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Dating during COVID-19: Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown and social distancing restrictions have produced an increase in the use of dating apps – often as a means of social connection, rather than seeking partnership. New practices of dating, including ‘walking dates,’ have also emerged, while lockdown’s impacts on intimate relationships have provoked resistance from some corners.

Theme

Mobility Events

Keywords

Intimacy, dating, resistance, freedom, pandemic, Australia, New Zealand

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In many parts of the world, governmental restrictions introduced to manage outbreaks of COVID-19 have had wide-reaching impacts on our ability to see, touch and spend time with each other. This entry will explore how residents of Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand have navigated their most intimate interactions over this time. Research in both countries reveals their populations have exhibited an overwhelming willingness to comply with governmental directives.² Even so, the impacts on intimate interactions have, in some instances, been met with community resistance – pointing to intimacy’s emotive significance and to broader concerns regarding the government’s unprecedented reach into private life. Regardless, many individuals have learned to “adjust”³ to restrictions on their mobility, which in some cases have led to adaptations of dating practices.

Governmental restrictions on intimate mobilities and interactions

Lockdown and social distancing measures have influenced the ways in which we meet romantic partners and navigate intimate relationships. In the early months of the pandemic, authorities in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand identified dating as a minefield of potential breaches of lockdown restrictions. Some went so far as to provide advice on safely and responsibly navigating intimacy under lockdown. In Australia, Queensland’s state government published guidelines for dating during lockdown, reminding couples that they could not see each other if they did not live together, and providing ideas for partners to stay connected while physically separated.⁴ Over the Tasman, when national restrictions were eased to Alert Level 2 in May, Aotearoa-New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern advised the country to “play it safe” and avoid meeting with strangers for dates.⁵ The National Health Coordination Centre, however, provided conflicting advice, suggesting that dating was permissible, so long as key health rules were followed, such as staying home if sick, and washing hands regularly.⁶ While governmental restrictions in both countries have been repeatedly justified on public health grounds, authorities have remained cognisant of their disruptiveness to ordinary mobility, and interference to intimacy.

Legal ramifications

This interference might seem unprecedented: most Australians and New Zealanders have certainly never faced such restrictions on their mobility, nor such disruptions to their intimate and family lives. Rights to freedom of movement – including to move freely within a country – and to family life, free

² Seale, Holly, Anita E Heywood, Julie Leask, Meru Sheel, Susan Thomas, David N Durrheim, Katarzyna Bolsewicz and Rajneesh Kaur. 2020. COVID-19 is rapidly changing: Examining public perceptions and behaviors in response to this evolving pandemic. *PLoS ONE*. 23 June 2020. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0235112>. Last accessed 22 December 2020;

Thaker, Jagadish and Vishnu Menon. 2020. Aotearoa-New Zealand Public Responses to COVID-19. Massey University. Available online at: https://mro.massey.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10179/15576/Aotearoa-New%20Zealand%20Public%20Responses%20to%20COVID-19_JT.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y. Last accessed 4 May 2021.

³ Author’s interview notes, ‘Kajal’, 5 September 2020.

⁴ Queensland Government. 2020. Love in the time of coronavirus (COVID-19). *Queensland Health*. 5 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/news-events/news/love-sex-date-coronavirus-covid-19-queensland-restrictions-safety>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

⁵ Downes, Siobhan. 2020. Is Tinder ok under Covid-19 alert level 2? PM’s dating advice differs from ministry’s’. *Stuff NZ*. 8 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/love-sex/300008555/is-tinder-ok-under-covid19-alert-level-2-pms-dating-advice-differs-from-ministry>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

from the interference of others, are further protected under international law.⁷ International legal instruments, however, acknowledge that many of these rights may be suspended at times of public emergency, which, many agree, applies during a pandemic.⁸ Moreover, both Australians and New Zealanders have appeared generally willing to comply with the restrictions imposed by their governments, in the interests of public health and safety.⁹ In addition, the liberal tradition has long allowed some governmental interference within the private sphere; legal scholar Frances Olsen highlights that some interference is generally deemed acceptable under the “protective intervention argument”, where it is seen as necessary for the protection, for instance, of abused children or women.¹⁰ During a pandemic, some interference in the private sphere may – under certain conditions¹¹ – again be justified in the interests of public health.

Community resistance

Even so, at several points during the pandemic, governmental restrictions on mobility have been met with resistance from the general public, especially with regards to their disruptiveness to intimacy. In late March 2020, the Victorian government announced that partners who did not live together would not be able to visit each other for social reasons under lockdown. The announcement was met by a public outcry; at the same time, wider concerns were also being raised regarding the government’s unprecedented – and unchecked – legislative reach.¹² The Victorian restrictions were seen as a step too far; an unwelcome and dangerous intrusion into the governance of the populace’s intimate lives. In an environment of broader anxiety over increasing police powers, activists and community groups raised concerns regarding the rule’s potential for discrimination against social groups who are already disproportionately criminalised. The rule was reversed the following day, when the state’s Chief Health Officer announced on Twitter that the government’s intention was not to penalise couples, and that partners visiting each other would be exempted from lockdown restrictions. Despite the public’s general compliance with the governmental restrictions, the Victorian example points to the community’s unease with the state’s reach into intimate life, by virtue of its restrictions on mobility.

‘Liquid love’ or emotional need? Swiping through COVID-19

Individuals in both countries have continued to date during the pandemic, adapting their practices to accommodate whatever mobility is permitted under the restrictions. Since March 2020, the use of dating apps has markedly increased around the world, including in Australia and Aotearoa-New

⁷ Article 4, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

⁸ Rusinova, Nadia. 2020. COVID-19 and the Right to Respect for Family Life under Article 8 ECHR. *The European Association of Private International Law*. 1 June 2020. Available online at: <https://eapil.org/2020/06/01/the-interplay-between-covid-19-and-the-right-to-respect-for-family-life-under-article-8-echr/>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

⁹ Seale et al. 2020; Thaker et al. 2020.

¹⁰ Olsen, Frances. 1985. The Myth of State Intervention in the Family. *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 18(4): 835-864.

¹¹ Australian Human Rights Commission. 2020. *Where is the line on COVID-19 emergency measures?* 28 October 2020 Available online at: <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/covid19-and-human-rights/where-line-covid-19-emergency-measures>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹² Taylor, Lenore. 2020. Coronavirus will force Australia to make diabolical decisions – we must choose with care. *The Guardian*. 10 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/australia-coronavirus-diabolical-decisions-choose-with-care>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

Zealand.¹³ Still, these figures should perhaps be approached with caution: this increase in use has not necessarily correlated with an increase in dating. Despite using dating apps through most of the pandemic, 27-year-old Sydney resident Kajal told the author she did not go on any dates during the initial weeks of the New South Wales (NSW) lockdown. While she could see many individuals logged into dating apps during this time, she is unsure whether they were serious about going on dates, and suggests many may have simply been passing time online, without meeting their matches. She herself admits to downloading several dating apps during the lockdown period to combat her boredom at being “home all the time”.¹⁴ During lockdown, Kajal even found that her text conversations with matches would last about two to three weeks, compared to the five- to seven-day conversations she had prior to March.¹⁵ 28-year-old Lisa, who lives in western NSW, had a similar experience. While she spent more time on dating apps during the lockdown period, and over the months of social distancing that followed, she did not go on many dates over this time. Like Kajal, Lisa also found herself engaging in lengthy conversations with prospective dates. While she once generally chatted to matches for one or two weeks before meeting with them or moving on to others, after March, she found herself speaking to prospective dates for several months, without ever meeting with them.¹⁶

The author suggests Kajal’s and Lisa’s perceptions of dating apps prior to and during the pandemic point to the idea of ‘liquid love’.¹⁷ According to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, online dating has become a form of entertainment, reflecting the influences of individualisation and social change on romantic relationships and family structures.¹⁸ Kajal, for example, found the length of her conversations with prospective dates “extremely annoying”, and quickly lost interest in speaking with or meeting matches. In contrast, Lisa enjoyed having extended text conversations, but admits that she felt as though she was “wasting...time” by speaking to people she knew she would never meet.

Still, Lisa’s experiences of dating apps during the pandemic also illustrate that they in fact fulfilled some deeper emotional need: engaging in long conversations with matches provided her with a “false sense of security”,¹⁹ at a time when she was unable to see many people in person. After the lockdown ended, she finds that she no longer feels the need to date, or even chat to matches on her phone, as she can freely travel to Sydney to see her friends and family, which more effectively meets her need for intimacy. Lisa’s experience perhaps counters Bauman’s thesis of ‘liquification’²⁰: in the absence of her family and friends, Lisa turned to dating apps to forge a sense of connection in a time of relative isolation. Researchers Hobbs et al. have previously remarked on the ‘pessimism’ of many

¹³ Findlay, James. 2020. Why the pandemic could be the ‘ultimate’ time for singles to meet. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 31 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/why-the-pandemic-could-be-the-ultimate-time-for-singles-to-meet-20200325-p54dut.html>. Last accessed 22 December 2020;

Portolan, Lisa. 2020. The safest sex you’ll never have: how coronavirus is changing online dating. *The Conversation*. 31 March 2020. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/the-safest-sex-youll-never-have-how-coronavirus-is-changing-online-dating-134382>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹⁴ Author’s interview notes, ‘Kajal’, 5 September 2020.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Author’s interview notes, ‘Lisa’, 15 September 2020.

¹⁷ Bauman, Zygmunt. 2003. *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*. Cambridge: Polity Press in Hobbs, Mitchell, Stephen Owen and Livia Gerber, 2017. Liquid love? Dating apps, sex, relationships and the digital transformation of intimacy. *Journal of Sociology* 53(2): 282. Available online at: <https://eclass.uoa.gr/modules/document/file.php/MEDIA310/Hobbs-Owen-Gerber-Liquid%20love.pdf>. Last accessed 4 May 2021.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Author’s interview notes, ‘Lisa’, 15 September 2020.

²⁰ Bauman 2003 in Hobbs et al. 2017

perspectives on dating practices, instead suggesting “dating apps provide a ‘network of intimacy’... These networks of romantic possibility enhance a person’s capacity to find a partner with whom to build a mutually fulfilling relationship”.²¹ Here, these “network[s] of romantic possibility”²² have perhaps meaningfully fulfilled individuals’ emotional needs at a particularly isolating time²³ – even in the absence of any intention to meet in person.

Adaptations of practice: the rise of the ‘walking date’

Although many of us have dated during the pandemic, the activities we have engaged in are likely to have changed. Some of these adaptations are well-documented: across the world, pub, coffee and dinner dates have been replaced by extended text exchanges, Zoom hang-outs and long walks outside.²⁴ Both Kajal and Lisa have trialled ‘walking dates’, which, they explain, allowed them to meet with matches even while respecting lockdown restrictions (during April, NSW lockdown rules allowed up to two people from different households to meet outside for exercise). Kajal explains that while the pandemic was initially a “shock to the system”, “people are now adjusting” to the governmental restrictions and adapting their behaviour accordingly. She explains that while walking is not her preferred means of meeting potential partners, as it is difficult to hold a conversation or make eye contact while walking side-by-side, she concedes that she enjoyed doing something other than meeting in a bar, as she usually would have done before March 2020, and says she will continue to organise walking dates after the pandemic’s end.²⁵ Similarly, Lisa enjoyed doing “something different” on her walking dates, and would consider continuing them, even when they are no longer necessary.²⁶

While restrictions on intimate mobilities have necessitated certain adaptations to dating practices, these modified practices may well last into the future. These examples perhaps point to the community’s overall willingness to comply: where dating is concerned, the Oceanic response to lockdown and social distancing restrictions appears to be largely one of adjustment, rather than resistance.

²¹ Hobbs et al. 2017

²² Ibid

²³ New Zealand during the COVID-19 lockdown: A cross-sectional study. *PLoS One*. 4 November 2020. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0241658>. Last accessed 22 December 2020;

Every-Palmer, Susanna, Matthew Jenkins, Philip Gendall, Janet Hoek, Ben Beaglehole, Caroline Bell, Jonathan Williman, Charlene Rapsey and James Stanley. 2020. Psychological distress, anxiety, family violence, suicidality, and wellbeing in New Zealand during the COVID-19 lockdown: A cross-sectional study. *PLoS One*. 4 November 2020. Available online at: [10.1371/journal.pone.0241658](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0241658). Last accessed 22 December 2020;

Smith, Ben J and Michelle H Lim. 2020. *How the COVID-19 pandemic is focusing attention on loneliness and social isolation*. Public Health Research & Practice. 30(2). Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.17061/phrp3022008>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

²⁴ Rubin, Courtney. 2020. The New Rules of Dating. *The New York Times*. 18 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/18/at-home/coronavirus-pandemic-dating.html>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

²⁵ Author’s interview notes, ‘Kajal’, 5 September 2020.

²⁶ Author’s interview notes, ‘Lisa’, 15 September 2020.