<u>Love & Data</u>

You're single and alone on your couch in August 2020. You made it through 90 days of lock down and a summer sitting at least six feet from your friends in parks and restaurant patios. You barely remember the last day you hadn't worn sweat or yoga pants for most of the day. Restaurants and bars near you only seat groups of less than eight people, and you still have to wear a mask in public.

You have never been more ready to mingle. You want to meet new people and preferably before the long, cold winter only further isolates you. You jump into the app store and download the dating app of your choice, fill out a survey, consent to some terms, upload a few pictures, and boom! You are chatting to an available hottie within three miles.

Dating apps, like Bumble, Hinge, and Grindr, are increasingly the preferred method for establishing romantic connections. The calamity that was 2020 is expected push that trend even further as more traditional methods of courtship and flirtation were limited under public health restrictions.[1] Dating apps provide an opportunity to meet and interact with new people without an immediate risk of COVID. But what exactly are users providing in exchange for their romantic opportunities?

Dating apps rely on algorithms to match prospective partners.[2] For these algorithms to predict compatibility or to provide any consistently reliable connections, they will need personal information about the users, i.e. not just their age and height but also their political and religious affiliations, drug use, sexual orientation, and family plans.[3] The apps will also likely request similar information about their preferences in romantic partners. Because most apps will also offer matches within a certain distance, the application will ask for user's geographic information. To allure potential matches to engage with a new user after the algorithm predicts a match, the apps will likely suggest users put their best face forward and recommend they post a number of their best photos and stories of themselves to encourage matches to engage.

Before a user's first swipe, the app has collected a treasure trove of information that it can store and, more importantly, share.[4] Last year the Norwegian Consumer Council found that Grindr, the world's most popular gay dating app, was releasing user codes and information to other companies and essentially sharing the sexual orientation of its users.[5] The same report found that a popular dating website, OkCupid, also shared personal information of users, including drug use.[6] Information collection may end not, however, after users set up their account. Most apps will push for users to chat and meet with their matches, they are dating apps after all, but may also be store the interactions between matches.[7]

Unfortunately, no uniform national laws or regulations control the terms by which dating apps may store and share the information they need to operate in the United

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[1] https://www.oprahmag.com/life/relationships-love/a28726299/best-online-dating-apps/
[2] See https://www.natlawreview.com/article/privacy-tip-222-dating-app-privacy-secret
[3] *Id.*
[4] *Id.*
[5] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/13/technology/grindr-apps-dating-data-tracking.html
[6] *Id.*
[7] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/26/tinder-personal-data-dating-app-messages-hacked-sold

States or guarantee the security of that information.[8] Requirements under state law vary from state to state, and only California grants residents the right to access and delete any personal information a business, like a dating app, collects.[9]

Online daters should closely read the privacy and information sharing policies their dating app maintains. Without consistent, uniform guidelines and monitoring of information storage and sharing, users should assume any information they provide can be shared, may be vulnerable, and may someday be released into the public domain. Online dating may be the best way to match during a pandemic, but users should think carefully about the data they provide to ensure their personal information, photos, and videos are not making more connections than they are.

--A.J. Johnson

Dating apps are a popular and safe way for singles to meet during a pandemic but require large amounts of personal information to generate meaningful connections. The laws regulating the storage and use of that data in the United States vary from state to state, so online dating app users should carefully consider the information and interactions they post on the apps.

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[8] https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2020/11/20/this-cuffing-season-its-time-to-consider-the-privacy-of-dating-apps/
[9] *Id.*