

Unmatching Dating Apps: Motives for Disconnection

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Abstract

This work explores the motives for online daters to disconnect from dating apps. It draws on two studies: Study 1, an online survey ($n = 349$) aimed at (past) online dating users (44.7 % female, 91 % heterosexuals), and Study 2, a qualitative one based on semi-structured interviews ($n = 20$) with (past) online dating users aged 21–45. Quantitative analysis was carried out on survey results to obtain frequencies, and a thematic analysis was applied to explore the survey's open-ended questions and interviews. As both our quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal, individuals disconnect from dating apps due to five main reasons: users' experiences, app features, users' well-being, privacy concerns, and life transitions. Motives for disconnection can be cumulative and can change over time. The motives also reflect the meaning of dating apps through how they are appropriated and incorporated into everyday activities. Although disconnection reflects the ambivalent relationship of users with dating apps, they are aware of the possibility of reconnecting whenever they want or need to.

Keywords

Dating apps; media ecology; app disconnection; media disconnection.

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Desvinculación de las aplicaciones de citas: los motivos de la desconexión

Resumen

El presente trabajo explora los motivos por los que las personas que buscan citas en línea se desconectan de las aplicaciones de citas y se basa en dos estudios: el estudio 1, una encuesta en línea ($n = 349$) dirigida a (antiguos) usuarios de citas en línea (44,7 % mujeres, 91 % heterosexuales), y el estudio 2, un estudio cualitativo basado en encuestas semiestructuradas ($n = 20$) con (antiguos) usuarios de citas en línea de entre 21 y 45 años. Se efectuó un análisis cuantitativo de los resultados de la encuesta para obtener las frecuencias y se aplicó un análisis temático para explorar las preguntas abiertas y las entrevistas de la encuesta. Como lo revelan nuestros análisis cuantitativos y cualitativos, las personas se desconectan de las aplicaciones de citas debido a cinco razones principales: las experiencias de los usuarios, las características de las aplicaciones, el bienestar de los usuarios, las preocupaciones sobre la privacidad y las transiciones de la vida. Los motivos de la desconexión pueden ser acumulativos y cambiar con el tiempo, a la vez que reflejan el significado que se les da a las aplicaciones de citas, a través de cómo se apropian y se incorporan en las actividades cotidianas. Si bien la desconexión refleja la relación ambivalente de los usuarios con las aplicaciones de citas, estos son conscientes de la posibilidad de volver a conectarse cuando quieran o tengan la necesidad.

Palabras clave

Aplicaciones de citas; ecología de los medios; desconexión de las aplicaciones; desconexión de los medios.

Aplicativos de encontro incompatíveis: motivos para a desconexão

Resumo

Neste trabalho, exploram-se os motivos que levam as pessoas que procuram de forma on-line encontros a se desconectarem dos aplicativos de relacionamentos. Baseia-se em dois estudos: Estudo 1, um questionário on-line (n = 349) destinado a usuários (antigos) de encontros on-line (44,7% mulheres, 91% heterossexuais), e Estudo 2, qualitativo, baseado em entrevistas semiestruturadas (n = 20) com usuários (antigos) de encontros on-line com idades entre 21 e 45 anos. Realizou-se uma análise quantitativa dos resultados do questionário para obter frequências e aplicou-se uma análise temática para explorar as perguntas abertas do questionário e as entrevistas. Como revelam as nossas análises quantitativa e qualitativa, os indivíduos se desconectam dos aplicativos de encontro devido a cinco razões principais: experiências dos usuários, recursos do aplicativo, bem-estar dos usuários, preocupações com a privacidade e transições de vida. Os motivos para a desconexão podem ser cumulativos e podem mudar ao longo do tempo. Os motivos também refletem o significado dos aplicativos de encontro através da forma como são apropriados e incorporados nas atividades diárias. Embora a desconexão reflita a relação ambivalente dos usuários com os aplicativos de encontro, eles estão cientes da possibilidade de se reconectarem sempre que quiserem ou precisarem.

Palavras-chave

Aplicativos de encontro; ecologia das mídias; desconexão de aplicativos; desconexão das mídias.

Introduction

Online dating mobile applications (apps) have thrived, accumulating more than 366 million users worldwide (Statista, 2023). Their appropriation results from negotiating the imposition of their technological and social affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Taking into account dating apps' design and operating logic, their communicational affordances, and how they are classified by users and non-users, dating apps “constitute a process of remediation of the codes of courtship” (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022, p. 426). From a media ecology perspective, dating app appropriation reflects the set of meanings attributed to such technology and how it is incorporated into the social sphere, impacting how relationships are formed and shaped.

In an increasingly saturated media environment where digital solutions, including dating apps, are part of users' digital diets, studies have shown that media disconnection comes as a response. This act can be justified by different reasons ranging from economic, social, or well-being-related (Nguyen, 2023; Syvertsen, 2020).

Although dating apps and digital detox subjects have received attention from the media and academia, these two threads have mainly remained disconnected in claiming attention. In the context of media ecology, framed by the set of changes that dating apps bring to the relationship sphere, it is important to identify the reasons that lead users to disconnect from them. This study proposes to do so through a mixed methodology approach combining a survey with semi-structured interviews. Its findings provide insights into individuals' dynamic relationships with dating apps.

Dating app ecology

The principle of using the internet to meet people is not new. However, in the last decade, dating apps have contributed to its normalization as a common medium where intimacy takes place (Sepúlveda, 2023). Dating software (apps) can be downloaded from mobile digital stores. They rely on the communication affordances of smartphones, which can be used anywhere, anytime, and in combination with other functionalities (e.g., location,

camera, microphone), predominantly visual. They incorporate gamification strategies to motivate usage while associating dating with an entertainment logic (Linne, 2020). Therefore, among the various reasons for using dating apps—the most common of which is to find a casual or lasting relationship—entertainment and distraction are also present (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017).

From a media ecology conception (Ong, 2002; Postman, 1970), the challenge lies in understanding the changes dating apps bring to the social sphere in a particular field: romantic relationships. The emergence and adoption of dating apps have created an environment where people meet and relationship forms have changed (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022; Illouz, 2018, 2019), affecting the decisions users make about satisfying socialization and communication needs. This change, in Postman's (1970) view, cannot be only seen as another means that is added to the existing elements—technological but also traditional ones (e.g., school, work, networks of friends, family)—but also as having an impact on the existing environment and consequently on the practices that arise from it.

The principles and operating logic underlying dating apps result in a set of practices mediated by such platforms that transform romance. Dating apps are associated with a culture of hooking up, an underlying barrier to forming lasting relationships in which users' emotions are treated as commodities (Illouz, 2019).

The online dating process, strongly conditioned by the rules and affordances of apps, makes users create strategies to succeed. These are reflected in how they build their profile, recognizing that they have to produce a desirable self-presentation, initiate a conversation to get a response and organize a date worth spending time on. From a “cold intimacy” perspective, passion and romance are replaced by efficiency and rationality (van Hooff, 2020), a shift that widens users' network of potential dates. It is also the affordances and rules of dating apps that allow behaviors considered inappropriate to arise (e.g., ghosting), for users to be victims of deception (e.g.,

catfishing), and for toxic attitudes to take place (e.g., misogynistic comments; Hetsroni & Tuncez, 2019).

Moving away from a more technologically deterministic view, while dating apps condition users' behaviors and experiences, users find tactics to get around them (De Ridder, 2022). Technology impacts individuals' vision and actions, and individuals transform, resignify, and readapt technology (Scolari, 2012) according to their needs and purposes. Users classify dating apps as a valid way to meet others (Sepúlveda, 2023), pushing aside the idea that they replace traditional networks and places but instead add to these. This classification results from a dialogical relationship between users and dating apps. It is also the result of a dynamic media ecosystem, wherein the incorporation of dating apps derives from negotiation and use.

Disconnection from social media

The level of digital connection and the role of digital platforms in today's societies is undeniably significant. We are facing a culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013) in which platforms impose themselves, governing various areas of everyday life, and dating is no exception. As a critical response to permanent connectivity in which digital technologies compete for users' attention, individuals have started managing their media consumption (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021; Syvertsen & Elin, 2020). Referred to as "media disconnection" or "digital detox," such expressions conceptualize individuals' self-regulating behaviors regarding their use of social media (Nguyen, 2021). It is a result of the realization that the appropriation of such technologies in different areas of life mediates daily activities and shapes how people relate and behave (Syvertsen, 2020). Studies have contributed to identifying why individuals do not use, restrict, completely stop using, or express dissatisfaction with digital platforms.

Syvertsen (2020) points out several themes: Offline presence and relationships are felt as more authentic than online ones; productivity issues, based on the fact that the digital is a distracting element; and reasons re-

lated to privacy, either about what is shared online or specifically with the use of personal data by the platforms. In terms of lifestyle and consumption patterns, Jorge (2019) highlights the digital detox process as a performance through which individuals recover their offline social relationships. Nguyen (2021, 2023) and Nguyen et al. (2022) identify reasons for disconnecting related to the platform, the device itself, social influences, and life context. Thus, liking or not liking how a platform works, the shared content, the lack of interest generated, or the feeling of too much information can lead to abandonment. In a specific study on disconnection from the dating app Grindr (Brubaker et al., 2016), participants who stopped using the app indicated that it was a source of distraction, particularly evident when they had started a relationship.

Understanding the phenomenon of digital disconnection requires admitting that the reasons for individuals to self-regulate the use of digital technologies are multiple and heterogeneous (Moe & Madsen, 2021) and can change over time.

As platforms are appropriate in different areas of life and for a diverse range of everyday activities, the scope of studies on digital disconnection goes beyond media studies. They highlight various domains of life and cultural topics, bringing contributions from the perspective of understanding the complexity of relationships between individuals, platforms, and society.

This work intends to contribute to discussing digital disconnection in relation to a very specific typology of digital platforms accumulating users: dating apps. To this end, our established research question is: Why do online daters disconnect from dating apps? Bearing in mind that media disconnection is a process that reflects users' self-negotiation (Moe & Madsen, 2021) as well as meanings attributed to the technology and the behaviors of self-regulation, we aim not only to identify but also to contextualize motives for disconnection from dating apps. Taking into account that dating apps are distinguished from other social media by their positioning, principles of use, and classification by individuals, users or not, this study will contribute concrete data with regard to dating culture.

Materials and Methods

Survey

Data collection and sample

To answer the defined research question, a survey that comprised both open- and closed-ended questions related to digital daters' motives for and process of disconnecting from dating apps was developed based on literature on online dating (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022; Sepúlveda & Vieira, 2020; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017), media disconnection (Jorge, 2019; Nguyen, 2023; Syvertsen, 2020), and exploratory interviews previously conducted by the author. The survey was available between March and October 2022, took less than 10 minutes to complete, and participants did not receive compensation. Participation was anonymous, and participants were informed about the study objectives and allowed to step out at any time. Given that the study targeted online dating app (former) users, information about it was spread online among the academic community (undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students) as well on social media networks (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn). The survey was conducted through Qualtrics software, and data analysis was performed using SPSS statistical software. The following parameters were considered for participant selection: 18 years or older, former users of dating apps, and current users of dating apps who, at some point, stopped using them.

In total, 419 Portuguese respondents participated in the survey. Twenty-one respondents completed less than 20% of the survey and, for that reason, were not included in the analysis. Of the remaining respondents, 49 never used mobile dating apps and, for that, were redirected to the end of the survey and did not answer questions regarding disconnecting from dating apps. Consequently, the final sample comprised 349 Portuguese users who had used and disconnected from dating apps. Of the 349 participants, 44.7% ($n = 156$) identified themselves as female, 54.7% ($n = 191$) as male, and 0.6% ($n = 2$) indicated other gender without specifying which one. Respondents mean age was 30.17 ($SD = 8.49$; range: 21–69 years old). A large concentration of participants was situated in the age groups of up to

34 (77.09%). Regarding civil status, most stated they were single ($n = 189$; 54.2%). When asked how long they used online dating platforms, 36.7% ($n = 128$) answered less than one year, 54.7% ($n = 191$) more than one year but less than two, and 8.6% ($n = 30$) more than two years. The majority of respondents used Tinder ($n = 313$), followed by Bumble ($n = 132$), and Badoo ($n = 46$). It should also be noted that 27% of users reported having used more than one dating app.

Analysis

Respondents were asked if they were using dating apps at the moment. At the time of the survey, most participants said they no longer used dating apps (82.8%). These respondents received closed-ended follow-up questions in which they were asked when they had stopped using dating apps, with 60.3% asserting that they had not logged in on a dating app for six months. The remaining participants (17.2%) indicated they still used dating apps. These respondents received closed-ended follow-up questions asking if they had, at some point, disconnected from the dating app (all of them had). A definition and examples of disconnection were given in order to facilitate comprehension. Second, respondents were asked about their motives for disconnecting from dating apps. They could choose multiple options from a closed-ended question.

Semi-structured interviews

Data collection and sample

With the aim of contextualizing and deepening the comprehension of reasons for disconnection from dating apps, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews allowed it to follow a previously designed script and provided flexibility by introducing other questions whenever necessary (Bryman, 2012). This makes it an appropriate method, complementary to the survey, as it captures the nuances regarding motivations for dating app disconnection. The interviews were conducted one-on-one, by video call, between August and December 2022. Recruitment was carried out through the survey that was taking place, through the study advertisement on social media networks (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn), and shared in the researcher's own network, asking readers to

share with their networks, following a snowball strategy. The selection parameters were the same as for the survey: 18 years or older, former users of dating apps, and current users of dating apps who, at some point, have stopped using them. Twenty Portuguese adults aged 21–45 ($X = 32.2$) who had disconnected from dating apps at some point were interviewed. Research aimed at various (non)users, gender-balanced, and diverse in age, education level, and type of dating app. The sample comprised nine women and 11 men; most had a college degree ($n = 17$), and slightly more than half were single ($n = 12$).

Concerning dating app usage, the majority of participants ($n = 10$) indicated they used them for less than one year, followed by those who said they had used them for more than one year ($n = 7$) and those who used them for more than two years ($n = 3$). At the time of the interview, 14 participants were not using dating apps, and the six remaining users affirmed that although they were using them, they had paused their usage at some point. As for their preferences, all participants used the Tinder app. Bumble ($n = 11$) and Badoo ($n = 4$) were also mentioned.

During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked about their relationship with dating apps (e.g., Are you using dating apps? Which dating apps do you use? For how long?) to obtain a general overview. The interview was followed with questions about participants' motivations for disconnection (e.g., Why do you stop using? What makes you disconnect from dating apps? What were you aiming for with disconnection?). The interviews lasted between 23 and 65 minutes. Participants did not receive compensation. Informed consent was requested after informing the participants about the study's objectives and indicating they could withdraw at any time. Anonymity was guaranteed, and pseudonyms were used to report participants' quotes.

Coding and analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Maxqda software was used to store, organize, and code the data. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was performed after discourses were coded to identify themes and patterns. The coding process was discussed with a research as-

sistant. The researcher became familiar with the data, and categories were constructed using inductive and deductive approaches.

Results and Discussion

Participants of both studies pointed to several reasons for disconnecting from dating apps, and five main dimensions were identified: 1. Users' experiences; 2. Apps' features; 3. Users' well-being; 4. Privacy concerns; 5. Life transitions. These dimensions align with the results of other studies on disconnection (Nguyen, 2021, 2023). However, when we looked at the reasons that compose them, they were contextualized by the specificities of dating apps. Table 1 shows the reasons and frequencies resulting from the Study 1 survey.

Table 1. Dating App Disconnection Motives

Dimension	Motive	<i>n</i>	%	Total %
Users' experiences	Didn't meet anyone interesting	144	41.26	42.51
	Didn't satisfy my needs	221	63.32	
	Didn't live up to expectations	179	51.29	
	Got bored	59	16.91	
	Negative experiences	100	28.65	
	Nothing new happened	191	54.73	
Apps' features	Chat limitations	41	11.75	29.96
	Didn't like the overall functioning	206	59.03	
	Difficulty in editing the profile	21	6.02	
	Limited search options	73	20.92	
	Poor profile information	86	24.64	
	Unclear matching system	142	40.69	
Users' well-being	Got tired	113	32.38	13.93
	Negatively affected my self-esteem	59	16.91	
	Time-consuming	121	34.67	

Dimension	Motive	<i>n</i>	%	Total %
Privacy concerns	Didn't want to share my data with the app	25	7.16	4.09
	Didn't want others to see me online	61	17.48	
Life transitions	Started a relationship	118	33.81	9.51
	Stopped being trendy	9	2.58	
	Stopped making sense	73	20.92	

Source: Own elaboration. Results from the survey (*n* = 349). Answer options were cumulative.

“My experience showed me that I should delete the app” (Óscar, 30)

The most predominant dimension regarding motivation for dating app disconnection was users' experiences (43.78 %). Among these, the argument “Didn't satisfy my needs” was the most frequent (*n* = 221; 63.32 %). People have several motives for using dating apps and, as the Uses and Gratification Theory applied to this media context shows, users will continue to use it as long as it satisfies their needs (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Sepúlveda & Vieira, 2020); when it does not happen, it can give rise to users' disconnection. A participant elaborates: “I started using it because I wanted to meet girls. I thought Tinder would help me, but it didn't. After several attempts, I ended up leaving” (Pedro, 22).

Still, within the scope of experiences, users also indicated that “Nothing new happened” (*n* = 191; 54.73 %). “When I started using it, I was all excited, but time passed, and that basically boiled down to swiping profiles. I couldn't get dates. I was losing enthusiasm and the will to use it” (João, 27). João's testimony highlights not only a lack of results but also a monotony associated with dating apps. These aspects led to the affirmation “Got bored” (*n* = 59; 16.91 %) and were illustrated through expressions such as, “It was more of the same” (Gonçalo, 31). Although dating apps incorporate gamification principles (e.g., swipe movement or sending notifications when a new match happens or when receiving a new message) to retain users (Linne, 2020), they are not enough. Users' experience is the key to going beyond such functions. If users do not consider the experience satisfying, expressed by the lack of novelty and/or by not having matches or encoun-

ters, it can lead to disconnection. In this context, the motive “Didn’t meet anyone interesting” ($n = 144$; 41.26 %) came up, reinforcing the importance of experience. This motive reveals that although conversations take place, they are not guaranteed to be satisfactory, and therefore potentially generate a justification for ceasing usage. As one participant explained, “You are there, swipe profiles, match, and start to talk, but there are people who are so uninteresting, so futile...” (Rute, 29). Francisca (35) gives more detail: “The men I talked to had a simple approach: common compliments and insistence on sex. Not my type.”

These experiences and the feeling that dating apps “Didn’t live up to expectations” ($n = 179$, 51.29 %) justified disconnection. Users’ expectations could be built through how the apps presented themselves, how they were portrayed, or even by the experience of others. Filipa (32) reported her disappointment: “It seemed that wherever I turned, there were only people talking about dating apps. I decided to use it. It was nothing like I imagined. I got disappointed and quickly uninstalled it. I was looking for some magic and I didn’t find it there”. Critics have singled out dating apps as romance destroyers by managing them as a business (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022) while leading to specific practices that impact how dating is experienced.

Users pointed out specific experiences classified as negative ($n = 100$; 28.65 %). These were related to first, users lying, a common occurrence on dating platforms (Sepúlveda, 2023) but one not accepted—as one participant mentioned: “For me, there is nothing worse than someone who lies. It doesn’t matter if he lies on the profile or while texting, for me it had the same importance” (Sara, 36)—and which justifies disconnection due to lack of authenticity (Syvertsen & Eli, 2020). Second, ghosting—the act of cutting off communication for no apparent reason—is a doomed behavior for participants who experience it, “You are talking, and suddenly people disappear. They never get back to you. I can’t justify such an attitude” (Nuno, 26). And third, users are potential targets of fraud; as one participant reported, “He had an interesting conversation. The next thing I knew, he was asking me for money. I immediately realized what the purpose was...” (Susana, 38). Dating scams are not new, leading users to report how they were

victims of fraud and its impact on themselves and their relationship with dating apps (Rege, 2009), highlighting a lack of security.

Altogether, different kinds of experiences and results of usage justify disconnection from dating apps; not all experiences were directly classified as negative, although the consequences of usage dynamics explained why people stepped back from dating apps.

“The app made (didn’t make) me do it!” (Joana, 27)

Dating apps’ features, in various forms, were the second-most prevalent dimension regarding disconnection. Most participants said they “Didn’t like the overall functioning” ($n = 206$; 59.03 %). The operating logic of dating apps has been criticized for treating users and their emotions as commodities (Illouz, 2018) and has been indicated in promoting casual relationships. Marta (45) reported, “I didn’t like how it worked. What I least liked was the principle... The person is there, exposes themselves... I didn’t want to be evaluated based on my physical appearance”. This statement supports other criticisms concerning dating apps: how they objectify users by favoring the image over biographical information (Sepúlveda, 2023).

A large number of the study participants pointed to the “Unclear matching system” ($n = 142$; 40.69 %) as a reason for disconnecting. The matching system results from the action of algorithms, often classified as opaque (Gillespie, 2013), because the platforms do not reveal how suggested user profiles are selected. This lack of clarity stimulates users’ indignation, resulting in frustration and the sense of not being able to control results: “Why were those people presented to me? They had nothing to do with what I was looking for. I didn’t know what to do to make it show me other people. It was super frustrating!” (Filipa, 32). This statement reinforces the need for platforms to be more transparent about how they work, specifically how data suggests profiles to a given user.

The ease with which profiles can be created on some platforms since little information is required is another reason for disconnecting, “Poor profile information” ($n = 86$; 24.64 %). As one participant highlighted: “There

are many fields in the profile that are not mandatory. The result? We know very little about people” (Rui, 42). Another participant revealed, “After a while on Tinder, I left and opted for OkCupid. Then the profiles were much more complete because we had to answer a more extensive questionnaire” (Tiago, 36). This statement illustrates a dynamic in which the individual chooses to disconnect from a specific app but continues to use another one that meets their needs. It also shows the possibility of choice and refers to an ecology where different dating solutions coexist.

Other less common reasons, such as “Chat limitations” ($n = 41$; 11.75 %), “Difficulty in editing the profile” ($n = 21$; 6.02 %), and “Limited search options” ($n = 73$; 20.02 %), referred to difficulties that users came across, which had an impact on their practices and could lead to disconnection. However, users also stated how, in some circumstances, they circumvented them: “The chat was very boring. It was not possible to understand the sequence of messages, to send audios... This is why I always suggest moving to WhatsApp” (Oscar, 30). Another strategy mentioned was, “Since I could only have 6 pictures, the first thing I did was put my Instagram handle in the biography” (Rui, 42). These tactics show how users circumvent the impositions of technologies.

Overall, various aspects regarding dating apps’ functioning justified app disconnection for some users. The functioning can be related to the structure and logic that involves dating apps or to specificities of certain functions: Some are non-mandatory, and others impose certain behaviors.

“It was not being good for me... I felt saturated” (Marta, 45)

Concerns about participants’ well-being were also motivators for disconnection from dating apps. Responses highlighted how “Time consuming” ($n = 121$; 34.67 %) their use could be, as exemplified by one participant: “The next thing I knew, I was clinging to dating apps all night ... I realized that I could be doing other things or spending time with friends” (Francisca, 35). Francisca’s testimonial also points to the will to recover social relationships (Jorge, 2019).

Motives such as “Got tired” ($n = 113$; 32.38 %) and “It negatively affected my self-esteem” ($n = 59$; 16.91 %) reinforce how dating apps’ environments can be hostile (Hetsroni & Tuncez, 2019), resulting in disconnection. Participants identified the possibility of infinite swipes combined with the fact that they did not have results as causes of fatigue: “The profiles never seem to end, and the person is there swiping from one to the other, this combined with not having results led me to exhaustion” (Miguel, 43). It also made them to question their value: “Among so many profiles, I knew I was just one more. I ended up, inevitably, comparing myself with other people, and that made me feel bad...” (Joana, 27). The combination of these factors prompted one participant to state: “All that was too much for me. I got overwhelmed with the process” (Ana, 23).

Altogether, such motives highlight a desire to control the negative effects of dating apps on users’ well-being. Some users believe that they could achieve this by limiting dating app usage.

“I wanted to protect my privacy” (Susana, 38)

Privacy concerns also prompted disconnection from dating apps. The most common concern of the participants was that they “Didn’t want others to see me online” ($n = 61$; 17.48 %). Participants stated that they did not want to expose themselves in such media and be subject to judgments: “What will they think if they see me online? That I’m desperate? That this is my last resort? I preferred to leave and not be subjected to this judgment” (Paulo, 28). Participants even mentioned which people they did not want to know that they were using dating apps—colleagues: “One thing is a friend to see you there, another is someone from work. I don’t want people to get the wrong idea about me” (Sara, 36). Although the number of dating app users continues to grow, there is still a stigma towards it. This stigma then extends from dating apps to their users.

“[I] didn’t want to share my data with the app” ($n = 25$; 7.16 %) was another privacy concern indicated. Data could be that which was required when registering—“I don’t want Badoo to have my email, I don’t want to receive any type of communication” (Sandra, 21)—or that participants

considered more private—“I don’t want to share my name, age or even photographs, I don’t know what they will do with them” (Gonçalo, 31). These arguments reveal not only the users’ will but also their lack of knowledge on how dating app companies collect, use, process, and store data. Although such information is part of the Terms of Service of the apps, it is not sufficient and clear for users, this concern being a motive to disconnect. Additionally, dating apps have been accused of not guaranteeing the security of their users’ data and of sharing private information (Wallace, 2020), which can increase and sustain this mistrust.

Privacy issues come into play from a macro perspective regarding how apps collect, process, and share users’ data, and from a micro perspective in how users’ acquaintances may come to know that they use dating apps.

“Other things were happening in my life, and Tinder stopped making sense” (João, 27)

Dating app usage is contextualized by life events (Sepúlveda & Vieira, 2020); in the same way, its disconnection was also justified by life transitions. The most common argument among participants was, “Started a relationship” ($n = 118$; 33.81 %). To elaborate, interviewees uttered, “I was seeing someone, and for that reason, I deleted my profile” (Miguel, 43) or, “When being in a relationship, it made no sense to continue using dating apps” (Rute, 29). These testimonials suggest the meaning attributed by users to dating apps as well as the purpose of using them.

Another motive for disconnection regarding life transitions was “Stop making sense” ($n = 73$; 20.92 %). When explored in the interviews, participants gave clues about events in their lives that led to app abandonment: “I started using it when I went to study abroad, then I returned to Portugal and turned it off” (Nuno, 26), or pointed to a need that no longer existed: “I used it at a specific moment. I had just broken up. I wanted to have fun. Now that’s not what I’m looking for and that’s why I stopped using it” (Pedro, 22).

Dating apps are added to traditional sites and networks through which we meet other people (e.g., school, workplace, friends, family) rather than

positioning themselves as alternative means (Sepúlveda, 2023). As part of users' everyday life activities, dating apps cannot be isolated from the occurring events. They can have various impacts, causing users to resignify dating apps, what they are for, and when and how to incorporate them, thus being a basis for disconnection.

Conclusion

Drawing on 349 survey responses and 20 interviews, this study offers an overview of online daters' motivations for disconnecting from dating apps. The study reinforces various motives for media disconnection already identified in previous studies (e.g., platform features, privacy concerns, or well-being) but expands knowledge related to dating apps. It shows that disconnection relates to what dating apps represent in users' lives, the attributed meaning, and how they are incorporated into a specific moment. Disconnection from dating apps is also a response by users to what they comprehend of how people should meet and how their dating practices are mediated. In their lives and in a media ecology context, dating apps are seen as a complementary rather than an alternative or exclusive way to meet people.

The aspects that motivate online daters to disconnect from dating apps are fluid, although they often come as a response to their online experiences, highlighting the role that expectations about the services play. Moreover, dating app features and the perception of how usage is conditioned by platform design and rules, not allowing specific dynamics and behaviors, have also motivated some online daters to disconnect.

The gamification features of dating apps are supposed to improve the user experience. However, some specificities of dating app functions (e.g., matching system, chat limitations) are still identified as reasons for disconnection, and the same features that make the use of the app so "addictive" are also the ones that impact the personal well-being of users, also resulting in disconnection. However, the motives for disconnecting from dating apps were not always a consequence of negative experiences or features that limited the experience and, consequently, the results. Sometimes, motives for disconnection resulted from events in the participants' lives,

which could not change their perception of dating apps or not, thus justifying their continued usage. These aspects refer not only to how dating apps are understood by users in the environment in which they are inserted and their impact on dating rituals but also to the importance of life transitions for studying media disconnection. Disconnection from dating apps must not be viewed in isolation from the context of everyday life and activities or disintegrated from other social networks and technologies. These findings imply the importance of the life course and the concept of turning points as factors that contextualize dating app disconnection.

This study is relevant to understanding what dating apps are, what they promise, what they are used for, and how their incorporation into users' lives has particular meanings. To gain a complete picture, understanding the motivations for using dating apps and the motives for disconnecting from them is crucial. More than entertainment or keeping up with friends' activities, dating apps are mainly used for relationship seeking. However, the type of relationship different users seek in the same app may not be aligned, which can add to the disengagement factors, either because of what is being sought after a change or because the user does not find others with the same expectations.

This study shows that dating apps are part of users' dating tools and scenarios. It contributes to the understanding of dating app disconnection by identifying different factors that can lead to it and reinforces the concept that disconnection results from dating apps' appropriation of a given meaning. As the relationship between users and dating apps is dynamic, this dynamism also provides reasons for disconnecting, which may not be exclusive but cumulative and vary over time.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study has limitations that should be taken into consideration. The sample solely focuses on Portuguese users. It would be interesting to have participants from other nationalities. In addition, it would be important to examine the role of gender in the motivations for disconnection. The next step in understanding dating app disconnection would be to analyze the

process of doing so, realizing how it happens, what the associated emotions are, and what users consider they are disconnecting from.

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