participants. Participants have nominated themselves with their names or aliases to preserve their identification agency (Downes et al., 2013).

Risks and Fears

The online dating experiences lived by Italian LGBTQ+ young adults portray a nuanced and complex landscape that LGBTQ+ people must navigate. As the research participants reported predominantly engaging with non-LGBTQ+-specific dating apps (Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, etc.), they must navigate particular scenarios these platforms present. While some dating apps, which can be seen as 'cyber-queer' (Wakeford 2000) spaces such as Grindr or Her, offer opportunities for queer inhabitancy, they are not perceived as universally 'safe' (Albury & Byron 2016) especially for bi and trans users (Nelson et al. 2023) and due to experiences of racism and lateral marginalisation (Carlson 2020).

Focusing on overall LGBTQ+ specific risks and fears, key concerns also include the fear of being 'outed' in small (home)towns where individuals are not openly LGBTQ+, particularly among family members and friends, due to the risk of word-of-mouth from acquaintances. It is perceived that the safety experiences and stigma associated with using dating apps as being LGBTQ+ are specifically connoted and challenged, as they are combined with both the cultural stigma of being in dating apps for romantic and relational purposes (as seen in

Cali et al., 2013; Paul, 2014) and the general lived discrimination of being 'non-normative' identities and having sexual orientations:

> Martina (queer, bisexual, 27): "and in general [there is the fear of] being seen and judged, to be queer, to be in dating apps, to be queer in dating apps"

So, through Martina's quote, there are different elements to be considered while understanding the safety practices implemented by not only their sexual orientation, gender, or social gendered perception (Pym et al., 2020; Smith, 2022) , but also by the same existence in the landscape of online dating in the Italian panorama and the combination between these characteristics. This adds complexity to the already difficult negotiation of visibility and participation in dating apps , encountered also by heterosexual and cisgender users (Cali et al., 2013; Paul, 2014).

Moreover, participants' narratives revealed a range of risks based on the gender identity and sexual orientation of participants as dating app users.

Cisgender men expressed concerns over the risks of unsolicited explicit images (dick pics on Grindr mainly) and 'catfishing' (being misled about the appearance and/or identity of the person they were chatting to) while also recognizing their male privileges when navigating (online) dating experiences. Most gay men generally have the perception of safer experiences on Tinder rather than Grindr, as it is perceived as more dating-friendly and less merely sexual hook-up focused, in line with Giles et al. (2022).

> Anthony (cisgender male, gay, 27): "Probably, the biggest fear for me—the first thing that comes to mind—is the authenticity of the other person. This applies both to their photos and to the words they use, the conversations they have."

> Domenico (cisgender male, bisexual, 25) : "Yeah, in the few experiences I've had with dating apps— mainly Tinder and Grindr—Tinder hasn't really given me major issues. But with Grindr, well, it always feels like there's a bit of a risk, like jumping into the unknown. Kind of like what Andrea and Elisabetta mentioned—there are lots of profiles with no info or pictures, or people who immediately spam *you-know-what* without even saying hi or trying to have a conversation. But then again… it's Grindr, so you kind of expect it."

For cisgender women, the same risk of catfishing has been highlighted, along with concerns about aggressive and violent behaviours from cisgender and heterosexual men. Additionally, there is a reported risk of men exploiting the app's categorisation of gender-diverse individuals and women as a means to gain access to women or female-presenting people on the platform, even if they choose the app category feature "women only" to protect themselves.

> Ginevra (cisgender female, bisexual, 26): I'm bisexual, and when I used Tinder, I set my preference to both genders. But especially with men, I often felt like just a piece of meat, purely because of the way they approached me. It's partly the app, but also… well, that's why I ended up removing men as an option—I felt safer getting to know women. […] I've experienced situations where someone on Hinge identified as a woman but turned out to be a man—perhaps they made an honest mistake, as they didn't

seem queer, or maybe they were trying to game the system, I'm not sure. It also happens that people who identify as men still appear in my matches on Tinder, probably because, as she mentioned, the algorithm eventually starts suggesting them for some reason."

Transgender and nonbinary participants reported some unique vulnerabilities, alongside the shared fear of catfishing and reported violent acts from cisgender male. These worries also include the fear of the fetishisation of bisexual/pansexual people and lesbians by cishet men. Key concerns include the risk and fear associated with 'chasers', namely individuals who seek sexual pleasure with only transgender individuals.

> Martina (queer, bisexual, 27): "I'm bisexual and queer, but I often pass as a straight girl, so on Tinder, I choose both things [as categories]. However, when I get approached by straight men, their approach is sometimes very, very aggressive for sure. "

> Schiorro (nonbinary, queer, 24): "I've encountered another huge, huge, huge problem… men online. I've set the filter to 'women only' on all the apps I use because I often feel an actual fear of being contacted by men, of their invasiveness. And of course, I'm speaking in general terms – I'm referring to cis men as shaped by society."

> Andrea (trans masc enby, bisexual, 22): "And another fear for me, probably, especially as a queer person knowing the environment, is that there are people who are actually what the English term describes as *Chasers*—people who specifically seek out queer individuals. This can be, for instance, due to fetishisation. I'm a bisexual person and also a trans person, which means I can find myself in situations where I'm unknowingly fetishised in both respects."

These quotes highlight how individuals who are perceived as women—whether transgender, nonbinary, or otherwise gendered as female through social perception—are often subjected to acts of violence by men. Such interactions reinforce patriarchal and sexist norms of courtship, wherein men are positioned as possessing power and agency over others (Comunello et al., 2019). Moreover, this is perceived as a risky and tricky situation, where several strategies through the apps are shaping people perceived as women's protection by eliminating men through setting the filters accordingly ('women only' options). Not only gender becomes an issue for them, but also sexual orientation is a matter to take into consideration, especially if bisexual or queer, which leads toward the potential meeting with men. Their perception of the intersectionality of their identities (as nonbinary or trans and bisexual/queer) keeps underlying the impact of fetishisation in such online courtship (Albury et al., 2020).

In addition, there is apprehension about being reported as 'not belonging to the platform' and facing violent reactions from men on Grindr. For transgender and nonbinary (mostly still female-presenting or AFAB[6]) individuals in such digital space whose presentation is perceived as not 'passing' as men or male-presenting, there is a fear of being excluded from romantic or dating opportunities while getting harassed, misgendered, or even 'outed.' On Grindr, the rigid binary understanding of gender in the digital interactions is still very relevant, undermining queer experiences. These factors contribute to the perception that Tinder offers

a comparatively safer experience for trans men and nonbinary individuals with masculine presentations compared to Grindr. For trans men, there is also the risk of being reported for non-conformity to the dating apps' (as Tinder or Grindr in particular) perceived user norms.

> Gabriele (trans man, heterosexual, 25): "Gabriele: For example, I used to feel quite apprehensive about using dating apps or websites, mainly because I often felt the pressure to appear a certain way on these platforms. I actually started using these spaces before coming out as a trans man, so it was quite complicated to meet people because I had a very masculine presentation, but at the same time, I wasn't very comfortable with my appearance. A lot of my worries revolved around this part of me, and often, when trying to connect with people romantically, I faced difficulties because of it.
>
> Interviewer: If I may ask, did you also encounter difficulties with the technology itself, or was it mainly about how you could or had to present yourself on that specific app?
>
> Gabriele: From a technological perspective, I do think there are biases embedded in these platforms. If I present myself in a certain way, I could even end up being reported as not belonging to that community. For example, if I had signed up for Grindr some time ago, I probably would have been flagged because I wouldn't have been seen as someone who 'should' be there. Or, even if it weren't the technology itself, there would have been people making me feel like I didn't belong. So I think it's a mix between the technology and the people who use it."

Gabriele understands and underlines how the mutual shaping between the technology and the societal perception of gender (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999) is strongly proven also in the space of online dating phenomena, proving how it is difficult to experience a space for relational and identitarian self-exploration for gender non-conforming people.

Therefore, fears and risks expressed here are the ones that form the personal understanding of the overall online dating experience of the users, shaping the strategical choices for safeguarding themselves throughout the in-app experience and the effective hook-up/dating experience (which include the online initiation and the pre-meeting organisation). Such risks and fears are notably less pronounced for some but increase significantly for individuals who are not cisgender male. This disparity highlights varying levels of online safety privileges within the broader 'queer group', underscoring criticism of cyber-queer spaces (Robards, 2018; 2021). These findings reveal the difficulty of constructing a generalised queer understanding of dating apps, as experiences are shaped by intersecting factors of (socially perceived) gender, sexuality, and biographical queerness of the users.

Online Dating Safety Strategies

Following Babcock et al.'s (2024) theorisation of a spectrum of strategies at work in managing safety on social media, we present the online dating safety strategies corroborating the model suggested. Furthermore, we turn to how our participants engaged

in a mixture of in-app and offline safety approaches and practices to mitigate risks and fears. This provides insights to complexify the strategical interactions which take place in the world of online dating, considering the identities that are involved in such social exchanges. As we explore below, these strategies are interlinked with the ways our participants were simultaneously navigating their gender and sexual identity journeys and social acceptance.

LGBTQ+ participants adopted diverse approaches to mitigate risks related to their journey within their gender and sexual identification, categorised into three broad protocol strategies, which we map here according to Babcock et al.'s (2024) Safety Spectrum Theory Model.

Strict

Highly cautious participants, who were often not fully out in specific contexts, employ practices as avoiding apps in familiar localities (not opening apps in their hometowns, for example), refrained from sharing identifiable information, and restricting their profiles to minimize exposure. Practical examples of such modalities include hiding their profile or even deactivating the app, choosing generic dating apps (and not gender diverse or queer dating apps, like Tinder instead of Grindr or Her); and not putting photos that include the face or other identifying features, or links to social media accounts in the bio.

> Feffa (cis female, bisexual, 25): "When I was in (a small town in northern Italy), I would deactivate it." [...] "[Town] is small, provincial, so in the end, it's always the same people around. So, with guys, I could still manage, but it still bothered me quite a bit, like, to come across a classmate from elementary school or someone I played basketball with ten years earlier. But especially exposing myself on the app with girls, so like, 'Oh, she's bisexual,' which now I don't have a problem saying—my family knows, I mean. But it's like that part of me, the child who grew up in that place, that part of me, mm, is fine with them not knowing, I don't know how to explain it. [...] And that's it, so yes, I'd say my biggest fear was that people would find out."

Fluid

The practices chosen by the participants employed selective disclosure, tailoring their visibility and identity presentation based on contextual factors, such as the app's perceived safety or user demographics, based on their personal stage of identitarian LGBTQ+ self-discovery. Participants recall techniques which relate to the choice of a specific/sectoral app for LGBTQ+ individuals (such as using Bumble rather than Tinder) or to disclose specific identitarian elements in the bio strategically (regarding their political values or relational orientation).

> Ginevra (cis female, bisexual, 26): "I also identify as polyamorous, but I would never feel comfortable writing 'polyamorous' on Tinder, while on Bumble I already feel more at ease including it, even if just in

my bio. I'm not sure if it even makes sense to write it, but in any case, I've never felt comfortable writing it on Tinder. Since I've only recently started this polyamorous journey, I've been wondering when is the right time to tell someone you're getting to know? Before meeting them? So, I still haven't figured out the right way to do it".

Relaxed

Individuals who were confident in their LGBTQ+ identity and were fully 'out' tended to report fewer precautions and more relaxed practices around their visibility on apps, engaging with apps without significant modifications to their profiles or behaviours.

> Cepuka (cis man, gay, 27): "In terms of fears and challenges, even those related to technology, I've actually had very few. Since I came out before signing up on the site, I never really had major concerns about showing myself."

The Online and Offline Spectrum of Online Dating Strategies

To briefly describe the overall approach to safety strategies, it can be noted that there is a variety of modalities that employ in-app, multi-app (external to the same dating app used) and offline features and tools.

The majority of such strategies are employed across our cohort, with little difference according to the gender and/or sexuality of the users to underline that the safety issues are common to all individuals. Among Italian LGBTQ+ young adults, safety strategies emerge as complex and multifaceted, shaped by the interplay of offline, multi-app, and online approaches. As in-app strategies, these include preferring platforms where profiles are verified, utilising specific filters (e.g., gender, orientation, age), and analysing profile bios and pictures for compatibility.

To open up to multi-app and external strategies, many also seek linked social media accounts for additional verification. A hierarchy of intimacies (Scarcelli, 2021) and rituals of transition (Broeker, 2021)—such as shifting conversations from dating apps to social media (e.g., Instagram) and eventually to private messaging apps like WhatsApp—play a crucial role in fostering trust, underlying how safety and intimacy are closely intertwined.

> Gemma (cis woman, bisex/pansex, 26): "I also do this kind of selection. I usually chat a bit first on the apps, looking at their photos, bio, and what they write—because there are some bios that just scream, "Okay, no, this is a red flag." Based on that, I move them to other apps because there, there's a different kind of selection. [Unclear] They get to see my daily life, my photos, how I talk. And above all, I really push them to send audio messages, videos, and photos so I can see over time how they behave. On Instagram, especially, I get message requests, so there's no direct messaging. And just from the first message I received there, I can often tell a bit about the person—whether they introduce themselves or not, whether they make inappropriate comments. Because on dating apps, they all seem amazing, calm,

and everything… but then they show up on other social media with weird messages. So now, no thanks."

Going to offline strategies, users often learn safer practices through experience and advice from peers, such as meeting in public spaces to be surrounded by people and not feel alone with the other person.

> Italia (transmasc nonbinary, bisexual, 25)**: "**In my opinion, something important—I'm not sure if I'm answering your question—but what G. said about meeting in a public place where there are lots of people… even that makes me a bit uncomfortable. Maybe because I'm perceived by society as a girl, a woman—I don't know. I feel a bit at risk if I don't know you, and I just don't feel comfortable saying, "Hey, let's go for a walk in the park." I don't know how many people will be in the park, I don't know your intentions, and I don't have the physical strength to resist if something were to happen. So yeah, relying on these strategies—do they work? Do they not? I wouldn't know. But still… it all feels pretty limiting."

Despite these strategies, there remains no concrete way to eliminate risks, and users frequently rely on a 'sixth sense' to navigate safety concerns, as reflected in the words of Italia, transmasc nonbinary, bisexual individual (25 years old): 'You know when it's not safe [...] it's survival matter.'

Such findings regarding the implementation and perceived efficiency of the safety features of dating apps align with previous studies (Phan et al., 2021; Byron et al., 2020; Harkness et al., 2021). While users place trust in the efficacy of native safety features, the results underscore the critical importance of adopting a multifaceted approach to protection and risk management. These strategies highlight and reinforce the concept of 'safety labour,' a burden often perceived as a personal responsibility, particularly for individuals socialised as and socially perceived as female (as discussed in Gillett, 2021). The elements of in-app and offline strategies come closely tied with the approach formulated by Babcock et al. (2024), extending the understanding of the principal approaches to online dating safety strategies (strict, fluid, and relaxed).

Building on the model proposed by Babcock et al. (2024) and considering the elements presented above, the identity biographical journey of LGBTQ+ young adults plays a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of diverse approaches to risk mitigation in their in-app presence. Two key elements, which can be referred to as 'Biographical Queerness,' characterise their positioning within the spectrum of strict, fluid, and relaxed approaches. The first element pertains to personal changes experienced during their exploration of gender and sexual identity, ranging from being in the closet to fully and publicly embracing a LGBTQ+ identity. The second element relates to their stage in the gender transition journey, specifically for transgender or nonbinary individuals. Therefore, 'Biographical Queerness' emerged as a critical factor influencing conceptualisations of 'safety' and 'risk' on dating apps, with participants' practices often evolving alongside their identity journeys and experiences of social acceptance. Indeed, it is important to underline that the process of "coming out" as LGBTQ+ is not a neat spectrum, but rather a very non-linear and context-specific practice (Klein et al., 2014). So, even in the online dating process, this has to be

complexified and specifically understood as part of the individual identity awareness to be considered for a strategical approach towards the digital courtship. As seen in the findings, some people are more comfortable with their queerness, not dictating their need to come out to people who are of little consequence are their lives.

These strategies offer a critical lens into the ways LGBTQ+ individuals navigate the intersecting demands of self-disclosure, safety, and relationship-building on dating platforms. Far from being passive users, they engage in deliberate, situated practices that reveal how intimacy is not only pursued but also strategically managed in response to structural vulnerabilities, platform affordances, and social norms. These everyday tactics illuminate the affective and political dimensions of queer digital life, offering valuable insights into how desire, risk, and recognition are negotiated within technologically mediated spaces.

Convening all the above, we propose here an Extended Safety Spectrum Theory Model (Figure 2). Central to this model is the interplay between individual identity factors—such as sexual orientation, gender, and social gendered perception—and the broader cultural and experiential contexts shaping in-app interactions. LGBTQ+ young adults navigate their in-app presence through two primary dimensions: biographical queerness and previous experiences influenced by cultural context, each varying along a spectrum from strict to fluid and relaxed states, both online and offline. These factors affect the overall online dating experience, particularly concerning the gender and sexuality of potential partners and the process of online initiation leading to (pre-)meeting scenarios. By accounting for these intersecting dimensions, the model highlights the dynamic negotiation of safety, identity, and desire within digital platforms, demonstrating how these negotiations are conditioned by both personal identity markers and situational contexts.
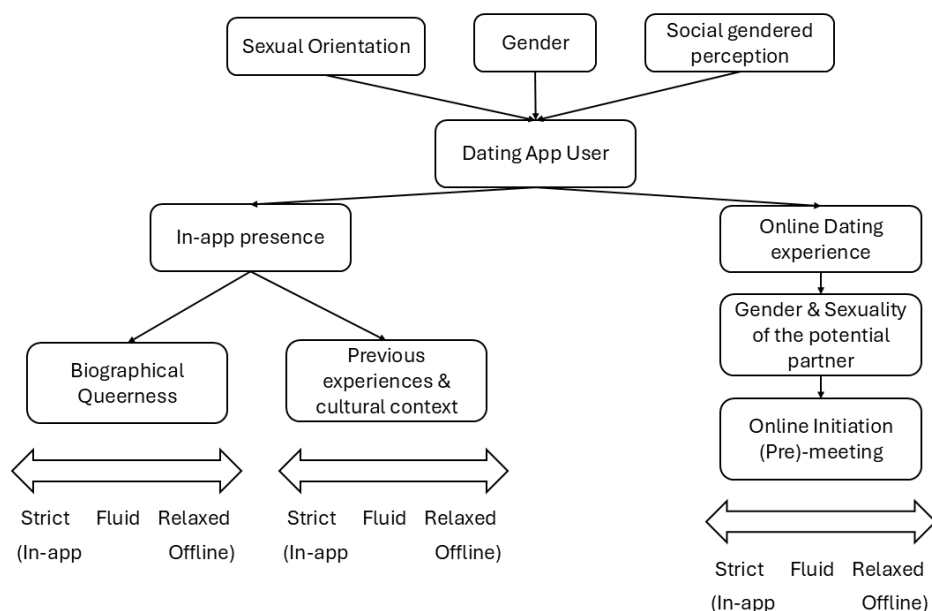

Figure 2 - Extended Safety Spectrum Theory Model

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the interplay between 'biographical queerness' (sexual and/or gender identity journey), cultural context, and strategies for managing 'risk' to exercise 'safety' on dating apps. In doing so, we propose here an extension of Babcock et al.'s Safety Spectrum Model to include these factors. By drawing attention to how biographical queerness shapes interactions with dating apps, we emphasise the role of cultural and contextual factors in Italy. By situating these experiences within the broader socio-cultural and political context of Italy, the findings reveal how digital intimacy intersects with biographical queerness and cultural context shaping both risks and the strategies used to mitigate them.

The introduction of 'Biographical Queerness' as a conceptual category that broadens the scope of the Safety Spectrum Theory Model, emphasises the fluid, yet evolving relationship LGBTQ+ individuals have with their gender and sexual identities in digital spaces. This lens highlights how safety strategies are deeply intertwined with users' journeys of self-discovery and the socio-cultural contexts they inhabit. 'Biographical Queerness' serves as a critical lens to understand the intersection of identity, temporality, and technology in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. This concept resonates with contemporary discussions on digital intimacy and queer spaces online (Robards et al., 2018; Byron et al., 2021).

The study identifies a complex ecosystem of risks faced by LGBTQ+ dating app users, including harassment, fetishisation, exposure, and societal stigma. These risks are not only tied to the affordances of the platforms themselves but also to the heteronormative and discriminatory environments in which these individuals live. Italian LGBTQ+ young adults employ a spectrum of strategies—spanning strict, fluid, and relaxed approaches—that blend in-app features, multi-app tactics, and offline practices to enhance their sense of safety and agency. While some strategies are general and shared across different gender and sexual identities, others are distinctly LGBTQ+, shaped by the participants' unique vulnerabilities and cultural positioning.

These findings underscore the dual role of dating apps as both empowering tools for connection and visibility and precarious spaces where societal biases and discrimination are often reproduced. By documenting how Italian LGBTQ+ young adults navigate these tensions, this research not only contributes to the discourse on digital intimacy and safety but also offers practical insights for platform design and policymaking. App developers must consider how to create inclusive, user-centred features that address the specific safety needs of LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in regions where LGBTQ+ identities remain marginalised or face regressive marginalisation in increasingly conservative contexts.

Future research could expand upon this work by exploring intersections with other axes of identity, such as class, or disability, as well as by examining longitudinal changes in the perception of safety among LGBTQ+ dating app users in Italy. Additionally, further exploration of the concept of 'Biographical Queerness' in different cultural and political contexts could deepen our understanding of how digital platforms intersect with identity

formation and negotiation. Importantly, this research also contributes to more locally informed, culturally specific understandings of dating app use.

In conclusion, online dating for LGBTQ+ young adults in Italy is a delicate balance between opportunity and risk. Through their resourceful strategies, these individuals demonstrate resistance and creativity in navigating digital spaces, but their experiences also call attention to the need for more equitable and 'safe' online environments. Recognising and addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering inclusive digital platforms that support intimacy, connection, and identity exploration for all users.

Biographical Notes

Rachele Reschiglian (they/she), Ph.D. student in Social Sciences at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology of the University of Padova (Italy). Their works engage with intercultural communication; gender, sexualities, and queerness; digital cultures and intimacies; social movements and visuality. They are interested in qualitative multimodal/visual and participatory research and methods.

Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, PhD, is an Associate professor at Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology of the University of Padova (Italy). He teaches Media, Gender and Sexuality and Digital Intimacies. His research deals with sexuality, gender and digital culture, digital intimacies, pornography, masculinities, love and emotions and young people. Cosimo Marco is an editor of The Journal of Gender Studies and co-chair of the Digital Intimacies Research Network.

Brady Robards is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Monash University. Brady is a sociologist of youth and digital cultures, with recent projects on young people's privacy management strategies on social media, the role of social media in queer cultures, digital media use in the context of alcohol consumption, young people's engagement with public services, and the impacts of social media use on employment and professional identity. Find more on Brady's website: bradyrobards.com/.

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Notes

[1] In the Italian context, there is no clear distinction in the vernacular discourse between "hook-up apps" or "dating apps" or "online dating". Therefore we will use concepts coming from such categories interchangeably, as they are useful to better grasp such varying context.

[2] The self-identifications of the participant are here shared in the quotes, to respect their own personal understanding (gender and sexual orientation).

[3] We decided to divide cisgender with transgender and nonbinary experiences as they report different risks, fears, and practices based on the social gendered perception. The choice to incorporate transgender and non-binary identities "as to refer to youth whose sex assigned at birth does not completely align with their current gender identity, while also recognizing that identities of transgender and nonbinary are not always mutually exclusive." (Price-Feeney et al., 2019) is used to better understand our population.

[4] The card is an informational sheet about the protective features offered by various dating apps identified by the researchers. It included a section for the respondent's personal details, such as birth year, gender, and sexual orientation; questions about the respondent's familiarity and usage of certain dating apps along with descriptions of their safety features (also provided by the researchers; follow-up questions on whether the respondent knows and uses these features, and if they find them effective; and a final section asking whether the respondent uses other dating apps and whether they would pay for enhanced safety features, along with a space to explain their reasoning.

[5] App safety features are understood as safety and privacy features provided by the apps' infrastructure as 'Block the contact' (Tinder) or 'Report and Block' (Grindr), 'Private Detector' (Bumble) or 'Hide me from Discover' (Feeld). These are available to any app user, with no regards to specific gender, sexual orientation, nor sexuality.

[6] AFAB: Assigned Female At Birth.