



Trans and Gender Diverse People's Dating App Use: Safety and Wellbeing Factsheet

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Prof. Kath Albury
Swinburne University of Technology

Christopher Dietzel
McGill University / Swinburne University of Technology

Tinonee Pym
Swinburne University of Technology

Teddy Cook
ACON

Gabe Curtis
*Thorne Harbour Health - EQUINOX Gender
Diverse Health Service*

Son Vivienne
Transgender Victoria / Thorne Harbour Health

Elle Void
Your Community Health

Notes on Methods and Demographics

This factsheet summarises key findings from a series of qualitative workshops and interviews with 14 trans and gender diverse (TGD) dating app users aged between 18 and 35. Four participants were assigned male at birth, and 10 were assigned female at birth. We use self-nominated sexuality and gender identities throughout. All names used are pseudonyms.

Participants used different terms to describe their gender, including being male, trans-male, non-binary, female, trans woman, genderqueer, non-binary transmasculine, agender and 'not that'. Sexual identities included gay, lesbian, straight, queer, bisexual, and pansexual.

Cultural identities were self-described as Aboriginal/German, Anglo-Australian, Caucasian/Scottish, Caucasian, White/Pākeha, Australian, Maori/Australian, Aboriginal, and 'Mixed as.'

This document draws on data collected in NSW (2018-2019) and Victoria (2020) for the ARC Linkage project *Safety, risk and wellbeing on digital dating apps*. The [Safety, risk and wellbeing on digital dating apps](#) final report (Albury et al., 2019) outlines project methods, demographics and findings in detail.

Apps Used

Tinder was the most used app, followed by Grindr. These apps were often compared and contrasted – four participants characterised Grindr as centred on hook-ups, whereas apps like Tinder were also for finding friends and dating. Max (23, queer, non-binary transmasculine) said:

I've also found that Tinder's been really good for meeting other trans people, just like as a bit of a community if that makes sense. Because it's pretty fucking scary being out as trans in [regional city]. [I try to] minimise the - how obvious it is when I'm out. So being able to meet other trans people on Tinder, to just be friends with them is really good.

Two participants said Grindr felt less emotionally safe than Tinder. They explained that Grindr provided less contextual information about the user, and was thought to be more prescriptive,

due to both profile functionalities and its cultures of use. Morgan (21, queer, genderqueer) said:

[On Grindr] it's very much like what is your body type, how much – how [tall] are you, how much do you weigh, what is your position? Like, it felt there was just a little bit more humanity to Tinder even if you were just going for a hook-up... you sort of know who they are broadly.

Several participants thought that Grindr's infrastructure contributed to a less friendly app culture. One participant had experienced gendered harassment on the app, and described a Grindr hook-up that made them feel used and devalued. Another participant discussed feeling under pressure in Grindr chats, and concern for negotiating safe sex in that environment.

However, Quinn (24, bisexual, male) cited very positive experiences of Grindr as a space where they felt affirmed in their body and identity, and felt that Grindr's functionalities and culture were more trans-friendly than Tinder: 'There's always been a space for me on Grindr... their acceptance of me is their attraction to men and I'm part of that.' Two participants felt that Tinder often showed them profiles of people who seemed straight or not interested in meeting trans people.

Other dating and hook-up apps mentioned by participants included HER, OkCupid, Bumble, and Scruff. Participants also mentioned using other social media platforms for dating/hooking up, including Craigslist, Reddit, FetLife, Instagram, Tumblr, and Discord dating servers.

Feeling Safe on Apps and Meeting Up

Eight participants discussed having felt unsafe or vulnerable to violence or harassment on apps or in meetups, with two commenting that this was underacknowledged by cisgendered friends. Nine participants described encountering app profiles or experiencing chats that were transphobic, biphobic, racist, or discriminatory towards sex workers, and one participant felt app developers should take a stronger stance in counteracting discriminatory attitudes on their platforms.

Participants had a range of strategies for interpreting profile information (screening for stigmatising, fetishising or discriminatory

language), and some preferred taking their time with in-app chats, moving chats to another platform or checking other users' social media before meeting up.

Deceptive users and fake profiles were a concern for nine participants, who discussed strategies for filtering these out by interpreting profile information and photos as well as navigating the chat/messaging process. For one participant, this meant taking time to check whether a user's 'story' was consistent, and meeting only after a week or two of chat. Another participant felt it was suspicious when their own photo sharing wasn't reciprocated in chats.

Social media platforms were an important avenue for establishing trust while dating, although participants used these in different ways. Some felt more secure when they could access their match's social media accounts – for three participants, failure to move app-based chats to other social platforms was considered a red flag. However, four other participants were wary about requests to move to or share other social media too quickly (or at all), and another who did was cautious about their privacy settings when sharing.

Three participants felt that app platforms offering identity verification would help them to feel safe, but recognised the limitations for TGD app users whose appearance may not match the app developer's understandings of 'appropriate' gendered presentation. Blair (23, lesbian, female) suggested it was a problem when app platforms instituted official identity verification for TGD users, as they may not be out, and/or their appearance may alter as they transition. Blair noted, 'A lot of the profiles without faces on it, they probably seem a bit dodgy, [but] a lot of them aren't. I still swipe on some... because I was that person at a point.'

Two participants were also on the alert for 'chasers' – that is, app users (usually cis men) with a highly sexualised and fetishistic attraction to trans people. Avery (24, queer, 'not that') said, 'Anyone who approaches me for being gender non-conforming in any fucking way are usually fetishising that, and straight up that's a fuck no... keep chasers chasing.' Another participant noted that although some users attempt to deter 'chasers' in their profile text (i.e., 'Not your unicorn'), this would have only limited efficacy.

Blair said that although 'chasers' tend to be cis men, she had experienced a date with a cis woman from an app who been 'intense' and lacked boundaries. Quinn spoke positively about a Grindr hook-up with a cis man leading to other hook-ups:

I feel like a lot of gay guys might not be that open to [hooking up with a trans man] but once their friends do it, they'll see it and try it out. I don't know, I enjoy that sort of experimentation and being a part of that.

Three participants mentioned encountering 'predators' or 'predatory' behaviour on apps or social media platforms they used for dating and hook-ups. One participant had experienced assault during a meet-up from an app, and another mentioned their friends' experiences of assault. Another had been catfished by a fake profile (with photos stolen from another user) and recognized this after arranging to meet up. One participant had their own photos stolen and used in a fake profile. None of these participants mentioned reporting these incidents to police.

Safety strategies for meeting in person included screen-shotting profiles beforehand, having a prior arrangement with a friend to call during a bad date, sharing locations with a friend or speaking to bar staff when uncomfortable. One participant also said it would be useful if dating apps provided a panic button (similar to those available on rideshare apps) or an emergency number. Blair suggested apps could do more to improve user literacy regarding 'screening processes and knowing how to safely meet with someone.'

Almost all participants preferred meeting in public, however two participants acknowledged that this was easier in cities, as compared to regional areas where other app users were often discreet (or closeted).

Quinn spoke about using apps 'in a more adventurous way' after moving to a large city while, for another participant, using apps had felt safer when they lived in a smaller city as they could access mutual friends on social media. Two participants said they would never meet in a park, with one saying they wouldn't move to a second location during an initial meet-up unless they were in a populated area. Participants spoke about the tension between protecting their own

safety and taking into account others' situations – for example being asked by a date if they lived alone was described as a potential 'red flag', although it was acknowledged that this may be simply because the person is closeted.

Experiences with cis men on apps were viewed as unsafe in a range of contexts. Three participants reported frequently encountering fake profiles on queer women's apps, or seeing cis men's profiles on mixed-gender apps when the user had elected not to be matched with men at all. Four participants had encounters with cis men on gay and bisexual men's apps that they experienced as pushy, prescriptive, or aggressive.

Three participants discussed concerns about physical safety when meeting up with cis men. Morgan noted, 'I certainly feel more vulnerable as someone who is femme expressing... just because I don't come across as powerful and I feel like that would put me in a more vulnerable situation'. Quinn mentioned a recent suspected murder case profiled in the media that involved a Grindr meetup, saying 'I've always had it in the back of my head that someone will go and do that sort of stuff'.

Disclosing Trans Identity and Educating Others

Two participants felt there was a common assumption among app users that all users were cisgender, placing the onus on TGD people to disclose. Participants discussed the challenges of disclosing trans and non-binary identity on apps, acknowledging that while placing the information upfront in a profile could filter out certain users, it could also render them vulnerable to intrusive questions and fetishisation.

Many also reported encountering transphobia on app user profiles (e.g., 'cis4cis') as well as in chats. Blair spoke about initially using text-based platforms so as to avoid the issue of profile photos:

I didn't want people to associate - because I wasn't out back then, if they saw me on a dating app - to realise that I was presenting as female and that I was trans.

Max had encountered transphobic reactions from cis straight app users, and described switching between gender and sexuality categories regularly on Tinder to avoid straight

people: 'if I'm showing myself as a man I'll only look at the [queer] men, and if I'm showing myself as a woman, I'll only look at the queer women.'

One participant had decided to stop using the app HER as his friends had had encounters with trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) attitudes from users on that platform. However, Sam (23, pansexual, non-binary) reported meeting many TGD people on HER and found it to be a 'much safer space' than Tinder.

Participants adopted a range of approaches in response to cis app-users asking intrusive questions about their bodies and identities (both on apps and after meeting dates in person). Six participants were strongly opposed to answering cis users' questions, feeling they should self-educate. However, one participant was happy to do this as she compared it to her own curiosity about other TGD people's experiences. Another participant specifically avoided in-app chats with other trans users who they felt were seeking information or social support. Two participants said they felt more comfortable with other TGD users.

Three participants discussed preferring cis app profiles that make explicit the user is a trans ally or trans-informed, such as the use of phrases like 'No SWERFs or TERFs'. (SWERF is an acronym for sex worker-exclusionary radical feminist.) Avery commented:

That's a really good one, because that tells you a lot about how much they're listening to people, how much they're having these conversations, how much they give a shit.

Two participants mentioned feeling better about engaging with cis users' profiles that state their cisgender identity.

Developing Confidence, Establishing Boundaries, and Making Connections

Confidence emerged as a common theme among participants, with six using the term when reflecting on shifts in their app use over time. Two participants described earlier periods of app use, where they had lacked boundaries with other users due to feeling unworthy and concerned about rejection. Three had learned to

be on the alert for stigmatising language in profiles, and four for pushy, prescriptive or passive-aggressive behaviour in chats and profiles.

One participant felt that receiving unsolicited 'dick pics' before a chat had been established was a red flag which signalled a lack of regard for boundaries, as he had specified in his profile that he did not want to receive them. Six participants also discussed boundaries in relation to their own attitude to other app users, noting the importance of managing expectations and respecting others' right to change their mind or say no.

Three participants described learning to be more selective in their choices and felt that apps helped them to know themselves better, or to clarify and communicate what they were looking for. One participant discussed the positive

impacts app use had on their mental health and ability to initiate relationships, and another spoke about apps improving their body confidence and developing their queer identity and sexual connections. Eight participants said apps helped them to meet new queer and TGD friends.

Findings relating to TGD app users and sexual health can be found in the companion factsheet *Trans and Gender Diverse People's Dating App Use: Sexual Health Factsheet*.

Reference

Albury, K., Byron, P., McCosker, A., Pym, T., Walshe, J., Race, K., Salon, D., Reeders, D., Wark, T., Botfield, J. & Dietzel, C. (2019). *Safety, Risk and Wellbeing on Dating Apps: Final Report*, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.



Safety, Risk & Wellbeing on Dating Apps

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For inquiries, contact the Lead Chief Investigator Professor Kath Albury: kalbury@swin.edu.au



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