

# The Student Experience with Dating within the COVID-19 Pandemic: Dating Apps, Isolation and Blurred Lines

Claire Percival

## Abstract

When the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic was declared in the UK in March 2020, I, like many others, turned to Tinder and began having conversations with strangers, whilst confined to the four walls of my bedroom, as emotions of isolation, and anxiety grew nationally (YoungMinds, 2021). As restrictions eased, I forgot I had the app, but come September, with Covid-19 guidelines tightening again when I returned to university, I found myself turning to Tinder, where I met my boyfriend. My personal experience with dating. This made me reflect about the ways in which university students have been dating within the pandemic, inspiring me to have conversations with my peers. The main topics that arose was how to define dating, with the distinction between dating and a relationship, and why people were turning to dating apps, when Burton and Baym claim that the people are unable to make real connections with others online, viewing profiles as personas (Baym, 2015; Burton, 2020). We also discussed the emotional impact of the pandemic towards attitudes of dating, the timing of relationships changing, and finally what it was actually like to go on dates throughout the pandemic.

## Methodology

I talked with students aged 18-21 studying at a UK university. Most of these conversations took place over Zoom, with the exceptions being Finn, Jack, Eilidh, Stephan and Jemima whom I interviewed in person as I had formed a support bubble due to living alone<sup>1</sup>. I also reflected on the period I had spent on dating apps, and my own relationship which started during the pandemic. Being interested in dating in a broad sense, I included people who had been dating prior to pandemic but were currently not at the time of speaking to myself, those dating throughout the pandemic, and those in long term relationships, all from a variety of sexual orientations. All my interlocutors followed me on Instagram, and were aware of my relationship status, thus feeling comfortable to talk to me about their experiences, as they knew I would not judge their actions due to our prior connections. The conversations for this project predominantly revolved around the difficulties of dating throughout the pandemic with lockdowns and restrictions, regarding emotions and motivations, with a strong focus on the impact of online applications.

## Definitions

To begin, however, we should look at what it means 'to date'. According to the Cambridge dictionary, dating can be defined as 'to regularly spend time with someone you have a romantic relationship with' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). However, this differs from the

1. To ensure privacy, all interlocutors have been given a pseudonym.

views expressed by those I spoke to. Each believed there exists a difference between 'dating' and a relationship. Finn, a nineteen-year-old who has been in a long-term relationship for a year, spoke of how he does not consider himself dating his current partner:

"I wouldn't say I'm dating my partner now. I think dating is the pre-stage before the whole boyfriend-boyfriend, girlfriend-girlfriend, boyfriend-girlfriend thing. When we were first getting together, that was when we were dating. Talking, getting together, dating – I'd put that under the umbrella of dating, whereas established is definitely a clean solid line."

Finn was very serious when talking about the distinction. To him, dating means the preliminary stage of getting to know a partner, before being certain you want to enter an relationship with them. Additionally, dating is a largely ambiguous term, which encompassing many different elements that revolve, around getting to know someone. This matched a consensus about how 'dating' and 'being in a relationship' are different, with Stephan talking of how there were two steps in a relationship:

"I guess, dating is the first phase, just kind of going on multiple dates with the same person but not necessarily being in a relationship; being in a relationship is after you officialise it through having a conversation."

It is clear that the idea of dating, versus a relationship is about two distinct stages for many students, with the boundaries contrasting between passive action and active relationship status. Additionally, the idea of 'officialising' a relationship through a conversation implies a level of formality, creating an almost bureaucratic element

to the status. This links with the examples of Bogle, who, when talking to students about their ideas of dating within a college environment, spoke of relationships being formal, as opposed to the more comfortable and common sexual encounters of dating (2008). Although dating is still casual in the community I spoke to however, it is more about becoming acquainted to a person as opposed to sexual encounters.

Thus, the students I spoke to largely agree that the process of dating is an informal preliminary stage of familiarising yourself with someone and can cover a large portion of the connection prior to progressing into an 'official', established relationship.

## Motivations – Dating Apps

Looking behind the motivations of dating during the pandemic was interesting, predominantly because there was a lack of drive. Personally, I downloaded Tinder out of boredom, from having to stay within my family home. I was not particularly searching for dates – in fact, the first date I went on was six months later. And I was just one of many who turned to Tinder, with Sunday 29th March 2020 being the day Tinder recorded a record-breaking three million swipes (Stoicesu, 2020:4).

When speaking to people who also downloaded dating apps during the pandemic, similar motivations were found – that of wanting to talk to new people. However, there was much more stress put on the idea of heavily relying on the apps to provide this opportunity. As opposed to the idea of interacting with people through friends or in classes ( which is the main way

of meeting a partner at university according to Knox and Wilson), with classes being online, and a lack of social events, the world of dating apps created a possibility to maintain essential socialisation (1981:256).

Jemima, whose three-year relationship ended at the beginning of the pandemic, spoke of how she downloaded Tinder, because she wanted to meet people – something she could not do organically due to lockdown restrictions. She explained she was hoping for a romantic attraction, and wanted to meet those she matched with. Here, her experiences of online dating differs from literature on the topic, as it is often claimed that people become confused between the ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ world, with the construction of identity in disembodied places resulting in contrasting relationships when meeting in person (Baym, 2015; Burton, 2020). To Jemima, the people she met online were accurate reflections, as opposed to personas, as Burton argues. This indicates that online dating within the pandemic predominantly offered an opportunity to create connections with individuals, through a virtual profile, even if one was unable to meet in person for a long period.

However, Fiona, a twenty-year-old who has never been in a relationship, downloaded Tinder when having drinks with her friends after returning to university in September. She said it was for fun, and had no intention of meeting anyone she spoke to. For her it was another social media, a source of entertainment – thus the primary function of the app was twisted to match the goal of enjoyment. This demonstrates the theory of user and gratification,

which has been developing in the field of psychology since the 1960s. According to this theory, the use of online spaces is linked to feeling satisfied in areas such as identity and, social communication while encouraging, escapism, and amusement through an online space (Ruggiero, 2000:28). According to Fiona, the pleasure she received from online interactions, simulated the possibility of dating while, providing enough enjoyment, so that she never felt the need to physically meet in person, or commit to anything with the people she met online. The act of using a dating app took on a game-like quality, something one does with friends in a group setting for entertainment.

Stephan, a twenty-year-old who met his girlfriend on Tinder during the pandemic, provided a balance between the Fiona and Jemima’s opposing uses of the app. He said

“I was just casually seeing who was on Tinder. If the conversation doesn’t work, I wouldn’t want to meet. I wasn’t going on it too seriously, and I wasn’t messaging people too seriously either, I was just like laughing a bit, but seeing who was out there”.

The idea of casually using Tinder to message others in order to create a connection is reflected by Miller, who when looking at the use of social media in the Glades in England found that people were using Tinder to create a fun way to engage with people, with the ability to message providing an opportunity to decide whether they want to meet in person (2016:103). Furthermore, Stephan’s attitude towards meeting others reflects

the idea that people's online profiles are accurate depictions, similar to Jemima's opinion.

The different interactions and intentions people have had on Tinder indicate how there is not a single use for the app. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a higher reliance on apps to meet people. However, whether this progresses to the next stage relies heavily on there a strong enough connection between to users to facilitate effort in furthering the relationship. For those who are using it in a social environment with friends, interactions remain solely virtual.

## Emotions

Throughout the pandemic, many have faced isolation, alongside anxiety and frustration. A Young Minds Survey, published in the summer of 2020, found that 87% of respondents have expressed emotions of loneliness during the lockdown, and 80% saying their mental health has suffered (YoungMinds, 2021). These feelings also surround ideas of dating, with a sense of exhaustion arising, leading people to focus more on themselves, and how to increase their happiness on their own. Emily illustrated:

"I don't have the desire to invest my time and energy in people who don't even seem that great anyway... it didn't seem worth it... I'm really busy, I'm doing really well, and I don't necessarily feel I need to look for an extra thing at the moment."

This was also echoed by Amelia, who said:

"It sounds really cringey but I'm just really happy with life, everything's good vibes- if someone were to come along it would just enhance that, it's not like I need someone."

These points emphasise the idea that dating imposes on an individual's personal life. As opposed to being simply an addition, which is gained in a relationship, the process of physically looking for someone is largely draining. When someone is happy, there is less focus on attempting to find satisfaction through dating. Interestingly, both mentioned how they are happy currently, despite the ongoing pandemic, which differs from other people's experience of struggling with isolation.

Looking at the other side of the coin, however, we can see the idea of loneliness. Blake et al's conducted research focused on university students, which has highlighted the mass feelings of isolation students are experiencing regarding Covid-19 (Blake et al., 2020). This mirrors Stephan, who downloaded Tinder as he:

"Didn't have many people at this point, just Ewan really, and a few people in the flat. It was a bit sad sometimes."

Stephan's lack of contact with people, as he had only a small number of people in his household, incentivised him to search for other social connections that would provide him with happiness. In this sense, relationships are positioned as something that provides a distraction from negative emotions. The use of dating apps in this situation to deal with negative emotions has been common in the pandemic, with a survey by QuackQuack finding that 59% of people older than eighteen turn to dating apps to help mitigate anxiety (EntertainmentNews, 2021). We can therefore see that, as opposed to providing

excitement, and positivity people feel fatigued, and do not want to put in the effort or time to dating. Many associate relationships as something that one searches for only if they are feeling socially isolated. Furthermore, there is an idea of 'needing' to look for a relationship when feeling low, as opposed to being content in oneself. Overall therefore with pandemic isolation already affecting peoples emotions, reactions to dating differed, either finding peace within, or finding someone to spend time with.

## Timeframes

Another topic that frequently arose during conversations with people in long-term relationships was the idea of time. For many, throughout the past year, ideas of time have become warped, with days merging into each other due to the monotony of lockdown. And the impact is has had on relationships is drastic. Jack and Kiley both mentioned that, if it had not been for the pandemic, they would not have moved in with their partner. Kiley said:

"It definitely felt – not too big a step, but it did feel like too big a step. We made it work, but we would never had moved in together now, if it wasn't for covid."

Here, internal conflict is evident for Kiley, as the move to living together posed a different dynamic to their relationship. The emphasis on 'never' highlights how, as a result of the pandemic, their relationship has been altered as opposed to, what she would have expected at this stage.

"We're definitely a lot closer quartered than we would have been if it wasn't for the pandemic. Because obviously you're spending a lot more time together, you're advancing much faster, condensing it into shorter periods."

Similarly, Jack, a twenty-one-year-old said: In this, both express the opinion that their relationships were forced to develop and mature much faster due to the pandemic. With the timeframe being condensed, feelings are intensified, alongside increasing pressure in defining and continuing the relationship.

## Dates

An issue brought up which I was not previously conscious of was that of blurred lines in regards to social interactions during the covid-19 pandemic, and not knowing whether one was going on a date, or simply spending time as friends. This was the case for Diana and Judy, who explained they had been on walks with someone, assuming that it was a casual, friendship meeting, but the other expected a romantic element. Diana explained the awkwardness of her encounter:

"I found it difficult to define whether it was a date or not. In the first case, it was like literally being asked out before the pandemic and then you go for a coffee or a drink, and you know in your mind that's definitely a date. This time it was like you go on a walk, but I'd been going on a walk with so many friends it was sort of difficult to have a... there wasn't much difference. I don't think either of us were particularly sure."

With the pandemic, and the lack of ability to go to places, the relationship felt much more ambiguous. Rather than having clarity in what the relationship was, due to the monotony, and limited actions one could do, experiences began to feel the same, whether it was between

romantic or platonic contacts. The idea of being 'asked out' before the pandemic, provided much more precision regarding the intentions of the meeting while also introducing an element of formality. In the story Diana told, there was a lack of clear communication. This indicates that the experience of dating in the pandemic, has resulted in a lack of intentions; instead of knowing where one stands regarding romantic interest, due to only being able to do the same things, no matter the person, intentions are vague, resulting in awkward situations.

Diana also mentioned the issue of trying to follow the guidance of staying two metres apart: "*I said 'don't come too close to me' which is always a bit weird.*" This was not the case for Jemima however:

"After my breakup, when I started dating, and going on dates, the restrictions had eased a bit more. The first date I went on we walked around town in Edinburgh. I didn't feel so obliged to keep my distance when meeting new people."

The idea of maintaining distance was not at the forefront of her mind, which relates to Lauren:

"You get distracted, and taken away with the flow of a date. I wouldn't try and keep my distance. If you actually wanted to have a relationship with someone, it would be strange to not have any physical contact with them."

This mirrors Jemima's opinion, that if one was actually interested in dating someone, they were less likely to avoid physical contact. Additionally, when there is clarity that it is a date, the need to keep the physical distance was disregarded, as physical connection plays a role in romantic

compatibility. Furthermore, the idea of getting "caught up in the flow of a date" emphasises how dating is seen as a social action and is categorised as a positive event. With ideas of spatial distancing not being prevalent when on dates, despite the risk of Covid-19, it appears that the environment remains similar, intensely focused on seeing if a connection exists with the other individual.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has analysed the experience of dating within the pandemic from the perspective of students. With the inability to meet in an organic setting, a large amount of attention has shifted towards dating apps such as Tinder. However, opposing the literature of how online dating connections are fabricated, it is seen that it has become a large source of opportunity to relate to others for the students, even if being used in a 'not too serious' manner.

Being an emotional period for many, the fact that dating, although perceived as being largely casual, still demands high amounts of efforts has resulted in, a reduction in the focus on the need to date when people feel happy with themselves. This has made young adults now associate , dating with feelings of loneliness or isolation.

Interestingly, however, for those who have been actively dating, the physical elements of a relationship have remained permanent. When enthusiastically interested in pursuing a new relationship, there is less focus on the need to maintain

distance, whereas in Diana's situation, who felt confusion surrounding the motivations of meeting, there was more of an incentive to remain apart.

As for those already in an established relationship, the additional pressures of moving in together has created a strong element of maturity with relationships becoming much more serious.

Overall, during the Covid-19 pandemic, dating appears to not be a main priority for

students. The easy-going nature of dating, prior to becoming established, remains with the events of meeting online, and going on a walk as a date being the only large shift. How attitudes will change once the pandemic ends however, is still to be seen.

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