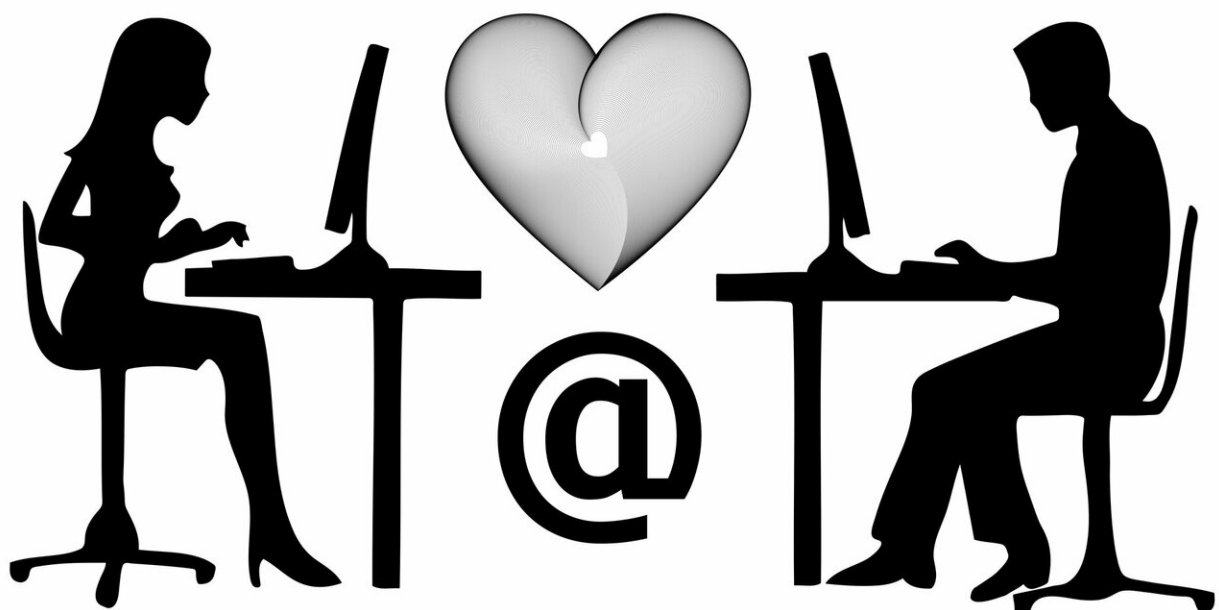# Dating apps sought to spark love during the pandemic, according to new research

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The unwelcome, unsought and altogether unsexy COVID-19 pandemic was arguably the greatest monkey wrench for the dating app industry. The business model is founded on forging proximate relationships, and—rightly or wrongly—associated with casual sex. Beginning in March 2020, it was facing a bleak future as relationships were to be

mediated by screens for an unforeseeable amount of time.

However, as a new study in the journal *New Media & Society* demonstrates, dating apps like Tinder, Bumble and Match.com were quick to adapt to the new limits placed on socializing. Innovations in [technology](#), customer messaging and promotional material helped the apps pivot away from hook-up culture and toward a new kind of "virtual dating"—one in which couples met over video calls with take-it-slow expectations. Connections, relationships and authenticity were prized over instant chemistry and mutual sexual attraction.

"These apps needed to take the [pandemic](#) seriously, because there was a lot of media attention on them at the beginning of it," says the study's lead author, assistant professor of communication studies Stefanie Duguay. "We had a health minister tell citizens that if you swipe right on Tinder or Grindr, you might get more than you bargained for. These apps were being implicated in this bigger public discussion, so it would have been very strange if they had just stayed the course."

Traditional is new again

Duguay and her co-authors Christopher Dietzel, a postdoctoral fellow at Dalhousie University, and David Myles, a postdoc at McGill University, began collecting and analyzing data from dating apps from March 2020 when countries began responding to the pandemic. (The eight apps in this study were those marketed primarily to heterosexual populations—data from queer-oriented apps like Grindr and Her are discussed in their other research.)

Most of the app companies were quick to seize the opportunities presented by improved video calling technology to normalize virtual dating. Although the term dates back to the 1990s, its meaning has substantially evolved from the text- and e-mail-based connections made

then. Video technology makes it possible for prospective couples to eat, drink and converse together from their respective homes. It may lack the atmosphere of a restaurant or bar, but it opens new possibilities for connection.

To keep users coming back even when in-person dating was difficult, if not impossible, apps changed how they look and are used. Some developed their own video-call technology and incorporated it into their interfaces. Others published listicles and tips on spicing up virtual dates, created student-specific features and altered their logos to play up the at-home vibe. In general, they kept user-facing language light and conversational.

An emphasis on authenticity, love and romance messaging also caught the researchers' attention. They write that in a highly unusual time like a global pandemic, the apps appealed to a sense of societal normalcy, emphasizing trust, monogamy and marriage.

"These ideas are very safe and traditional, and many people are trying to ground themselves in connections, relationships and emotional stability," Dietzel says.

However, as Duguay notes, this presents its own set of problems. For one, it excludes users who are not looking for long-term romance. Second, the approach precludes sexual activity and assumes people should put their sexuality aside during a pandemic. "Now, after two years, we know that's impossible."

See you again and again and again

As societies transition out of the pandemic, the researchers believe that the dating apps will retain at least some of their new features.

'"They've invested in the technology, put the messaging out to people, and the experience is easy and seamless," Duguay says.

And, Dietzel adds, the inevitable return to in-person dating does not necessarily mean abandoning the new messaging adopted by companies like Bumble.

"They can still project certain values, such as encouraging their users to take things slow," he says. "After all, these apps are companies, and it is in their interest to keep customers using their sites for as long as possible."

More information: Stefanie Duguay et al, The year of the "virtual date": Reimagining dating app affordances during the COVID-19 pandemic, *New Media & Society* (2022). DOI: 10.1177/14614448211072257

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