

“Any Questions?” Podcast Transcript

Episode 10 : Swiping While Queer

[Jazzy Instrumental Intro Music]

Dani: Dating today looks a lot different for us than it did a decade or two ago. It’s not how it was for our parents and grandparents where they met by chance encounter or through family and friends. While that may be some of our stories, some of our stories begin with a swipe on an app. We are after all in the digital age. But exactly how inclusive is the dating app scene, especially for the queer community?

Ashlyn: Hi everyone and welcome to this episode of the *Any Questions?* Podcast. I’m Ashlyn, I use she/her pronouns and I am a peer leader from HPWS.

Dani: I’m Dani, I use she/her pronouns and I am a peer leader a part of HPWS.

Ashlyn: Today we will be talking about the queer experience on dating apps and how that differs from the heterosexual or straight experience. (In the context of our podcast, we define “queer” as any individual who does not identify as heterosexual and/or cisgender). To do so, we will first identify the prevalence of heterosexual versus queer individuals on online dating apps, then talk about the brief history and facts, and harm reduction strategies for using dating apps, suggested by the apps themselves. Then, we will talk about how using dating apps as a queer individual can impact wellness.

What is a dating app?

Dani: A dating app is a geosocial-networking app that allows you to create a profile in order to meet or match with others. You might be thinking what the heck is geosocial networking, to put it in simpler terms it’s an app that lets you socialize with others on an online platform based on your location like tinder, grindr, bumble and her.

These apps give you a space to make new friends, find a community, build business partnerships, find love or have sex. Some might say that dating apps find you a world full of opportunities, but that might not always be the case.

Ashlyn: Now let’s talk about heterosexual vs. queer usage of dating apps.

In a study from 2019 conducted by Michael Rosenfeld, Reuben Thomas, and Sonia Hausen from Stanford University and University of New Mexico, they found that in 2017 65% of queer couples had met through dating apps compared to 39% of heterosexual couples. Like our definition of “queer” states, the LGBTQ+ community has a wide array of different identities and lived experiences, and depending on how each person understands queerness for themselves, that may impact the level of inclusivity they experience within these apps.

For example a cis woman who is attracted to other feminine aligned individuals may have an easier experience within these apps compared to a non-binary individual due to the limitations that some dating apps have for selecting your own gender identity or the gender identity of those that you are interested in connecting with.

Dani: Let's examine dating apps Grindr, Tinder, Bumble, and Her to see just how inclusive these apps are for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Ashlyn: First let's talk about Grindr. Grindr was launched in March 2009. The app was at first not welcoming to all gay men of different identities. So many users were met with profiles and messages that spewed racism, transphobia, and fat phobia, so much so that blogger Andrew Londyn wrote a book describing how to "survive" Grindr. Modern day Grindr has self-proclaimed itself to be "...the world's largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people," but in practice, does it live up to its expectations?

When setting up a profile, there is no section where you can indicate your own gender identity and sexual orientation. For example, if I identified as a man and also as bisexual, there would be no setting on the app where I could indicate to others that I am bisexual.

In addition, you can only upload only one profile picture. This could be disadvantageous for some queer individuals who may not feel comfortable posting their face on a queer-centered dating app, as the ability to post more than one picture could allow them to showcase pictures of other aspects of their lives, including activities that they enjoy and places that they like to go.

Dani: Now, let's talk about Tinder. Tinder was initially created in 2012 to introduce a mobile app platform for individuals who were looking to meet people of the opposite sex, as a response to the rise of Grindr. The app was created to mimic a high tech version of the game hot or not, with a swipe like interface like a deck of cards. Even if you don't match with a person, the creators' hope is that at least the user leaves with an enjoyable experience.

In an effort to broaden their reach into the queer community, Tinder began creating a more inclusive platform in 2016, nearly four years later from the year it was created. They rolled out the option to expand upon users' gender identities. Instead of just man and woman they included the option of selecting "more" and then in that selection were the options of "trans" "transwoman" "transman" and "transgender."

As of 2019 Tinder members were allowed to establish their sexual orientation on the app, allowing its members to choose up to three orientations they best feel represent themselves and their experiences. You also have the option to display personal sexual orientation on your profile. Within the discovery setting, users are able to choose their potential partners' gender preference as well as the option to have people of the same orientation be shown to you first.

In 2019, Tinder even announced a new safety feature that is meant to protect LGBTQ+ users in countries with discriminatory laws. So, when a queer user opens the app in one of these countries, a Traveler Alert will appear, warning them about the risks they may face in their current location. Queer users will also no longer automatically appear on the dating app when in these regions.

Ashlyn: Next, let's talk about Bumble. Created in 2014 by one of the co-founders of Tinder, Whitney Wolfe-Herd, Bumble's entire premise is to mitigate some sexual harassment that can occur within dating apps by requiring girls to message guys they match with first within 24 hours or the match goes away. But this is completely ignored when it is a same-gender match, anyone can message first. I think it's important to note that queer matching has always been available

on Bumble, just they miss out on the primary function of the dating app, making it seem like any other dating app.

Bumble has a lot of different options for their profile, including height, star sign, political views, how much you drink/smoke, etc. and at first I thought their app was going to be incredibly inclusive for transgender folks, the app has 80 different gender options to choose from. With further digging though, Bumble only gives three options for people to choose whose feed they pop up on, they can pop up on people who want to find women, who want to find men, or are interested in everyone. With no specific option to be interested in non-binary folks. So a person who may not conform to the gender binary has to pick based on the binary how they are classified within the app. Maybe someone wants to match with women and nonbinary individuals, but do not want to match with men, this is not an explicit option on Bumble. You only get 3. Even with 80 labels, this algorithm does not seem the most inclusive to anyone who is not cisgender.

After you set up your profile, the app becomes very reminiscent of tinder, which makes sense since the cofounder of tinder made this app too. So you can see other people's profiles and swipe left or right based on if you want to match or not.

Dani: After hearing about all these apps you are probably thinking where's the dating app for queer women??? Well I'll tell you. WEAREHER was established by Robyn Exton in 2013. The intended purpose was to create a unique space for queer women. This app is extremely similar to the apps we have already talked about. You create a profile, swipe left or right, and potentially meet your match where it's romantic or platonic.

There isn't a lot of information on this app even when you go onto the website you can only find slight overviews of the purpose of the app. There's a monthly subscription. WHO SAID YOU COULDN'T BUY LOVE. 1 month is \$14.99, 6 months is 71.99, and 12 months is \$89.99.

There are both pros and cons to the app. First, the dating app provides a space for Queer women and can reduce the level of uncertainty when finding other women. The app also provides events that facilitate courtship and friendships. However, the dating app can get expensive for upgrading in features such as seeing who likes your post, filter by sexuality, and seeing who's online. In addition, it leaves out non binary folks. The app is literally called HER, which is an identification for feminine aligning folks. How can non binary folks feel a sense of community when the app itself is a gender conforming term?

When setting up a profile, it has a wide variety of items for identification including name, birthday, profile picture, friending, swiping, matching, location, pride pins including Andro, Butch, Femme, Dyke, and Stud, Transpride, Drinking, Political views, Religion, Diet, Star sign, Family preferences, and Pets.

Ashlyn: Next, we will be examining the harm reduction-based suggestions offered by the apps that are meant to provide these users with fulfillment in their experiences.

Dani: But first, what exactly is harm reduction?

Ashlyn: Harm reduction is “a set of practical strategies intended to reduce the negative consequences of high risk behaviors such as alcohol or drug use”. In this case, using dating apps. Harm reduction does NOT equal harm elimination, but this approach does not have to center abstinence as the end goal.

First of all, we would like to emphasize that these are just suggestions that we are providing. By no means do you or people you know have to follow these suggestions, but we are providing them if in case some of these strategies may be helpful for you or a friend. Additionally, these are not our own suggestions, rather they are suggestions from the websites of the apps that we did research on. If you would like to learn more about harm reduction based-strategies that they offer in addition to what we discuss in this episode, please feel free to visit their websites.

Dani: What a lot of these apps share is the suggestion of meeting through a virtual platform before meeting in person. These apps want to make sure that the interactions you are having are positive and with a real human. Bumble in specific has a video chat feature that users can use to meet before meeting in person. We know that not all of these apps have a built in video chat function so other platforms can be FaceTime, Skype, Zoom, Google Chat, WhatsApp, video chats on the apps, etc.

Next, these apps acknowledge that meeting a stranger can feel very unsafe, so they recommend meeting dates in public places for example a well transited park, a restaurant or other public area. Also, sometimes it could even be worth considering telling a third party about your upcoming meeting. Letting someone know where you are and who you are expecting could help.

It can also be incredibly important to get tested for STIs and knowing your HIV/STI status so you can have informed conversations with your partner(s) if you are engaging in a sexual relationship through these apps. Informed consent is important to making sure all of the individuals involved in the sexual activity know all of the risks of the interactions and can come up with steps to help make sex safer, like using condoms, dental dams, and other safer sex tools (many of which are offered for FREE at UHC).

Finally, do not share personal information on your profile, like your home address, phone number, and the college at which you study (if applicable). In addition, if you feel that being seen on a dating app by someone you know could be potentially harmful to your physical safety, you can post profile pictures without your face in them and without any other identifiable features, including tattoos and home furniture.

Now that we know all of this, what does this mean for queer individuals using dating apps, and how could these factors potentially impact their wellness?

Ashlyn: When thinking about the harm reduction strategies we found, it made us realize how much easier taking these steps may be for straight people. For example, queer folks may not live in a space where they can openly go on a video chat date with someone of the same gender. They may not be in a place to be openly out to their family or roommates. This can make it harder for them to ensure the person they matched with is not a catfish and that they person they matched with is a safe match.

If an individual lives in a community where they know a lot of people but are not necessarily “out” to these people as a means of protection or safety, meeting in public places in that community might not be an option.

LGBTQ+ folks are also much more likely to be harassed within dating apps compared to straight individuals. According to Pew Research Center, queer folks have experienced being sent unwanted sexually explicit photos, continued messaging after expressing their disinterest, being called offensive and discriminatory names, and threatened with physical harm at higher rates than their straight counterparts. I have also heard of many feminine aligned individuals looking for a feminine aligned partner experiencing different gender couples pop up on their feeds “looking for a third”, making it harder for lesbian women to find genuine matches and connections within these apps. However, this is not a bad thing to search for in itself. Overall, this can severely affect an individual’s emotional and social wellness, if they are trying to form genuine connections within these apps and they are met with undesired interactions.

Dani: In this time where connection through digital interfaces is more important than ever, we recognize that in some aspects dating apps can fall short, especially when using while queer. But for some people, straight or queer, dating apps can be the catalyst for a positive experience. In the end it’s all about creating connections, finding community and finding what works for you, whether it be through an app or in other spaces. We know that some individuals are looking for community on these dating apps. We want to make sure that students at UMD know that there are alternatives to dating apps. We want to plug some of our amazing resources here on campus. We thank you for listening to this episode of Any Questions? And don’t forget to tune in to the next episode on...Body neutrality!

We would also like to leave you all with some resources before you go. First, MICA. MICA is an organization on the University of Maryland’s campus that centers on being an inclusive space for all students of all identities and does identity-centered programming and community building for students within marginalized identity groups, like Latinx, AAPI, LGBTQ+, Interfaith, etc. The MICA philosophy is “We support all students at the University of Maryland. Our work is important and provides opportunities and spaces that affirm students and their identities, build inclusive them at communities among diverse members, and create social change locally, nationally and globally.”

Next, the Equity Center. “The LGBT Equity Center provides the campus with leadership and expertise in building a fully equitable community; strengthens and supports people of diverse sexes, gender identities or expressions, and sexual orientations; and develops visible and vibrant LGBTQ+ campus communities.” As a part of the LGBT Equity Center you are connected with an array of opportunities involving leadership, community building and resources such as support groups. The equity center is inclusive of all LGBTQ+ students, however it was designed for students who fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. The Center provides a full list of liaisons, resources for Trans Policies and Campus resources and guides.

Finally, the UMD Health Center is also a great resource that can be utilized by LGBTQ+ students on campus. Some of the services provided include free STI events throughout the semester, free contraceptives such as condoms, lube and dental dam, as well as other supplies. The Health Center also offers a service called CARE, which is a resource for students impacted by sexual assault, dating or domestic violence. To get more info about MICA, the Equity Center,

and the health center, please be sure to get the links within our description for this episode of Any Questions

[Jazzy Instrumental Outro Music]