

Representations of Dating Apps For Users Living In The State Of São Paulo, Brazil

Representações de Aplicativos de Paquera para Usuários do Estado de São Paulo, Brasil

Representaciones de Aplicaciones de Citas para Usuarios del Estado de San Pablo, Brasil

Représentations des Applications de Rencontre pour les Utilisateurs Habitants dans L'état de São Paulo, Brasil

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Antônio Carlos de Barros Júnior

Psychoanalyst, PhD and Master in Social Psychology from the University of Sao Paulo (USP), Brazil. Affiliated to the Brazilian Institute of Winnicottian Psychoanalysis (IBPW). Research here in question carried out within the Institute of Human Sciences, Paulista University (Unip), Brazil.

Larissa Maria de Castro Alves

Specialization in Analytical Psychology (PUC-SP) (in progress). Graduated in Psychology from the Institute of Human Sciences, Paulista University, Sao Paulo, Brazil

Andrea Siomara de Siqueira

Master in Social Psychology from the Institute of Psychology of the University of Sao Paulo (USP). Adjunct Professor at the Municipal Faculty Professor Franco Montoro, Mogi Guaçu, Brazil

Mário Amore Cecchini

Doctoral candidate in Psychology at the University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom. Master in Sciences from the Department of Neurology of the Faculty of Medicine of Sao Paulo University (USP). Professor at Paulista University (Unip).

Abstract

The objective of this study was to investigate representations of dating apps for Brazilian users living in the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and also differences in those representations regarding sex, sexual orientation and age. Methodology was quantitative and qualitative. Instrument used for data collection was an online questionnaire, and data processed through content analysis (Bardin) of open question and statistical analysis (SPSS v.20 and Minitab 16) of closed multiple-choice questions. Spontaneous responses brought up representations linked to unspecified relationships, feelings of discomfort or suffering, and practicality. Most prevalent closed-question representations were practicality, getting initial information before meeting people and searching for a stable love relationship. Establishing a long-term relationship was more prevalent in women and heterosexuals in general; aiming for sex was more prevalent in men and homosexuals, and living veiled experiences that cannot be openly experienced in face-to-face life was more prevalent in homosexuals. There were little statistically significant differences related to age. Despite changes in contemporary love relationships, traditional social representations are still in place: linked to the search for an ideal partner (women) and for sex and a transgressive *jouissance* (men). Apps reflect search for practicality and utilitarianism of postmodern capitalism in large cities, but also fun and pastime.

Keywords: dating apps, relationship apps, virtual relationships, social representations, psychology.

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo foi investigar representações de aplicativos de paquera para usuários brasileiros residentes no estado de São Paulo, Brasil, assim como diferenças nas representações quanto a sexo, orientação sexual e idade. A metodologia utilizada foi quantitativa e

qualitativa. O instrumento utilizado para a coleta de dados foi um questionário on-line, além de análise de conteúdo (Bardin) para questões abertas e análises estatísticas (SPSS v.20 e Minitab 16) para questões fechadas de múltipla escolha. O estudo contou com 120 participantes. Respostas espontâneas trouxeram representações ligadas a relacionamentos não especificados, a sentimentos de desconforto/de sofrimento, e a praticidade. Representações de perguntas fechadas mais prevalentes deram-se por: praticidade, obtenção de informações iniciais antes de um encontro e busca por relacionamento amoroso. Esta última foi mais prevalente em mulheres e heterossexuais em geral, a busca por sexo foi mais prevalente em homens e homossexuais, e viver experiências “veladas”, que não podem ser vivenciadas abertamente, foi mais prevalente em homossexuais. Houve pouca diferença estatisticamente significativa em relação à idade. Apesar das mudanças nas relações amorosas contemporâneas, representações sociais tradicionais continuam vigentes: vinculadas à busca por um parceiro ideal (mulheres) e por sexo e gozo transgressor (homens). Os aplicativos refletem busca por praticidade e utilitarismo do capitalismo pós-moderno, nos grandes centros, além de diversão e passatempo.

Palavras-chave: aplicativos de paquera, aplicativos de relacionamento, relacionamento virtual, representações sociais, psicologia.

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar las representaciones de las aplicaciones de citas para usuarios brasileños que residen en el estado de San Pablo, Brasil, y también diferencias en estas representaciones con respecto al sexo, la orientación sexual y la edad. La metodología tuvo enfoques cuantitativo y cualitativo. El instrumento utilizado para la recolección de datos fue un cuestionario en línea, y ellos fueran tratados mediante análisis de contenido (Bardin) para preguntas abiertas y análisis estadístico (SPSS v.20 y Minitab 16) para preguntas cerradas de opción múltiple. Las respuestas espontáneas trajeron representaciones vinculadas a relaciones no especificadas, sentimientos de incomodidad o sufrimiento, y practicidad. Las representaciones de pregunta cerrada más prevalentes fueron la practicidad, obtener información inicial antes de conocer gente y buscar una relación amorosa estable. Establecer una relación a largo plazo fue más frecuente en mujeres y heterossexuales en general, buscar sexo fue más frecuente en hombres y homosexuales, y vivir experiencias veladas que no se pueden experimentar abiertamente fue más frecuente en homosexuales. Hubo pocas diferencias estadísticamente significativas relacionadas con la edad. A pesar de los cambios en las relaciones amorosas contemporâneas, representaciones sociales tradicionales siguen vigentes: vinculadas a la búsqueda de una pareja ideal (mujeres) y al sexo y goce transgresor (hombres). Las aplicaciones reflejan la búsqueda de la practicidad y el utilitarismo del capitalismo posmoderno en las grandes ciudades, pero también la diversión y el pasatiempo.

Palabras clave: aplicaciones de citas, aplicaciones de relaciones, relación virtual, representaciones sociales, psicología.

Résumé

L'objectif de cette étude était d'étudier les représentations des applications de rencontres pour les utilisateurs Brésiliens habitants dans l'État de Sao Paulo, au Brésil, et les différences de ces représentations concernant le sexe, l'orientation sexuelle et l'âge. La méthode a été quantitative et qualitative. L'instrument utilisé pour la collecte des données était un questionnaire en ligne, et elles ont été traitées par une analyse de contenu (Bardin) de questions ouvertes et des analyses statistiques (SPSS v.20 et Minitab 16) de questions fermées à choix multiples. Les réponses spontanées évoquent des représentations liées à des relations indéterminées, des sentiments d'inconfort ou de souffrance, et des aspects pratiques. Les représentations de question fermée les plus prédominantes étaient l'aspect pratique, l'obtention d'informations initiales avant de rencontrer quelqu'un et la recherche d'une relation amoureuse. Cette-ci était plus fréquent chez les femmes et les hétérosexuels en général, viser le sexe était plus prédominant chez les hommes et les homosexuels, et vivre des expériences voilées qui ne peuvent pas être vécues ouvertement était plus répandu chez les homosexuels. Il y avait peu de différences statistiquement significatives liées à l'âge. Malgré l'évolution des relations amoureuses contemporaines, les représentations sociales traditionnelles sont toujours en place : liées à la recherche d'un partenaire idéal (femmes) et au sexe et à la jouissance transgressive (hommes). Les applications reflètent la recherche de praticité et d'utilitarisme du capitalisme postmoderne dans les grandes villes, mais aussi le divertissement et le passe-temps.

Mots-clés: applications de rencontres, applications de rapport, relation virtuelle, représentations sociales, psychologie.

Since the 1990s, dating sites and chat rooms became popular. The arrival of applications (apps), a little later, has contributed to increasing ease of use, mobility of access and convenience of looking for human company. A survey representing the population of United States of America (USA) (Rosenfeld et al., 2019) showed that 39% of heterosexual couples have met online (it was 2% in 1995 and 22% in 2009), with estimations suggesting that, in 2050, 86% of people aged 35-65 will have looked online for

love in the United Kingdom (eHarmony Editorial Team, 2017). As more and more people use dating apps to meet others, it is possible to say they constitute an important aspect of modern life. Therefore, it is important to reflect on how people use these apps and why they do it. Until the present moment, few studies related to dating apps have been carried out in Brazil, and no study including a Brazilian sample has verified their representations considering possible differences between sex, sexual orientation and age group. Thus, the objectives of this research were to investigate representations of dating apps for Brazilian users living in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, and also differences in those representations regarding sex, sexual orientation and age.

Liquid modernity in dating apps

Love relationships in Brazil were discussed by Santos (2016), who pointed out two major phases: until the end of the 19th century and from the 20th century onwards. In the first phase, women were always dominated by brute or social force with imposed rules or ideologies that encouraged them to seek the ideal partner to form a family in pre-established patterns. The second phase was marked by major social changes, which contributed to getting to where we are nowadays. Santos (2016) stated that, between the 1960s and 1980s, Brazilian sexual morality became more flexible: greater social acceptance of unmarried couples, the search for pleasure and freedom and the feminist movement were part of this scenario. The achievements of women were remarkable and evidenced the expansion of women's personal and financial autonomy. In the 1990s, dating and sex became more socially accepted. In the meantime, the internet began to gain space as an enabler of relationships. With the apps arrival, the scenario has become more dynamic, as they combine real-time interaction, easy user experience and mobile access, resulting in convenience when searching for dates.

This is aligned with Bauman's statement (2003) about our living in a liquid, consumerist and individualized modernity, which, on the other hand, contributes to some difficulty in affective relationships today. The author argued that people look for products ready for immediate use, intense pleasure and instant satisfaction. As these characteristics became more and more common, technological advances allow many people to seek what Bauman (2003) called "pocket relationships": convenient ones, which are always available to be used, kept at any moment and even discarded so that a new bond can be accommodated. This is in line with the idea that emotions have become a commodity (Illouz, 2019), that is, something to be produced and consumed (Zapata et al., 2021).

However, it must be considered that lasting stable relationships are still valued in our society. For Santos (2015), traditional values in relation to women and marriage are still rooted in Brazilian culture, even if there is perhaps an ongoing transformation. Amorous social relationships in post-modernity come to be constituted, above all, as a means of fruition for subjects. In psychoanalytic terms, such enjoyment often goes beyond pleasure, which is mostly associated with the subject himself. The "beyond pleasure" refers to a dimension of *jouissance* in relation to the other, in the Lacanian sense of the term – a sensation that implies something associated with a transgression of the law, of the norm, by defiance or submission, for example (Roudinesco & Plon, 2006). For Lacan (2014), precisely, *jouissance* is the experience of satisfaction in which the other, although essential for its realization, is put in the place of residue, pure object or non-existent (in their condition of alterity), or yet subjects put themselves in the place of a pure object for the other.

Another aspect to be considered is that in postmodernity individuals' narcissism is exalted and extremely stimulated (Lasch, 1991). It is important to emphasize, however, that there must be an Other (a mother, a family, a social discourse, or representations) that allows and promotes such investment in the subject, that makes them believe that they can be so special. For Lacan (2007), love relationships must be regarded as derived from the subjects' (unconscious) desire, which involves lack and desire of/for the Other, that is, arising from the Other and at the same time representing wishing to be desired or recognized by them. The subject then begins to desire to find such an object, and begins to unconsciously ask "what does the Other want from me?" ("what am I for the Other?") (Lacan, 2014).

According to Moscovici (2001), social representations are what guide individuals toward what is visible, which relate appearance to reality, so that people's perceptual and cognitive systems are adjusted to them. In other words, such representations of everyday social life are a kind of convention for objects, people or events, giving them form and reality. They impose what must be thought of and perceived by individuals, through tradition and structure, they name and transform the unfamiliar into the familiar (Moscovici, 2001). With this theoretical focus, volatility of love relationships can be thought of as being linked to this: the bond with the other remains as long as they can be an object of partial enjoyment (*jouissance*) for the subject. Such *jouissance* is associated with and anchored in contemporary discourses and social representations linked to the disposable character of relationships.

This context, combined with an incredible advance in information technology and its main fields, in recent decades – microelectronics, computers, the internet and wireless telecommunications (Castells, 2010) – culminated in the creation of online dating apps. But, of course, there are differences in how this social reality is reflected for each person and each group of people, depending, for example, on sex, sexual orientation, and age group.

Representations of dating apps

Apps exist in a wide range of variants and are directed to different types of audiences, the so-called location-based real-time dating ones, such as Tinder, stand out. In this same category are Happn, Grindr, Wapa, 3nder and many others. Previous studies have shown that the most prevalent reason for using Tinder is for fun, entertainment and to pass time (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2022; James, 2015; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017; Timmermans & De Calawé, 2017a; b). The search for a stable relationship is usually also among the most prevalent ones (but see James, 2015), although it is not the main motive for using the app. On the other hand, casual encounters or sex vary in that sense: sometimes they are found among the least prevalent ones (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017; Timmermans & De Calawé, 2017a; 2017b), but they also may appear among the main ones (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; James, 2015). Besides, Timmermans and De Calawé (2017a) indicated that people are using Tinder for far more reasons than the app developers could have imagined, including using it for social approval, to feel a sense of belonging, for distraction, to socialize and so on.

When it comes to age influence in this, it has been found that older people use Tinder more for friendship (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017) and relationships (Sumter et al., 2017). As for gender differences, women use Tinder more for friendship and self-validation (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017) and relationships (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017), while men use it more for flirting, casual encounters, and sex (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; James, 2015; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017; Timmermans & De Calawé, 2017b). Finally, homosexual, and bisexual users were found to have the sex motive score higher than heterosexual individuals (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017).

Regarding Brazilian research on the subject, Santos (2018) found that the reasons or motivations for using Tinder are the search for affinities, increasing self-esteem, rebuilding oneself after separation (getting over one's ex), relearning to flirt (after a long-term stable relationship), feeling attractive, emotional neediness, seeking dating, sex (casual or in large volume), friends and even professional contacts for business. According to Maia and Bianchi (2013; 2014), easy contact between people facilitates ways of taking over public spaces (squares, shopping malls etc.), symbolically reconfigured into spaces mapped by the desire of encounters for exchanging emotional experiences, romance and pleasure. Silva et al. (2021) interviewed 30 young adults (18-24 years-old), showing that around 50% of the participants used Tinder as a tool to meet people with similar interests, 30% looked for casual sex and 10% to find a boy/girlfriend. Couto et al. (2013) concluded that relationships developed in apps refer to the search for uncompromising and ephemeral sex, and for narcissistic purposes, even though the idealization of the "right guy" may be present.

Method

This is an exploratory and descriptive study with qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to capture spontaneous representations that users had of the dating apps (open question) and to compare them with results taking suggested representations into account (closed multiple-choice questions).

Participants

Participants in this research were Brazilians who were or had been users of at least one of the following location-based real-time dating applications (LBRTD): Tinder, Happn, Grindr, Hornet and Badoo. In total, there were 166 anonymous respondents who have voluntarily filled in the online questionnaire used to collect data while it was available (no payment or reward have been offered to them). Among those, 120 people have been selected: Brazilians who use or have used at least one of the five dating apps being considered and who were residents in the state of São Paulo, Brazil (the excluded respondents either were not Brazilian or did not use any of the apps in question or did not reside in the state of São Paulo). The number of people from other states was not sufficient to be representative and so they have been excluded from the data. The age groups considered were young adults (20 to 39 years old, n=88) and middle-aged adults (40 to 64 years old, n=30). There were also adolescents (18-19 years old, n=2) that were included only in the overall analysis. Table 1 presents the complete demographic data of the research participants, including sex and sexual orientation.

Table 1*Demographic data of the total sample of participants (N=120)*

Sex	n	%
Female	87	72.5
Male	33	27.5
Sexual Orientation	n	%
Heterosexual	87	72.5
Homosexual	16	13.3
Bisexual	17	14.2
Age	M	SD
Average	33.9	8.7
Median	34	
Age group	n	%
Adolescents (18 - 19 years)	2	1.7
Young adults (20 - 39 years)	88	73.3
Middle-aged adults (40 - 64 years)	30	25.0
Marital status	n	%
Single	80	66.7
Married/ stable union	24	20.0
Separated/ divorced	12	10.0
Widow(er)	3	2.5
Not answered	1	0.8
Used apps	n	%
Tinder	102	85.0
Happn	79	65.8
Grindr	13	10.8
Hornet	10	8.3
Badoo	33	27.5

The research was approved by the research ethics committee of Paulista University (process no. 3.859.110). Research participants agreed to be part of it, electronically signing a Free and Informed Consent Form.

Procedures

An online questionnaire filled in by participants themselves was used, whose link was made available and distributed to as many people as possible through online channels: e-mail, WhatsApp and social media (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn). The questionnaire was available between March 11th and April 30th, 2020. There were both open and multiple-choice (closed) questions (see Table 3).

Data analysis

Data obtained from answers to the multiple-choice question used were grouped into clusters of the considered variables: sex (female, male), sexual orientation (homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual) and age. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov method was used to verify the distribution of variables. Since data did not form a normal distribution, the Mann-Whitney test was used to compare groups, two by two, and the Kruskal-Wallis test to compare more than two groups. Categorical data (e.g. gender, sexual orientation) were compared across groups using the chi-squared test. A 95% confidence interval (CI) was adopted and an error level of 5% was assumed ($p \geq 0.05$). Data was analyzed using SPSS v.20 and Minitab 16.

Data obtained from answers to the open question were categorized according to the content analysis method (Bardin, 2013), in order to classify them into categories for representations of the dating apps. Each of the researchers independently performed a semantic categorization as they deemed pertinent, using the multiple-choice responses (closed questions) in the questionnaire as a basis. When the category did not exist in the base list, a new one was created. Researchers presented their categorizations, discussed them and reached a consensus on the categories that were valid for the responses of each

respondent, setting up a matrix for this (answers X categories). Afterwards, the initially validated categories were grouped using semantic criteria of similarity between them:

1. Type of desired relationship/bond (sex, romantic/affective relationship, friendship, unspecified relationship),
2. Narcissistic or perverse aspects of the subjects,
3. Affects aroused (positive, linked to discomfort/suffering, apparent indifference),
4. Practical aspects (practicality, safety, etc.),
5. Others (generate reflection, etc.).

Results

Qualitative results

Qualitative results obtained from the open-ended question below were categorized - “What does using dating apps represent (or represented) for you? (That is, say what they symbolize/symbolized for you, what they cause/caused in you, what possibilities they bring/brought you, etc.)”. The final categories of representations are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of apps representation categories (spontaneous responses) (N=120)

Representation categories	% responses in relation to the total	n	Comments
1. Unspecified relationship	60.0	72	Responses did not specify any specific type of bond (e.g.: sex, friendship, affective/love relationships, etc.), but involved generic terms such as “meeting people” or “dates”.
2. Discomfort/ suffering affects caused by apps	29.2	35	Frustration, anxiety/apprehension, emptiness/empty relations, feeling of being discarded and rejection, “human menu”, annoyance, sadness, boredom, coldness, exposure, shame, lack of control in the use of the app, increased sexual compulsion, increased self-criticism
3. Practicality	28.3	34	Meet people to arrange different encounters without leaving home or that would not be possible otherwise, filter and select people with whom one has affinities before having a date.
4. Fun / pass time / new experiences	17.5	21	Fun (“ <i>entertainment</i> ”, “ <i>it’s funny</i> ”, “ <i>a hobby</i> ”), pass time or the possibility of trying new experiences (“ <i>causes curiosity</i> ”, “ <i>going out</i> ”, “ <i>knowing different places</i> ”).
5. Sex	16.7	20	Most sex search responses were generic. There were some mentions to more specific aspects (e.g.: fulfill fantasies or discovering new sexual practices).
6. Affective/ love relationships	15.0	18	
7. Apparent indifference to apps	10.8	13	Answers such as [the app] “ <i>didn’t represent anything</i> ”, “ <i>didn’t represent much</i> ”, “ <i>something futile</i> ”, “ <i>waste of time</i> ”, [used] “ <i>only by peer pressure</i> ”.
8. Attempt to resolve or minimize existing discomfort/suffering	10.0	12	Dealing with shyness and inhibition in meeting people, supply emotional needs, restrict personal life exposure, improve self-esteem, get some kind of help (unspecified).
9. Narcissistic or perverse aspects of subjects	9.2	11	Responses linked to a dimension of <i>jouissance</i> (Lacan), of feeling desired (narcissistic trait, desire), of seducing or discarding the other.
10. Friendship	8.3	10	As a prior objective or unintended consequence.
11. Positive feelings caused by apps	8.3	10	Joy, excitement, feeling of freedom, happiness or the chance to achieve it, hope.
12. Other representations	1.7	2	Reflection over the human relationships that interactions in apps provide.

Most participants' spontaneous responses (60.0% of the total, n=72) indicated representations that were linked to the unspecified relationship category, that is, with no explicit association with sex, friendship, affective/love relationships or another type of bond. Most mentioned that the apps represented the generic possibility of "meeting people" (23.3%, n=28), sometimes mentioning "people outside the usual social life" or "different people".

Representations linked to the category "discomfort/suffering affects caused by apps" were mentioned by 29.2% (n=35) of the total number of people. The most cited one was frustration (mentioned by 8.3% of respondents, n=10). The feeling of emptiness or that relationships derived from the app were empty (n=5), anxiety (n=4), feelings of being discarded and rejected (n=2) and other discomfort (n=4) were also mentioned, as well as aspects such as "human menu", annoyance, sadness, boredom, coldness, exposure, shame, lack of control in the use of the app, increased sexual compulsion and increased self-criticism.

About 28% of the respondents (n=34) associated the use of dating apps with practical aspects (category "practicality"): meeting people to arrange different types of encounters, without leaving home or that would otherwise not be possible (21.7%, n=26), the possibility of selecting people with whom one has affinities (6.7%, n=8) before meeting them in person. Then, 17.5% of the subjects (n=21) spontaneously brought representations linked to the category "fun/pass time/[the possibility of trying] new experiences" with dating apps. Spontaneous answers related to the sex category were mentioned by 16.7% (n=20) of the total respondents, a relatively low percentage, which is also the case when it comes to the affective/love relationships category (15.0%, n=18).

Representations linked to the category "attempt to resolve or minimize existing discomfort/ suffering" through the apps were mentioned by 10.0% (n=12) of the participants: dealing with shyness and inhibition in relation to meeting people (n=3), supply emotional needs (n=4), restrict personal life exposure (n=2), improve self-esteem (n=1) and get (unspecified) help (n=1).

Responses related to the category "narcissistic or perverse aspects of subjects" were mentioned by 9.2% (n=11) of the total. Such responses were grouped in this category because they concern *jouissance*, in the Lacanian sense of the term (Birman, 2011; Lacan, 2014; Roudinesco & Plon, 2006). The most prevalent was the possibility of feeling desired (n=8). There was also an occurrence of response related to seducing (n=1) and discarding the other (n=1).

A portion of the survey participants (8.3%, n=10) associated the apps with some positive feelings (representation category 11), including joy, excitement, feeling of freedom, happiness or the chance to achieve it, hope. There were even those who said that apps make people feel that they are "*still in the game*", allowing them to have a "*connection with the world*". Finally, about 11% of the respondents (n=13) showed an apparent indifference (representation category 7) towards dating apps (e.g.: "*didn't represent anything/much*", "*something futile*", "*waste of time*", "*only by peer pressure*").

Quantitative results

Regarding answers to the multiple-choice question that asked about the representations of dating apps, the most prevalent one was practicality (78.3% of people, n=94, indicated this representation as being frequently or always valid). Gathering initial data from someone before a face-to-face encounter takes place (71.7%, n=86) and the possibility of finding someone for a stable relationship (65.0%, n=78) were the second and third most prevalent ones, respectively. Representations that were the least cited were the possibility of finding sexual partners outside a relationship and having homosexual sex, in the case of subjects who consider themselves to be heterosexual or bisexual (see Table 3). It is also worth mentioning that having access to a large volume of people for sex and the possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies were rarely mentioned.

Table 3

Representations of dating apps (multiple-choice question) (N=120)

Representations	Mean (standard-deviation)	95% CI
Possibility of meeting people without leaving home (practicality)	2.24(0.94)	0.17
Getting initial data from someone before having a romantic or sexual encounter, to understand if interests match (for selection)	2.10(0.98)	0.18
Possibility of finding someone for romantic stable relationship	1.89(1.04)	0.19
Having access to a large volume of people to increase the chances of finding someone for a stable love/affective relationship	1.66(1.13)	0.20
Feeling wanted	1.40(1.15)	0.21
Feeling less lonely	1.33(1.12)	0.20
Improving self-esteem	1.31(1.17)	0.21
A way to deal with my shyness to meet people	1.19(1.15)	0.21
Decreasing initial anxiety in face-to-face encounters	1.17(1.08)	0.19
Less exposure of my privacy	1.15(1.10)	0.20
Having access to a large volume of people to feel more desired, more powerful	1.10(1.12)	0.20
A way of living, more discreetly, experiences that for me cannot be openly experienced	0.78(1.05)	0.19
Having access to a large volume of people to have sex all the time	0.74(1.02)	0.18
Possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies	0.74(1.08)	0.19
Possibility of having homosexual sex*	0.47(0.92)	0.18
Finding sexual partners outside current stable relationship	0.33(0.83)	0.15

Note. * N = 107. CI = confidence interval. Answers ranged from 0 to 3 points.

Considering the sex variable (men x women), the comparison indicated that women used apps for the possibility of finding a stable relationship and getting initial data (for selection) more than men (Table 4). On the other hand, men used the dating platforms significantly more than women as a way to have access to a large volume of people for sex all the time, fulfil sexual fantasies, find sexual partners outside the current relationship and for the practicality of meeting a large volume of people.

Table 4

Comparison between men and women in relation to representations of dating apps (N=120)

Representation/ score	Women	Men	P-value
Possibility of finding stable love relationship	2.02(1.00)	1.55(1.09)	0.029
Get initial data (selection)	2.23(0.91)	1.76(1.09)	0.028
Having access to high volume of people for sex all the time	0.47(0.79)	1.45(1.20)	<0.001
Possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies	0.56(0.97)	1.21(1.22)	0.003
Finding sexual partners outside current stable relationship	0.21(0.63)	0.67(1.16)	0.023
Ease/practicality of meeting a large volume of people (score)*	5.37(2.39)	6.73(3.21)	0.029

Note. Means and standard deviations are described. Maximum possible score = 3.0, except for the last row, whose maximum score is 12.0. * Combination of four multiple-choice answers: a) Possibility to meet people without leaving home (practicality); b) Having access to a large volume of people to increase the chances of finding someone for a stable love/affective relationship; c) Having access to a large volume of people to feel more desired, more powerful); d) Have access to a large volume of people to have sex all the time.

Non-heterosexual men (gay and bisexual) see apps significantly less as a possibility of finding a stable love relationship than heterosexual people (men or women) (Table 5). On the other hand, they see apps significantly more as a possibility to

have homosexual sex, to find sexual partners outside the current stable relationship, to fulfil sexual fantasies, and to have covert experiences than heterosexual people (men and women). Representations linked to fulfilling sexual fantasies and finding sexual partners outside the current stable relationship, as well as the combination of representations regarding living experiences covertly are also significantly more valid for gay and bisexual men than for non-heterosexual women.

Men of any sexual orientation see apps as a way to access a large volume of people for sex all the time significantly more than women, regardless of their sexual orientation. Non-heterosexual women consider dating apps significantly more to living experiences covertly than heterosexuals (men and women).

Table 5

Comparison between men and women including sexual orientation, in relation to representations of the dating apps (N=118)

Representations/score	(a) Heterosexual women	(b) Non-heterosexual women	(c) Heterosexual men	(d) Non- heterosexual men	P-value
Possibility of finding stable romantic relationship	2.15(0.91) (d)	1.63(1.21)	1.89(0.81) (d)	1.00(1.29) (a)(c)	0.01
Possibility of having access to a large volume of people to have sex all the time	0.54(0.80) (b)(c)(d)	0.11(0.32) (a)(c)(d)	1.16(1.17) (a)(b)	1.92(1.19) (a)(b)	<0.001
Possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies	0.54(0.96) (d)	0.53(0.90) (d)	0.53(0.90) (d)	2.15(0.99) (a)(b)(c)	<0.001
Possibility of having homosexual sex	0.27(0.76) (b)(d)	0.95(1.03) (a)(c)	0.00(0.00) (b)(d)	1.33(1.41) (a)(c)	<0.001
Finding sexual partner outside current stable relationship	0.22(0.69) (d)	0.11(0.32) (d)	0.26(0.81) (d)	1.31(1.38) (a)(b)(c)	<0.001
Living covert experiences (score)*	1.69(2.86) (b)(d)	2.32(1.83) (a)(c)(d)	1.21(1.72) (b)(d)	6.00(4.04) (a)(b)(c)	<0.001

Note. Means and standard deviations are described. Maximum possible score = 3.0, except for the last row, whose maximum score is 12.0). Letters below each value indicate which groups were statistically different in a post-hoc analysis (p -value < 0.05):

(a) = differ from heterosexual women.

(b) = differ from non-heterosexual women.

(c) = differ from heterosexual men.

(d) = differ from non-heterosexual men.

* Combination of four multiple-choice answers: 1) A way of experiencing, more discreetly, experiences that for me cannot be openly experienced; 2) Possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies; 3) Possibility of having homosexual sex; 4) Finding sexual partners outside the current stable relationship.

If the age variable is incorporated (Table 6), results indicate that young adult men (between 20 and 39 years old) see apps significantly more as a way to have access to a large volume of people for sex at all times than young (20 to 39 years old) and middle-aged (40 to 64 years old) women. Middle-aged adult men, on the other hand, see apps significantly more in this regard than young women.

For young women, apps also represent significantly less the possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies than for young and middle-aged adult men. Regarding the possibility of finding a stable love relationship, for middle-aged adult women this is a representation that tends to be more significant than for young men.

Table 6

Comparison between men and women, including age group, in relation to representations of dating apps (N=118)

Representation/score	(a) Young men	(b) Middle-aged men	(c) Young women	(d) Middle-aged women	P-value
Possibility of finding stable romantic relationship	1.46(1.10)	1.75(1.16)	1.95(1.03)	2.27(0.88)	0.072
Having access to a large volume of people to have sex all the time	1.46(1.18) (c)(d)	1.50(1.41) (c)	0.38(0.70) (a)(b)	0.64(0.85) (a)	<0.001
Possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies	1.21(1.28) (c)	1.13(1.13) (c)	0.48(0.89) (a)(b)	0.68(1.09)	0.027

Note. Means and standard deviations are described. Maximum possible score = 3.0. Letters below each value indicate which groups were statistically different in a post-hoc analysis (p-value < 0.05):

(a) = differ from young men.

(b) = differ from middle-aged men.

(c) = differ from young women.

(d) = differ from middle-aged women.

If the sexual orientation variable is incorporated (Table 7), non-heterosexual young adults (gay and bisexual people between 20 and 39 years old) consider apps significantly less as a possibility of finding a stable love relationship than young and middle-aged heterosexuals, but they consider apps significantly more than heterosexuals to living covert experiences. Also, middle-aged non-heterosexuals (between 40 and 64 years old) consider apps significantly more as a way to live such experiences than young heterosexuals.

Table 7

Comparison between age group and sexual orientation, in relation to representations of dating apps (N=118)

Representation/score	(a) Non- heterosexual young adults	(b) Non- heterosexual middle-aged adults	(c) Heterosexual young adults	(d) Heterosexual middle-aged adults	P-value
Possibility of finding stable romantic relationship	1.36 z(1.28) (c)(d)	1.50(1.29)	2.03(0.88) (a)	2.23(0.91) (a)	0.03
Possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies	1.14(1.24) (c)	1.50(1.29) (c)	0.47(0.89) (a)(b)	0.69(1.05)	0.017
Possibility of having homosexual sex	0.92(1.08) (c)(d)	2.33(1.15) (c)(d)	0.20(0.65) (a)(b)	0.23(0.75) (a)(b)	<0.001
Living covert experiences (score)	3.68(3.20) (c)(d)	4.75(5.19) (c)	1.48(2.59) (a)(b)	1.81(2.80) (a)	<0.001

Note. Means and standard deviations are described. Maximum possible score = 3.0, except for the last row, whose maximum score is 12.0 (combination of four responses). Letters below each value indicate which groups were statistically different in a post-hoc analysis (p-value < 0.05): (a) = differ from heterosexual women.

(b) = differ from non-heterosexual women.

(c) = differ from heterosexual men.

(d) = differ from non-heterosexual men.

* Combination of four multiple-choice answers: 1) A way of experiencing, more discreetly, experiences that for me cannot be openly experienced; 2) Possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies; 3) Possibility of having homosexual sex; 4) Finding sexual partners outside the current stable relationship.

Young heterosexuals see the apps as a means to be able to fulfil sexual fantasies significantly less than young and middle-aged non-heterosexuals. For young and middle-aged heterosexuals, apps represent less the possibility of having homosexual sex than for non-heterosexuals of both age groups.

Regarding results considering only sexual orientation (Table 8), homosexuals see those dating platforms significantly more than heterosexuals in terms of having access to a high volume of people for sex, possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies, having homosexual sex, finding sexual partners outside the current relationship and living covert experiences.

On the other hand, homosexuals consider apps significantly less than heterosexuals in terms of the possibility of finding a stable love relationship. Bisexuals consider apps to have access to a high volume of people for sex all the time, as a possibility to fulfil sexual fantasies and as a way to find sexual partners outside the current stable relationship significantly less than homosexuals. In comparison with heterosexuals, bisexuals see apps more as a possibility to have homosexual sex and as a way to live experiences covertly, but they see them less to have access to a large volume of people for sex at all times.

Table 8

Comparison between sexual orientations, in relation to the representations of dating apps (N=118)

Representation/score	(a) Bisexuals	(b) Heterosexuals	(c) Homosexuals	P-value
Possibility of finding stable romantic relationship	1.65(1.17)	2.08(0.89) (c)	1.13(1.31) (b)	0.01
Having access to a large volume of people to have sex all the time	0.18(0.39) (b)(c)	0.70(0.95) (a)(c)	1.56(1.31) (a)(b)	0.002
Possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies	0.71(0.99) (c)	0.56(0.97) (c)	1.75(1.24) (a)(b)	0.001
Possibility of having homosexual sex (while heterosexual or bisexual)	1.18(1.01) (b)	0.23(0.7) (a)(c)	1.00(1.35) (b)	<0.001
Finding sexual partner outside current stable relationship	0.12(0.33) (c)	0.24(0.71) (c)	1.06(1.34) (a)(b)	0.003
Living covert experiences (score)*	2.88(1.87) (b)	1.67(2.75) (a)(c)	4.94(4.28) (b)	<0.001

Note. Means and standard deviations are described. Maximum possible score = 3.0, except for the last row, whose maximum score is 12.0. Letters below each value indicate which groups were statistically different in a post-hoc analysis (p-value < 0.05):

- (a) = differ from heterosexual women.
- (b) = differ from non-heterosexual women.
- (c) = differ from heterosexual men.
- (d) = differ from non-heterosexual men.

* Combination of four multiple-choice answers: 1) A way of experiencing, more discreetly, experiences that for me cannot be openly experienced; 2) Possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies; 3) Possibility of having homosexual sex; 4) Finding sexual partners outside the current stable relationship.

Discussion

The fact that most of the participants' spontaneous responses (60.0% of the total, n=72) indicated representations that were linked to unspecified relationships and were generic responses in this sense (which could mean from affective/love relationships to casual sex, among other possibilities) might indicate that people still have some fear or inhibition in admitting why they use dating apps. Answers such as [the possibility] "to meet people" or "to have dates" do not compromise anyone. But it could also be that some participants simply did not think that it was important or were not motivated to clarify their answers in more detail.

It was noted that negative representations about the apps had non-negligible importance in the experience of several users. Frustration, the most cited, was felt for reasons such as "people only wanted sex" (when the person was looking for a long-term relationship) or when encounters did not work out several times or because interesting people were not found in the apps. Discomfort arose when individuals faced implicit rules such as [need to have] "added sexual value", behaviors that included "obscene words", harassment and abusive attitudes. Negative affects seem to arise mainly from a break of expectations regarding the apps and, perhaps, in some cases, from an idealization of them and what they encourage. They provide an immense range of possibilities for interactions and encounters of all kinds, but, on the other hand, they also provide numerous mismatches, different goals in individuals with whom one interacts, easy rejection and so on.

Practicality was the third category of spontaneous representations that were cited and the most prevalent of closed responses, followed by obtaining data from the person before meeting them, in order to search for affinities (selection), which also represents a type of practicality. These aspects were also reported in studies by Bryant and Sheldon (2017), James (2015) and Santos (2016, 2018).

In the research sample, 95% (n=114) of the respondents lived in large cities, which often do not favor closer human interaction, with physical distance between people's homes/workplaces making it difficult for them to meet. In this sense, apps can minimize such difficulty. Thus, their practicality may be linked to the contemporary lifestyle, in which the relation with time (and, often, with the other) is based on productivity and utilitarianism.

The use of dating apps to pass time or for fun in this survey appeared as the fourth most spontaneously cited answer. In the work of Ranzini and Lutz (2017), Bryant and Sheldon (2017) and Timmermans and De Calawé (2017a; b) it appeared as the most prevalent motive for using that kind of apps. One of the hypotheses for this use is that apps serve as an outlet for the stress and tensions that many individuals go through in postmodernity. Still, there would be countless other possibilities to bring such relief, which would not justify choosing a dating platform. On the other hand, passing time can be a sign, in some cases at least, of boredom and an attempt to remedy it. Trying to eliminate boredom through apps, at certain times, appears in the work of some authors (Santos, 2018, Timmermans & De Calawé, 2017a). Given the imperative to "*jouissance*" in postmodernity (Kehl, 2002), boredom can be seen as a social symptom of this imperative and/or as being associated with typically milder depressive conditions (Mezan, 2002). Furthermore, to pass time in an app, like the ones in question here, can basically represent an attempt (in the palm of the hand) to answer the fundamental question of the human being: "What does the Other want from me?", or, in other words: "What am I to the Other?" (Lacan, 2014).

The search for sex in apps was less prevalent as a spontaneous representation than initially thought in literature. Previous studies (Harrison et al., 2022; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017; Timmermans and De Calawé, 2017a; b) found it as not the first representation or actually one of the least prevalent uses of these platforms. In addition, the generality of the sex-linked responses obtained in the survey may have occurred for different reasons. First, one can consider the fact that the qualitative question required respondents to develop, on their own, the answer, being more laborious than a closed question. Another possibility could be some personal inhibition in relation to the topic.

Analyzing the results of the closed questions, the fact that the sample of this research was composed mostly of women (72.5% of the total) influenced the result that one of the most prevalent (closed) representations was the possibility of finding someone for a stable affective/love relationship (65.0%, n=78, indicated this representation as being frequently or always valid) and the least prevalent one was finding sexual partners outside the stable relationship (differences between men and women proved to be statistically significant – see Table 4).

Narcissistic or perverse aspects of the subjects were also found, to some extent, by Santos (2018) and Couto et al. (2013). The most prevalent one was the possibility of feeling desired, which reveals an important narcissistic trait and a dimension of desire (here taken in the Lacanian definition of being the Other's desire (Lacan, 2007). Recent evidence is in line with this view, as Sevi (2019) showed that the use of Tinder was positively associated with machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy personality traits.

Enthusiasm and a sense of well-being have been pointed out by participants who associated the apps with some positive affect (joy, etc.), either because of the "*innumerable possibilities*", which seem to be linked to the notion of freedom, or perhaps because of a narcissistic trait about being "*part of the game*" of flirtation, seduction, conquest [thinking, like Lacan (2007), that human desire is the desire of the Other]. Representations associated with the chance to be happy and the hope that dating apps may bring that about for some subjects also appear in Santos (2018).

In addition, it must be said that a small portion of the responses (less than 2%) addressed, besides the positive aspects of using the apps, some negative dimensions of them: frustration, apprehension or anxiety, indicating that sometimes there is some ambivalence towards these platforms, something discussed in previous studies (Blake et al., 2022; Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2022; Holtzhausen et al., 2020; Lenton-Brym et al., 2021; Linne, 2020).

Sex, sexual orientation and age group

Regarding representations cited by men that were statistically different from those pointed out by women, they are, directly or indirectly, related to sex: men seeking significantly more sexual encounters than women. For women, apps represent more aspects related to romantic relationships. These differences are even more striking in the comparison between non-heterosexual (gay/bisexual) men and women, especially heterosexual ones. When there was a significant difference in some representations considering the male and female age group, the prevalence of sexual aspects for men was also observed.

The difference in sex-linked representations between men and women corroborates the results obtained in previous studies (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; James, 2015; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017. Timmermans & De Calawé, 2017b).

The difference regarding the search for a romantic relationship is aligned with what Bryant and Sheldon (2017) found but differed from the results of Ranzini and Lutz (2017), since the authors found, in their research, that men were looking for more of this type of relationship through apps than women. Results seem to indicate that further investigations are required.

As presented by Biasus et al. (2011), for men, sex appears as a central element of sexuality at all stages of life, while for women, sexuality appears more as love, company and affection, and sex being a complement. In addition, there is still a social representation of the ideal person for a love relationship (“Prince Charming”) in the female case (Czernecka, 2020; Santos, 2015). Even though relationships may be changing, becoming more fluid, volatile, marriage and a stable bond remain valued (Andrade, 2016). Furthermore, social places assigned to men and women, and beliefs prescribed by the patriarchal model are still latent in the common sense, generating representations of estrangement or devaluation when women do not marry after 30 years of age, whereas for men, such representations usually indicate strong sexual attributes and freedom (Santos, 2015; Cravo, 2014).

The greater search for sex-related to men seems to be linked to our phallogocentric culture, even though changes may be gradually taking place. For men and women, the question of “What am I to the Other?” remains valid. In that sense, a lot of men seem to continue trying to show their (phallic) value in every casual sexual encounter. As this value is never complete, they need to continue in the dynamics indefinitely. Many women seem to remain, to some extent, looking for the one whose lack, eventually, they would fulfill (for whom they would be the “phallus”) and would stay with him/her for a lifetime, in full joy, without acknowledging that the desire that moves them is precisely that of not having found (what they are looking for), according to the Lacanian theory. For Lacan (2014), even if the phallus continues to be a symbol of power, it is more significant as a lack, as what can be lost or that, deep down, has always been lost (has never fulfilled the other’s lack). This aspect could be associated with the high prevalence of representations of apps linked to search for sex in the male homosexual universe. According to Lacan (2020), for gay men, the phallus cannot be missing, being an object that is absolutely demandable in the other. Bussinger (2013) found that gay men emphasize an experience of sex as a test of masculinity and related to the number of partners and boldness in relationships.

One aspect that is worth mentioning is the fact that homosexuals and bisexuals see apps significantly more as a way to live covert experiences (sexual fantasies, partners outside a stable relationship) than heterosexuals. It can be hypothesized that both homosexuality and bisexuality are still not fully accepted in the Brazilian society, despite advances in this regard, and, therefore, they are often still practiced covertly (Trevisan, 2004). On the other hand, as Pommier (2000) postulated, if the social ban on *jouissance* with someone of the same sex can lead to its repression, it also exacerbates this *jouissance*. In other words, a certain social rejection of homosexuality, which still remains, leads to gay sex often being carried out in a veiled way, but it also feeds the satisfaction obtained in it, precisely because it is not accepted. Furthermore, the fact that, for men in general, apps represent the possibility of fulfilling sexual fantasies more than for women, reveals that the issue of transgression, in our society, has an important component for men.

Limitations and future studies

Regarding limitations of this research, the sample of people here used cannot be considered as representative (random) of the population of the state of São Paulo. Besides being a convenience sampling, it also contained more women than men as compared to the total state population. In addition, there may be cultural differences in other Brazilian states not covered by the sample in question, although other studies consulted have, in general, presented similar results. Finally, the instrument used in this work did not allow us to dig into some aspects brought up by respondents, like apps representing possibility to “*meet people*”, or to explore in-depth affects involved in their use.

However, even in the face of these limitations, the study is relevant for being the first one in Brazil that has compiled and analyzed dating apps representations comparing differences regarding sex, sexual orientation and age. Besides, it comprised quantitative and qualitative approaches capturing spontaneous representations that users had of the apps and comparing them with suggested representations.

It is recommended that future studies be carried out to deepen the qualitative aspects of representations of dating apps through semi-structured interviews, for example, and to expand the sample for quantitative analysis, in order to allow greater generalization of the results.

Conclusions

This research made it possible to investigate what dating apps represent for Brazilian users, in the State of São Paulo, Brazil, according to what they declared, and the differences depending on sex, sexual orientation and age group of individuals. Representations that had the highest means among closed answers were: (1) the possibility of meeting people without leaving

home (practicality), (2) getting initial data from someone before having a love or sexual encounter, to understand if there is a correspondence of interests (selection) and (3) possibility of finding someone for a stable love/affective relationship. The most prevalent spontaneous responses were: (1) those related to the use of apps for seeking unspecified relationships (without specifying the type of bond desired), (2) representations linked to feelings of discomfort or suffering caused by the apps and (3) representations linked to their practicality. In addition, other aspects were mentioned that, despite having a lower prevalence, point to a multiplicity of uses and representations for dating apps: fun or pass time, search for sex, romantic relationships or friendship, solution or reduction of existing discomforts or suffering, narcissistic or perverse aspects, positive affects and feelings.

Regarding results depending on sex, sexual orientation and age group: the establishment of a stable affective relationship is more prevalent in women and heterosexuals than in men and homosexuals, respectively. The search for sex is more prevalent in men and homosexuals than in women and heterosexuals, respectively. The possibility of living more covertly experiences that cannot be openly experienced (sexual fantasies, partners outside relationship) is more prevalent in homosexuals than in heterosexuals. Fulfilling sexual fantasies and searching for partners outside a stable relationship is also more prevalent in men than women. There were not many statistically relevant results regarding age group.

It is argued that, despite changes in contemporary love relationships, their greater volatility, traditional social representations still exist: for women, linked to the search for the “prince charming”, the ideal partner who would want her as the one who would fill her lack, for men, linked to the search for sex and a transgressive *jouissance*, as a way of affirming their value as phallic possessors. Dating apps seem to work as a way to answer, in the palm of one’s hand, the human question of “What am I to the Other?”. In addition to (or as a result of) this, they cause a non-negligible level of discomfort or suffering in many users. To a large extent, they reflect the search for practicality and the utilitarianism of post-modern capitalism in large cities, but they also reflect, at least for some, the search for fun and pass time.

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Endereço para correspondência

Antônio Carlos de Barros Júnior
acbj@yahoo.com

Larissa Maria de Castro Alves
laracalves1@gmail.com

Andrea Siomara de Siqueira
andreasiomara@gmail.com

Mário Amore Cecchini
E-mail: amoremario@gmail.com



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