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Dating Apps and Harms to Marginalized Communities:

A Media Cloud investigation of news coverage of dating apps, highlighting harms ranging from data breaches to features that propel racism

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Executive summary: Dating Apps and Harms to Marginalized Communities

Online dating has evolved over the years as new apps and platforms cater to audiences of varying races, religions, and sexual identities. Since their inception, these apps have also had to adapt to increased awareness of potential harms from sensitive data leakage — a concern that becomes more significant during a global pandemic that moves everyone online. A Consumer Reports study on the evolution of consumer attitudes towards data collection in the last 25 years found that over time consumer awareness of data tracking and collection increases, but this does not translate to increased user control over data. This pattern also plays out for users of dating apps, who may not necessarily be able to fully understand and control what data is shared. Such limitations have the potential to leave irreversible impacts on user safety, wellbeing, and access to opportunity.

In this report, we analyze U.S.-based media coverage of online dating apps between Jan. 2019 and July 2020. We aimed to better understand the nature of this coverage and identify possible patterns and trends related to the privacy and security issues that dating app users may face.

Our top level findings are:
- **Consistent thematic drivers of media coverage about dating apps include Valentine's day, regulation, and COVID-19.** More specifically, this includes the role of Valentine's Day in conversations about online dating, regulatory action about online dating, and how COVID-19 is impacting online dating habits.
- **Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr drive media coverage on dating apps — positive and negative.** The only LGBTQ+-specific app that gets mainstream media attention is Grindr.
- **Data breaches and privacy concerns are a constant fact of life these days. Research and governmental action drive media coverage related to data privacy and leakage.** Media coverage routinely responds to specific incidents of dating app-related harms. Often, this coverage occurs following the release of research reports or governmental action on the subject.
- **Though we began our research with a focus on LGBTQ+-specific data breach issues, race and racism are unavoidable factors in this space.** Harms that an individual may face while using dating apps are unique to their social identity. These harms are varied, and include data leaks and discriminatory design features.

Why does this analysis matter? What are the consequences? Media coverage of data breaches occurs frequently enough that such harms may appear to be well-covered at first. However, data breaches on dating apps can divulge information that presents users with physical and social harms; such breaches can also hinder access to opportunity. For example, during our

review of news headlines, we found the story of a Detroit man who [used Grindr to track and shoot](#) two men for being gay. The Norwegian Consumer Council (NCC) in Jan. 2020 [demonstrated that Grindr, OkCupid, and Tinder were sharing](#) user location, sexual preferences, and drug use with third party marketing firms. At the same time, dating apps can host [features that further exacerbate](#) racism and discrimination through the preferences they offer and the information they disclose. We ultimately found news stories at local, national, and global levels that covered harms to minority communities, particularly the LGBTQ+ community and communities of color. Yet, the incidents that generate the most media coverage — and therefore receive the most attention — are only a fraction of those incidents that occur or receive minimal coverage on a regular basis.

Through an analysis of media coverage of dating apps and their related privacy and security issues, **our group aimed to highlight opportunities for further work and advancement in this space:**
- There is an opportunity for the media and everyday people to spend more time interrogating our relationships with dating apps and understand the implications of their data collection and sharing practices.
- There is an opportunity for increased media coverage at the intersection of technology and society, particularly as it relates to the highly personal nature of dating online.
- There is an opportunity for academics and advocacy organizations to do more investigative research to understand how dating apps work, what data collection and sharing looks like, and potential risks that exist in these technologies. Such work drives further media coverage and public awareness of risks related to dating apps.

Introduction

As shelter-in-place orders came into effect in 2020, individuals worldwide had to contend with questions about how to continue various aspects of their daily lives. For those individuals interested in dating during the COVID-19 pandemic, online dating became a necessity. The emergence of [first-time FaceTime dates](#) and new competitor platforms like "[Quarandate](#)" meant more traditional dating companies like Match Group were pressured to [incorporate new features](#), such as video dating, to remain relevant. Companies like Match Group and Bumble [saw increases](#) in messages exchanged and use of video call tools to support online dating.

Given the growth of online dating, it becomes important to consider the nuances of virtual dating apps and services — their prevalence in society, the dangers they present through mechanisms such as privacy and security protections, and the representation they afford to minority communities. Dating apps ask for personal information because people are forming personal relationships. Were concerns about personal information being discussed in the public sphere, so that new and likely users had awareness of the risks and benefits of dating apps?

To answer this question and identify the key media narratives around online dating, we conducted a media analysis of U.S.-based media coverage of online dating companies and apps between Jan. 2019 and July 2020 using Media Cloud, an open-source online platform for media research and analysis. We assessed the shift of news coverage over time to note how events such as a global pandemic, or an international investigation into a privacy breach, create ripple effects for news conversation. This research helped us better understand media coverage and identify critical issues that may need more attention.

This report starts by assessing the prevalence of various dating apps in news discourse about online dating. We then proceed to conduct an in-depth analysis of media coverage of dating apps based on the following: (1) the most popular dating apps as determined by prevalence in news coverage, (2) privacy and security concerns of using dating apps, and (3) minority representation on dating apps.

Methodology

The primary research tool used for this project is [Media Cloud](#), an open source database and analysis platform containing over 60,000 news media sources and over 1.5 billion news stories from around the globe. The platform allows for large-scale evaluation of news media coverage and media ecosystems.

To start, we used Media Cloud's Topic Mapper tool to collect 20,953 U.S.-based stories in the Media Cloud system that matched query terms related to online dating between Jan. 1, 2019 and July 31, 2020. This timeframe was selected to capture news coverage of online dating before and after the significant societal shifts of 2020. We then used keyword-based searches to remove points of noise and unrelated stories from our dataset. After analyzing the initial pool of stories gathered by the online dating query, we further filtered our data using topic-related keyword-based searches to better evaluate several themes, or key interest areas, including:

- The prevalence of various online dating apps and websites;
- Privacy and security concerns on dating apps;
- Mentions of LGBTQ+ and race-related issues.

The table below details the query terms and source collections used to evaluate themes.

Theme(s)	Queries	Query Terms	Number of Matching Stories
Overall Dataset	Online Dating	("virtual dating" OR "video dating" OR "virtual dates" OR "video dates" OR "virtual date" OR "video date" OR "online dating" OR "dating apps" OR "dating app")	20,953
Dating Companies and Apps	Tinder	Tinder	5,292
Dating Companies and Apps	Grindr	Grindr	2,096
Dating Companies and Apps	Facebook Dating	Facebook	3,697

Privacy and Security	Privacy and Security	(secur* OR hack* OR breach* OR expos*)	4,524
LGBTQ+	LGBTQ+	(LGBT* OR gay* OR lesbian* OR bisexual* OR transgender OR trans OR queer)	3,392
Race-related	Race and Ethnicity	(racis* OR ethnicity OR racial OR racial*)	940
Race-related Privacy and Security	LGBTQ+ and Privacy and Security	(secur* OR hack* OR breach* OR expos*) AND (LGBT* OR gay* OR lesbian* OR bisexual* OR transgender OR trans OR queer)	1,275
Race-related Privacy and Security	Race and Privacy and Security	(secur* OR hack* OR breach* OR expos*) AND (racis* OR ethnicity OR racial OR racial*)	379

Table 1: Themes of inquiry, search parameters, and number of matching stories identified for each query.

Our analysis of these interest areas took a few primary approaches. First, we evaluated the number of stories published each day matching a given theme's query terms to understand changes in attention over time. We then used Media Cloud to extract the top 100 words for a given theme, helping to generate word clouds that furthered comparative analysis. To better understand media coverage on a day-to-day basis (outside peaks in attention), we also manually reviewed the stories matching each theme.

What follows is a discussion and analysis of our findings. We present key peaks in attention for the various themes, along with word clouds for further perusal. We also discuss findings from our manual review of stories and identify further questions and approaches for possible future study.

For the purposes of this project, "online dating" refers to all dating activities that are mediated through digital platforms such as video calls, websites and apps. Because of its prominence in everyday conversations, we use the phrase "dating apps'' to refer to companies hosting online

dating activities on digital platforms. We define "minority" to include communities of color through the terms "race" and "ethnicity," and mentions of the LGBTQ+ community.

Broader patterns in news coverage: research, Valentine's Day, regulatory action and COVID-19

This research focuses on four primary areas: prominent dating apps, privacy and security concerns, and minority representation. However, in the course of our research, we observed several notable themes related to media coverage of online dating habits that are worth discussing. These include the influences of research pieces on media coverage, the role of Valentine's Day in driving conversations about online dating, the prominence of regulatory action in conversations about online dating, and the role COVID-19 is playing in curent online dating habits.

Research drives coverage: Research from universities and institutions contributed to spikes in coverage on this topic. In particular, a study from the University of Illinois and the University of Michigan "confirmed that racism on queer dating apps [like Grindr] can have significant negative health impacts on men of color, including depression and feelings of lower self-worth." Additionally, Valentine's Day in 2020 served as a launching point for research on dating and race-related issues, over-sharing data on dating apps, and downsides of online dating.

Valentine's Day: In general, Valentine's Day sparked interest in topics related to virtual dating in both 2019 and 2020. As the holiday that focuses on "finding love," journalists, companies, and research organizations aligned topics to release on Feb. 14. In 2019, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) put out a report that indicates "Americans lost $143 million to romance scams in 2018" and the Better Business Bureau warned of scams in a widely-cited report. A year later, scams also dominated the news headlines. On Valentine's Day in 2020, The FTC released data that showed how consumers lost more than $200 million to romance scams.

COVID-19: Pandemic-related physical distancing changed typical dating habits. In early April 2020, journalists captured the awkwardness of FaceTime dates, and questioned typical dating norms. Additionally, the pandemic prompted companies like Match to roll out video functionality as apps like Quarandate entered the scene. New features and services continue to accommodate physical distancing, such as group chats through HouseParty and Facebook Messenger Rooms. Media coverage captured the original shock of isolation, followed by experimentation with new dating features. This coverage also noted later acceptance of new dating dimensions and norms in the months to follow. Perhaps a rise in online dating during the pandemic is predictable given the need for connection in socially distanced times. The fact remains that sensitive data still continues to be collected and used by these companies in clandestine ways.

Image by athree23 from Pixabay

Theme 1 — Dating apps: Who's getting media attention and why?

After pulling our initial dataset of U.S.-based stories that mention online dating, we first wanted to understand which online dating companies and apps were most-mentioned across U.S.-based media. To do this, we identified and aggregated a list of 30 major dating companies and apps by referencing online guides to popular dating companies and apps and audience size estimates by Statista. We then supplemented this list with notable omissions such as Facebook Dating and Raya. The figure below highlights the dating companies and apps that were mentioned in at least 0.5 percent (out of 20,953 stories) of online dating-related coverage between Jan. 1, 2019 and July 31, 2020.

Company Mentions in U.S.-Based Online Dating Coverage
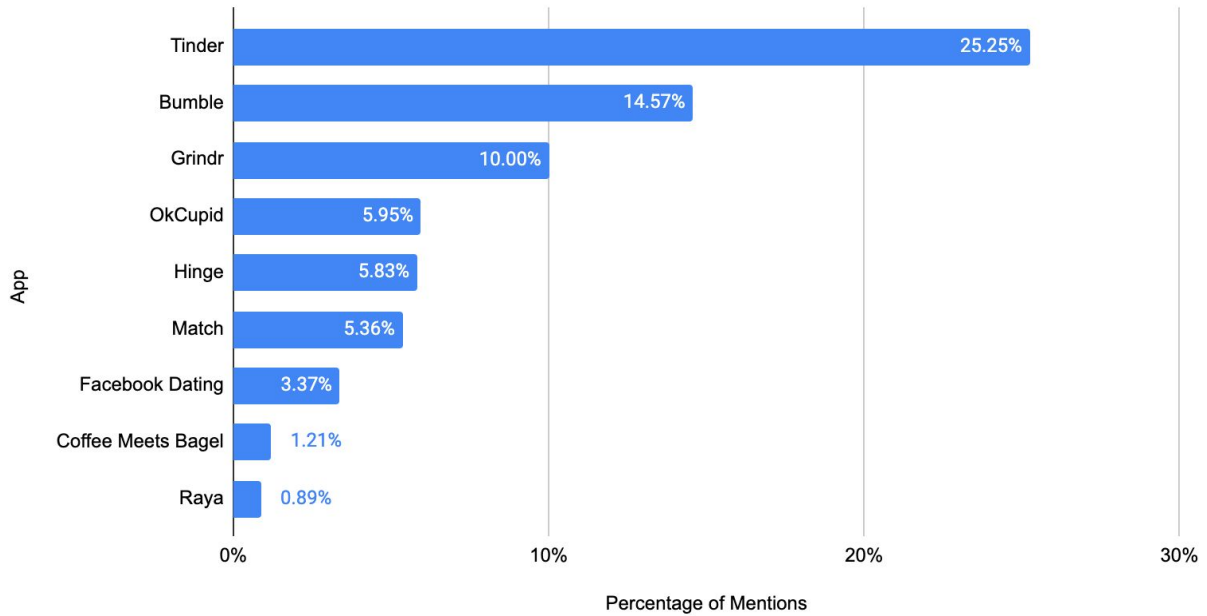Apps with over 0.5 percent of online dating coverage

App	Percentage of Mentions
Tinder	25.25%
Bumble	14.57%
Grindr	10.00%
OkCupid	5.95%
Hinge	5.83%
Match	5.36%
Facebook Dating	3.37%
Coffee Meets Bagel	1.21%
Raya	0.89%

Figure 1: *Percentage of mentions of dating apps in U.S.-based online dating coverage. This figure only shows those dating apps that received over 0.5 percent of coverage.*

Our analysis found media coverage of Tinder and Grindr to be particularly noteworthy. In Sept. 2019, Tinder had 7.86 million users, making it the most popular dating app in the U.S., according to Statista. In the same report, Grindr was the sixth most popular dating app, with 1.64 million users in the U.S. Of all the app mentions we reviewed for this report, Grindr was the only LGBTQ+-specific app to garner over 0.5 percent of online dating news coverage.

Coverage of both Tinder and Grindr highlighted data privacy and security harms associated with app use. Coverage of Tinder also focused on specific pop culture references, such as news stories covering the clichés of "big dating," being the world's pickiest dater, and Tinder jokes on April Fools Day. Meanwhile, coverage of Grindr was often characterized by specific incidents of user harms associated with app use, particularly for young people, the LGBTQ+ community, and people of color. Examples include stories such as the sexual assault of underage boys and other gay men Grindr and how "China's Kunlun Tech agrees to the U.S. demand to sell Grindr's gay dating app."

Many stories that mentioned Grindr often did so in relation to the company's Chinese ownership. At the height of debates about TikTok's Chinese ownership in summer 2020, TikTok was often juxtaposed with Grindr in news coverage. Grinder was referenced as an example of the government stepping in to try and block or break up deals with Chinese investors. This framing was out of the scope of our core research focus, but highlights how

news coverage may conflate internationally popular apps depending on their ownership and financial backing. We noted a similar incident of dating app geopolitics in news coverage of Tinder from June 2019, in which the [Russian government ordered Tinder to share data](#) with Russian government and intelligence agencies.

Of the apps reviewed, the only other app to generate notable patterns of media coverage in our period of study was Facebook Dating. The service received significant media attention when it launched in Sept. 2019. According to the articles we reviewed, the launch of Facebook dating was [newsworthy](#) given that Facebook was [mired in data privacy scandals](#) like Cambridge Analytica. News stories around the app's launch time also discussed [exposed phone numbers on Facebook](#), but these were not specifically related to Facebook Dating.

Given the high-profile nature of privacy concerns on Facebook, some articles chose to cover Facebook Dating from a privacy and security standpoint rather than a cultural one. We identified articles about [privacy features](#) and [in-app safety features](#), including [an article in WIRED](#) which highlighted how Facebook dating allows users to turn off matching with friends of friends, which "may also help LGTBQ+ people who are not out to their communities." Though there is no available information on Facebook Dating user adoption, according to [Fortune](#), we noted that media coverage of Facebook Dating declined significantly following the app's launch. Though Facebook itself generally receives much media attention, Facebook Dating receives notably lower levels of media attention.

Image by [Blogtrepreneur](#) from [Flickr](#)

Theme 2 — Privacy concerns and legislative action

Privacy and regulatory action are key themes in our investigation of dating app-related media coverage. We looked at the news stories that coincided with spikes in media attention and found notable coverage of policymakers' dating app investigations related to data collection, data management, and dating sharing. An increase in media attention in Feb. 2020, for example, can be attributed to [Ireland's Data Protection Commission's investigations](#) against Tinder following complaints from consumer groups in the European Union. A few months later, in May 2020, the U.S. FTC found that a Ukraine-based company and maker of dating apps was found to have [violated the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)](#) by "collecting personal information from children under 13 without parental consent."

In addition to policy action, we found many news stories that summarized popular privacy research or referenced that research to contextualize privacy and/or security concerns. The table below lists the reports we identified while reviewing news stories; areas of focus include online scams, leaking personal data, and inadequate protections.

Research Reports	Sampling of News Articles Referencing this Research
[Fall in Love, Go to Jail: BBB Report on How Some Romance Fraud Victims Become Money Mules](#) by the Better Business Bureau, a nonprofit organization **Feb. 2019**	[BBB Valentine Advice: Be Careful With Online Dating Sites](#) [BBB warns of online dating romance scams on Valentine's Day](#)
[Romance scams rank number one on total reported losses](#) by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission **Feb. 2019**	[Americans Lost $143 Million In Online Relationship Scams Last Year](#) [Romance scam: An elderly widower lost $200,000 in Oregon](#)
[OUT OF CONTROL: How consumers are exploited by the online advertising industry](#) by the Norwegian Consumer Council, a Norweigan government agency and consumer protection organization **Jan. 2020**	[How do Tinder and other dating apps use my data](#) [Study finds Grindr, OKCupid and Tinder sharing sensitive data](#) [Dating apps leak personal data, Norwegian group says](#) [Data privacy: Why Venmo sent my personal info – and yours – to Braze](#)
[It's not true love if they ask for money](#) by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission **Feb. 2020**	[Looking for love online? Romance scammers steal your heart to steal your money](#)
[Online Surveillance, Censorship, and Discrimination for LGBTQ+IA+ Community Worldwide](#) by Recorded Future, a privately held cybersecurity company **July 2020**	[A new report exposes how some dating apps put LGBTQ+ users at risk](#) [LGBTQ+ dating apps have unique security risks: Here's how they stack up](#)

*Table 2: **We highlight the research and policy reports that received the most media coverage related to security and privacy concerns about online dating.** Privacy and security-focused research of dating apps, cross-referenced with news articles about that research*

Of particular note was one syndicated [Associated Press article](#) that demonstrates research-to-policy action. The article reviews the U.S. House Oversight and Reform subcommittee on economic and consumer policy's investigation of Bumble, Grindr, The Meet Group and the Match Group over concerns that they are used by underage users and by sex offenders. The subcommittee is also concerned by their use of sensitive data and cites a report by the NCC, released in Jan. 2020.

The NCC report details the extent to which dating apps [sell "highly personal" consumer data](#) to advertisers and cites notes that ["Grindr sent data including users' GPS location, age and](#)

[gender](to)the other companies". Other stories make note of [Grindr's past failings](link) to protect users' HIV status from being shared, drawing a pattern of negligence in protecting consumer data.

We also found [references to a July 2020 report](link) by cybersecurity company Recorded Future. This report highlights dating app practices that inadequately protect LGBTQ+ users from oppressive government regimes. Together, the Recorded Future and NCC reports highlight a pattern of harm against members of the LGBTQ+ community. They provide and reflect increased awareness about the specific vulnerabilities faced by this population.

News coverage of such reports holds the potential to eventually fuel industry and policy change to increase user protections. The news stories we identified around privacy and security harms to LGBTQ+ community did not correspond to one-off egregious data breaches, but rather suggests a pattern of harms that repeats over time. The stories we reviewed both provide and reflect increased awareness about specific privacy and security vulnerabilities. Based on privacy and security regulatory action findings reviewed in this section, and the apparent visibility of research on dating apps and their role in current policy debates, it is possible that this steady stream of coverage can fuel industry and policy change to increase user protections.

Image by [Andrej Lišakov](#) from [Unsplash](#)

Theme 3 — Minority representation in online dating discourse

At the outset of this project, our research team had a foundational interest in privacy issues related to dating apps. We knew from previous research — such as the reports discussed in the previous section and assorted news stories — that online dating concerns, especially those related to privacy, were particularly important to members of the LGBTQ+ community. We also knew that the LGBTQ+ community is made up of [early adopters and heavy users](#) of the internet and online services, and that the LGBTQ+ community has maintained a strong presence online while they find safe spaces to connect, access resources, or share with each other. Dating apps play a critical role for many in the community, especially those who are looking for connection in places with low LGBTQ+ presence or who have yet to come out to their network.

With that in mind, we had originally planned to investigate media coverage of LGBTQ+ issues as one of our primary themes in this report. However, as soon as we began studying the news stories that matched our query for LGBTQ+ stories related to online dating, we realized that it is not possible to study LGBTQ+ online dating issues in isolation; rather, the headlines we found on these topics also included racial concerns about online dating.

The queer community was among the first to approach creative solutions to connecting online at the beginning of the pandemic. Past [research shows](#) this is an indicator of their need and experience using online spaces to form community and relationships. Evidence of their quick approaches can be seen through the early evolution of [Club Quarantine](#), a daily video call dance party meant to mirror the likes of a physical club while offering a safe space for the community to gather. Presence online was only further amplified by Pride month in June, a celebration for the LGBTQ+ community. Though usually celebrated in-person around the world, the community used a variety of digital tools to further organize, [bolstering their digital and media presence](#).

Further media coverage of race-related harms on dating apps became available when the Black News Channel launched in 2020. [Coverage at the time](#) included a discussion of dating app privacy concerns for the Black community. University of Southern California student Anthony Payne also [called on peers](#) to reassess their racial biases while dating. Amidst the Black Lives Matter movement in June 2020, [coverage](#) highlighted the relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and racial justice issues.

[Research from the University of Michigan and University of Illinois](#) in Nov. 2019 confirmed that "racialized sexual discrimination" (also known as 'sexual racism') on queer dating apps "can have [significant negative health impacts](#) on men of color, including depression and feelings of lower self-worth." Many articles also discussed potentially harmful features on Grindr. The app ultimately [deleted its controversial ethnicity filter](#), which"helped create a culture where users were [emboldened to express their racism](#)," in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.

Though we reviewed news stories from U.S.-based publications, we identified many stories that underscored the global nature of dating app-related privacy and security concerns. In April 2018, [European researchers](#) and [Buzzfeed journalists](#) highlighted that Grindr shared H.I.V. status, sexual tastes, and other intimate personal details with outside third party companies. While this event occurred outside our period of study, it continues to be a pivotal moment for discussions about the harms of online dating.

Gay dating app Jack'd [exposed millions of nude user photos](#) in Feb. 2020. Later in 2020, [a Moroccan social media influencer encouraged](#) people to use Grindr's location data to identify gay locals, noting that LGBTQ+ community face legal and societal challenges in the country. Local news articles also highlight examples of dating apps being used for harmful purposes, including an incident in which Texas men used Grindr to [lure, assault and rob gay men](#) and another in which a [Detroit man used Grindr](#) to target and shoot two gay men.

Media attention is increasingly turning towards race and racism and harms to the LGBTQ+ community while using dating apps. Dating app-related harms are not isolated to one community or one event — these issues are intersectional. *Race-related and discriminatory*

harms on dating apps are significant. However, they comprise a subset of media coverage on the potential privacy and security harms of dating apps.

Figures 2 and 3 present the volume of minority-related online dating coverage as a percentage of all stories about online dating in the U.S., so the percent volume helps contextualize the attention (or lack thereof) given to minority-related online dating issues in the United States. Figure 2 below highlights the overall volume of coverage on the subject. Relative to online dating in U.S.-based media, attention to the LGBTQ+ community (16 percent) and race and ethnicity (4 percent) are low. Journalists have the opportunity to cover more topics on minorities and online dating.
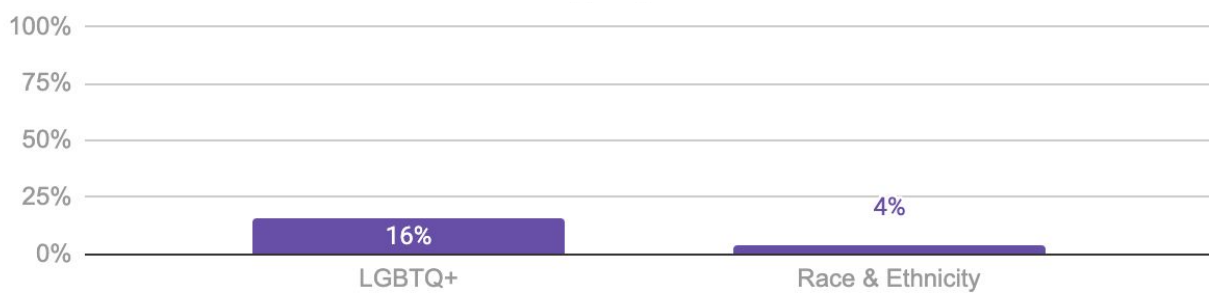

Figure 2: Less media attention is focused on race-related online dating than LGBTQ+-related online dating. *This figure shows media attention within the LGBTQ+ and Race & Ethnicity queries, presented as a percentage of online dating media stories in the United States.*

Figure 3 below highlights the volume of minority-related coverage of online dating specifically in regards to privacy and security concerns, given that those hold much significance for many in minority communities. Our qualitative review confirmed a low-volume undercurrent of media attention for minority dating topics over time.
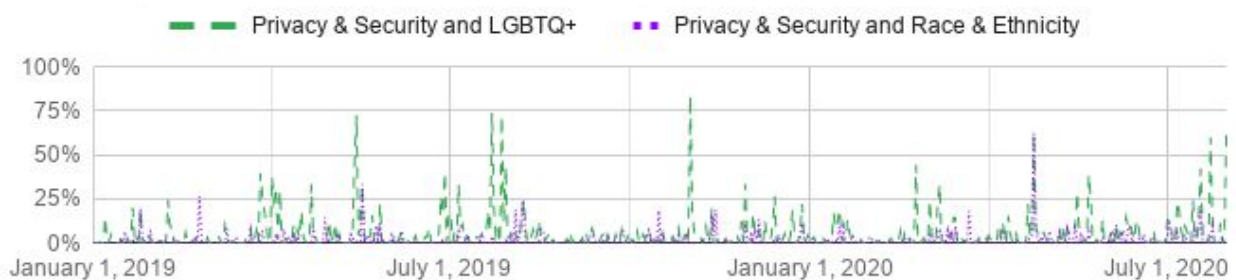

Figure 3: Data-related harms and LGBTQ+ stories appear to generate more media-related attention than data-related harms with race-related stories. *This figure shows media attention to privacy and security and minority-related online dating issues, presented as a percentage of all U.S.-based media coverage of online dating.*

To better understand minority coverage in online dating discourse (Figure 4 below), we queried LGBTQ+-related coverage which surfaced 3,392 stories, or 16.2 percent of overall discourse on online dating. Roughly 37.9 percent of the stories related to LGBTQ+ issues mentioned Grindr in some capacity. A nearly equivalent number of LGBTQ+ stories mentioned privacy and security issues in some capacity. Of the online dating stories that matched our query for LGBTQ+ and privacy and security issues, 48.2 percent mentioned Grindr. Our query for race-related conversations in online dating surfaced 4.5 percent of overall discourse on online dating. Of those stories, 40.3 percent mentioned both race and privacy and security issues.
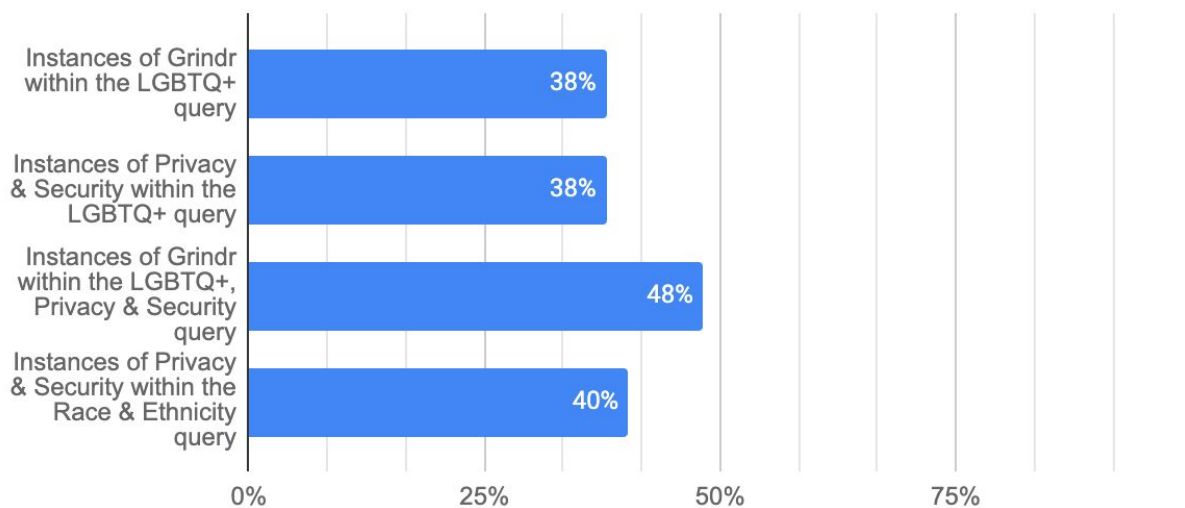

Figure 4: Privacy and security is a driving theme for coverage on minority-related stories. This figure highlights overlap in subjects across minority-related stories on online dating. Looking at the breakdown, a similar percentage of stories concerning privacy and security are found within both the LGBTQ+ (37.9 percent) and the race-related (40.3 percent) queries. An equivalent number of LGBTQ+ stories mention Grindr along with privacy and security. Of those stories about online dating that mention LGBTQ+ and privacy and security, 48.2 percent mention Grindr, indicating that Grindr-related conversations drive the privacy and security conversations for online dating about LGBTQ+ community.

480 stories about online dating mentioned both LGBTQ+ and race-related issues (Figure 5 below); 14.2 percent of stories about LGBTQ+ issues referenced race in some capacity and 51.1 percent of stories about race mentioned LGBTQ+ issues.
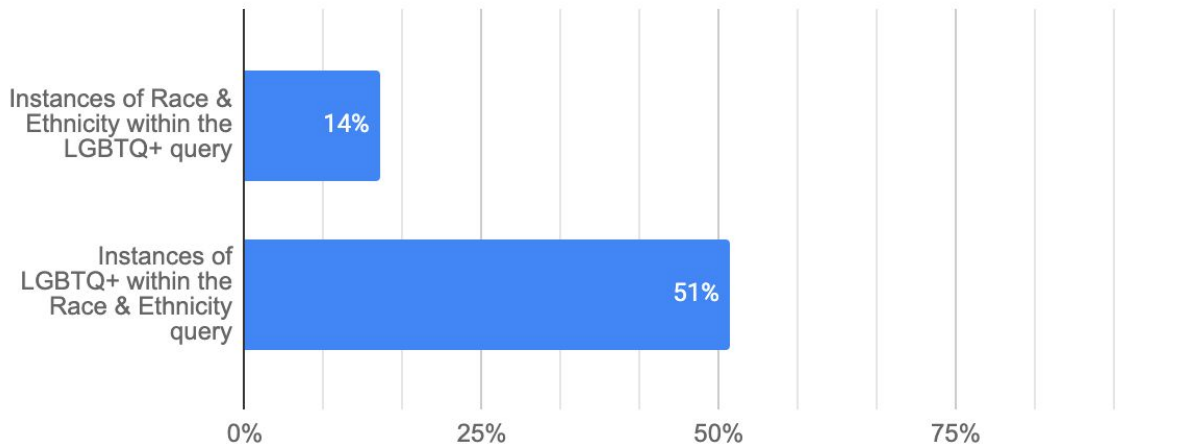
Figure 5: LGBTQ+ issues are present in a majority of race-related stories on online dating. However, racial issues are not a major conversation driver for stories about LGBTQ+ online dating. Of those stories that matched our search for LGBTQ+ issues in online dating, 14.2 percent also mentioned race in some capacity. Of those stories that matched our search for racial issues in online dating, 51.1 percent also mentioned LGBTQ+ issues in some capacity.

Figure 5 points to a noteworthy overlap in discourse between online dating conversations about LGBTQ+ and race-related issues; though 14.2 percent of stories about LGBTQ+ issues referenced race in some capacity, 51.1 percent of stories about race mentioned LGBTQ+ issues. Why might this be?

Our initial analysis suggests two possible explanations for this finding. First, these issues are intersectional, so there may be overlap in these stories. But how can we explain why there are more instances of LGBTQ+-oriented stories within the race-related category rather than the other way around? One potential explanation is that users may be more sensitive about adding racial preferences to dating profiles, while identifying sexual identity is a core feature on many dating apps. There are apps created specifically for the LGBTQ+ community (Scruff and Growlr, for example) and there are dating apps made explicitly for race-related preferences (EastMeetEast and BlackPeopleMeet, for example). However, as evidenced by Grindr's now-removed "choose your match by race filter," explicitly stating a racial preference for dating is more likely to be seen as racist.

Given the egregious harms that minority communities encounter on a routine basis, we were surprised at the comparatively sparse media attention dedicated to these stories. *Though approximately 20.7 percent of stories about online dating mention LGBTQ+ or race-related issues in some capacity, only 7.9 percent of online dating stories mention these minority communities specifically in regards to the privacy and security harms they face.*

Conclusion

This project began with a driving question: How might we better understand the community-focused impacts of online dating by evaluating media coverage of dating apps and their risks?

This report found that media coverage of dating apps is driven by user-based popularity of the apps, or by the reputations of the companies providing the apps (like Facebook and Grindr). We also highlighted how research findings and governmental attention — either through attempts at regulation or further review of the subject — affects media coverage of the privacy and security issues related to online dating. Further, we learned that, though media coverage of minority issues (LGBTQ+ and race-related stories) in online dating is fairly consistent, there is opportunity to expand coverage of both the discrimination minority communities face while using dating apps and the privacy and security risks associated with dating app use.

This report applied two methods of study to our corpus of online dating. We first analyzed the volume of news stories by subject and assessed story frequency for various patterns. We also manually reviewed stories to better understand the patterns driving media coverage of online dating. This manual review surfaced some unique trend-related findings and potential questions for future work.

Our manual review of stories surfaced a steady undercurrent of stories discussing the potential harms of online dating, related to data leaks and discrimination. We found coverage that routinely discussed harms of online dating, but also noted that those harms are not given as much attention as could be warranted given their severity. Further media analysis on dating apps is important to understand the factors that generate high levels of media coverage — and those that do not.

Media coverage is often event or situationally driven. Though that coverage is attentive to potential harms, it is more likely to occur under certain circumstances such as the Black Lives Matter movement, and when major data breaches occur on popular dating apps. Though we identified increases in media attention following research reports and regulatory action, we have to ask why consumer harms do not serve as a larger focal point for investigative work in this area given the pervasive nature of online dating. How can such research and reporting be most useful to users and how can it be amplified?

This report is intended to further conversations about dating apps, their potential harms and benefits, and our understanding of their role in society. Increasing numbers of personal relationships are being formed online, and — like many apps — dating apps are tools that can be weaponized as much as they are used to build positive social interactions. Technologies can be twisted to harm the exact people they intended to help. Improved visibility and stronger

protections for minority community members are persistent issues that have occupied media headlines in the U.S., and if our findings are any indicator, they won't stop being important.