

**ONLINE DATING APP SAFETY: INTERVIEW SUMMARY FINDINGS**

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## **BACKGROUND**

This study was conducted to gain a better understanding of young adults, specifically college students, and online dating app usage. By collecting information related to safety concerns and procedures on dating platforms, there is an opportunity for campaigns to challenge the online dating landscape; if college students' concerns and habits online are known, then more attention can be given to improving these platforms. Promoting safety and embracing technological advances is at the forefront of this topic, and more attention towards these platforms and practicing safe dating etiquette could transform the algorithm of online dating apps and their futures. Ultimately, this study focused on online dating offers a look into potential threats, and seeks to find solutions that promote safety while taking advantage of what these platforms offer.

In October 2020, American University sponsored a formative qualitative research study regarding online dating among college students. The objectives of this cross-sectional study were as follows:

- Identify the safety concerns young adults have when using online dating apps.
- Understand how often young adults follow recommended safety precautions (verified profiles, blocking suspicious accounts, meeting arrangements, etc.)
- Identify what motivates young adults to use different safety precautions
- Identify the barriers that prevent young adults from using different safety precautions.

## **METHOD**

During October 2022, six in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals enrolled in college in the Washington, D.C. area. Every interviewee has been on at least one dating site. The discussions included three male and three female participants in various years from sophomore to senior. The interviews were conducted in person in a public setting. This method was chosen in order to attain honest responses to important questions involved in the research process.

All interviews began with the planned introduction notifying individuals of the nature of the study, promising confidentiality. The participants were notified that they could stop at any point and avoid any interview questions. After hearing this information, each participant verbally agreed to participate and be recorded for transcription. Once the recording began, volunteers were notified.

A potential limitation of this research is the sampling approach. Participants were selected based on who responded to an Instagram story post directed towards students in the D.C. area with online dating app experience. Interview requests were sent to those who responded.

Table I: Study Design

	<i>Male Students</i>	<i>Female Students</i>
<i>Undergraduate sophomores</i>	0	1
<i>Undergrad. juniors</i>	1	2
<i>Undergrad. seniors</i>	2	0

## **FINDINGS**

**Participants reported that online dating apps are prevalent among college students and that they are attractive to the Gen Z group with various intentions.**

The six interviewees believed that their peers have used apps and have been on at least one dating app. In their words:

- “Most of my friends are currently on dating apps or have been in the past.”
- “I think they’re very popular.”
- “A lot of people in my classes are definitely on apps.”
- “I’d say that most single college students have probably used dating apps.”

Even though many respondents perceived current undergraduate college students as active on apps generally, the reasons for being on apps greatly varied. This impacted what apps are

popular among this population. One particular important factor appeared to be convenience. A college junior said that they “feel like it’s a great way to meet people in the same university as you but also others you wouldn’t have met otherwise.” Another reported that “the pandemic encouraged more people to grow accustomed to these methods of meeting new people.” Based on these participants’ experiences, Tinder and Bumble were reported as the most prevalent based on the opportunity to have various intentions and express that on these platforms.

Every respondent said they used at least one app, with answers between two and four mediums. Besides Bumble and Tinder, Hinge was another popular app reported among this sample.

**In terms of safety concerns, many respondents discussed catfishing and other scams but said that most of the responsibility is placed on users themselves. The main safety concerns occurred when discussing in-person meetings.**

Many participants discussed their awareness of the dangers posed on dating platforms, but most safety concerns related to doubt before meeting matches in person. People said:

- “The most obvious fear of mine is them being who they say they are.”
- “My main concern is making sure [to meet] in a public place and I can easily leave if anything bad happens.”
- “Dating apps is different from meeting someone in a class or extracurricular.”

Respondents believed that most scams were from not being cautious enough online. The main concerns involved meeting other users that could harm them. One participant said, “I think about it all the time, like what if [a match] abducts you or something?”

**Many participants mentioned the use of some verification, depending on what is available on the specific app. Whether it is through online or in-person connections, respondents were interested in taking precautions and following procedures.**

The more detailed responses in this category came from the female respondents. They said:

- “If I see signs or potential for harassment and abuse in general, I’m quick to block them on all platforms.”
- “I always meet in public places first and notify a friend with where I am going and with who.”
- “I have a code with my friends so if I send a particular emoji and/or drop my location while on a date, they can come to my rescue or notify authority.”

While one male respondee followed suit explaining that he opts to meet in public places as well, another participant did not specify that he followed any safety precautions. He said that he “can’t speak to that” given his identity and experiences.

**On the topic of barriers that deter users to use verification methods, many respondents said that they completed what felt appropriate to them.**

Even though many people felt that dating platforms could do more to protect users and push methods like ID verification and artificial intelligence, they generally thought that it may not be possible and in the best interest of these apps—especially concerning background checks.

Interviewees reported:

- “These companies cannot control who is on the apps and how/where these people choose to meet.”
- “It may cause people who don’t have anything to worry about to not use apps because of privacy reasons.”
- “I think they should but I don’t think it’s possible. They wouldn’t want to lose money.”
- “I have concerns that this will invade people’s privacy.”

**General topics that made people apprehensive about using platforms mostly concerned safety, but many felt that these issues are often neglected by themselves and/or companies.**

A barrier to being authentic online is coming across users that aim to produce harm. One respondent said that she did not think she would report an instance of online harassment or abuse. She said “I feel like there’s nothing [dating apps] could do about it. It would be great if they could.” Others expressed:

- “I know a lot of young people are on [dating apps]. My friends would meet younger girls without knowing beforehand.”
- “I don’t know who or how to report.”
- “Making [reporting] steps clear would be the first step in encouraging more reports.”

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

After hearing college students’ thoughts about online dating apps, it is evident that thoughtful methods of communication that resonate with their experiences are necessary.

### **Since the college-aged population is using many apps, the campaign should:**

- Focus on a few specific apps to promote safety precautions and verification but remain flexible generally speaking across all platforms to some extent.
- Encourage key publics to stand for verification by taking all measures provided on apps. Create a social media movement focused here.
- Provide guides on how to be safe on dating apps and warning signs to look out for.
- Advocate for additional security measures as permitted.

**Respondents felt that there was nowhere to report incidents of online harassment, and the dangers identified are not always handled well. To allay this concern, the Organization can:**

- Spread messages about reporting incidents, including statistics that demonstrate that people affected are not alone.
- Support users by offering more actions than are provided by dating apps. Advertise reporting forms, forums, and online message/call systems.

### **Ideas to promote transparency:**

- Link to petitions encouraging verification processes and online surveys that encourage users to record experiences on apps.
- Aim to hold online dating platforms more accountable in general by pushing efforts towards changing the narrative on reporting incidents. Particularly on social media and in statements.
- Collaborate with dating apps/other organizations to promote safety. Consider holding group dating events on the University campus or at other public spaces.

## APPENDIX

### Dating App Safety Discussion Guide

Note: Questions about what happened on dates, sexual experiences, etc., cannot be asked without going through AU's Institutional Review Board (to protect human subjects in research) due to the very sensitive and private nature of the information. Questions were removed and/or altered accordingly. We can ask their opinions in those areas, but not actual behaviors.

#### Dating Apps

**Target Audience for Interviews/Focus Group:** College students who have used a dating app at least once; *try to mix up gender across individual interviews if you can*. If you decide to take the focus group approach for this topic, please let potential participants know (depending on recruitment) that it might be a mixed gender group in case this makes them uncomfortable. You may get more willingness to participate and higher quality data with the individual interview approach for this project [recall the interview vs. focus group pros and cons you read about].

**What to tell them about the study:** You are being asked to participate in [insert "an interview" or "a focus group"] about dating apps for a study I am conducting for my Strategic Communication Research class. I'm looking for individuals who have used a dating app in the past so we can explore whether these apps pose any safety concerns for you and any opinions you have about how to make dating via apps safer. *I will not ask any specific questions about your relationships or any personal activities you engaged in that resulted from your use of the app*. You may opt out of any questions you do not want to answer and end your participation in the study at any time. What you tell me will be kept confidential, and I will not use your name or any information that can be used to identify you in the report. The interview will be audio-

recorded for the purpose of ensuring accurate data for my report. Once I receive my final grade for the report, all audiotape and/or transcripts from our conversation will be destroyed. **Use if conducting interviews:** I expect the interview to take approximately 30 minutes. **Use if conducting a focus group:** I expect the group to take approximately 1.5 hours.

**Study Participants:** College students who have used a dating app at least once

### **Research Objectives**

- Identify the safety concerns young adults have when using online dating apps.
- Understand how often young adults follow recommended safety precautions (verified profiles, blocking suspicious accounts, meeting arrangements, etc.)
- Identify what motivates young adults to use different safety precautions
- Identify the barriers that prevent young adults from using different safety precautions.

### **A. Introduction:**

#### ***INTERVIEWER/MODERATOR: THIS IS NOT VERBATIM***

Hello. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. My name is {NAME}. This research study is being conducted to understand college students' opinions and experiences related to dating apps and safety.

The idea is for us to have a conversation today with lots of give and take. There are no right or wrong answers to any questions I ask. I hope that you will feel comfortable enough to share what you truly think and feel. I'm interested in all opinions.

### **B. Procedures:**

#### ***INTERVIEWER: THIS IS NOT VERBATIM***

- Promise confidentiality (no reports will identify you; no one else will have access to interview recordings or transcripts, recordings and transcripts destroyed when project

complete)

- IF RECORDING [mention recording device]
- We have a lot to cover, so at times I may change the subject and move ahead. Please stop me if you want to make an additional comment before I move forward.
- If during this discussion you feel uncomfortable or upset by the topic, please let me know.
- If for any reason you are not comfortable with a question, you do not have to answer.
- Do you have any questions?

1. Before we get into talking about specifics today, I'd like to get your perspectives on the online dating landscape for college students. How popular would you say online dating is among college students these days?

2. Why do you think online dating is attractive to college students given all the opportunities to meet people on college campuses via classes, clubs, athletics, internships, shared housing, and more?

3. Based on your experiences and social networks, what dating apps on the market are most popular with college students? [If interviewee gives more than 3 apps, ask them to pick the top 3]

4. Thinking about the apps you just told me about do you have a sense of why some people might pick one app over the other? What are some of the ways these apps differ?

5. How many different dating apps have you personally used to date?

6. What factors or features are most important to you when selecting a dating app?

PROBE: What else do you consider? Anything else? [Examples of probes that can be

used to draw out the bigger, top-of-mind factors or features before moving to the next question too quickly.]

7. What, if any, safety concerns related to catfishing and other online identity and/or financial fraud scams do you worry about when using dating apps?
8. Do you take any precautions to protect yourself from online identity and financial fraud scams? If YES: What do you do?
9. Do you think dating app companies need to do more to combat online identity and financial fraud scams? IF YES: What should they do?
10. What, if any, safety concerns related to online sexual harassment and abuse do you worry about when using dating apps?
11. Do you take any precautions to protect yourself from online sexual harassment and abuse? If YES: What do you do?
12. Do you think dating app companies need to do more to combat online sexual harassment and abuse? If YES: What should they do?
13. What, if any, safety concerns related to meeting people offline do you worry about when using dating apps?
14. Do you take any precautions to protect yourself when meeting people offline? If YES: What do you do?
15. Do you think dating app companies need to do more to help people understand how to stay safe when meeting people offline? If YES: What should they do?
16. Do you think dating apps should conduct background checks on users to confirm participants' identities and screen out individuals with histories of financial and/or sexual crimes? Why or why not?

17. Research shows that many people do not report online harassment and abuse. Why do you think this is? What can app providers do to encourage more reporting?

18. What about the use of artificial intelligence? Some apps are exploring how artificial intelligence can be leveraged to find and censor sexually explicit and/or violent images.

Does this sound like a good idea to you or do you have concerns?

It is now time to wrap up this very productive discussion. Is there anything we did not touch on today that you would like to tell me?

**Thank You**