Women's Studies International Forum xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Review

Intimate intrusions online: Studying the normalisation of abuse in dating apps

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Dating apps
Tinder
Dating violence
Sexual harassment
Normalisation of abuse
Continuum of sexual violence

ABSTRACT

Intimate intrusions in mobile dating contexts are a pressing social issue given the high uptake of dating apps and frequent anecdotal reports of abuse. Despite emerging popular and scholarly interest in gendered violence and online abuse, little is known to date about women's everyday lived experiences of intimate intrusions facilitated through dating apps. In this review, I draw on three bodies of literature to demonstrate how sexual harassment, dating violence, and dating app research can help us better understand women's experiences on Tinder and similar apps. I then adapt the continuum of sexual violence as a framework to interrogate patterns of normalised abuse in this context. I argue that the theory of a continuum of sexual violence can help researchers to contextualise intimate intrusions on dating apps and consider their implications. It is important to pay attention to the normalisation of abuse in mobile dating contexts, particularly as a factor that may reinforce a culture that supports violence against women.

Introduction

In 2014, Warriena Wright fell to her death from Gable Tostee's high-rise apartment balcony after they met via the dating app Tinder (Silva, 2015). Although Tostee was acquitted of all charges, Wright's death demonstrated the potential for serious harm when meeting with relatively unknown internet strangers. But dating has always been risky for women, as intimate relationships are a primary site of violence and abuse (Stanko, 1990). While the opportunity to date online has been possible for many years and popularised with the advent of Match.com (Ranzini & Lutz, 2016), the proliferation of mobile phones, and increasing accessibility of the internet (Kelley, 2011) have spurred an increase in spatially aware apps directed at those seeking new friendships (Chen & Rahman, 2008), sexual encounters, and dating relationships (David & Cambre, 2016). The potential for intimate intrusions, defined as behaviours "women themselves perceive and/or experience as intimidating, threatening, coercive or violent" (Stanko, 1985, 1), facilitated via Tinder is a pressing social issue given the app has become an increasingly common way for young people to interact (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017). In Australia, Roy Morgan (2015) research found that 8.8% of young people aged 18–24 years had used Tinder during the four weeks prior to being surveyed about dating app use. Due to its popularity, Tinder has the potential to shift norms around social interactions more broadly. Tinder's demographic skews young. Since relationship patterns are established early on and early abuse often has a lasting impact (Hlavka, 2014), abuse experienced while using apps like Tinder has potentially lasting implications. As such, this article focuses on women's experiences of intimate intrusions on Tinder due to its domination of the mainstream heterosexual dating app market (Sumter et al., 2017). Differences in dating app affordances and user behaviour also justify research focused on specific apps.

Scholars have long stressed that violence against women is comprised of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). More recently, the popularisation of the term "coercive control" to refer to the broad range of behaviours comprising abuse in relationships highlights the importance of non-physical forms of abuse (Stark, 2007). Although experiences of physical dating violence and other forms of gender-based violence are important, the ability to stay connected via digital media regardless of distance means that physical boundaries are not barriers to abusive behaviour. Dating apps have created new avenues for the conduct of established forms of abuse (Hess & Flores, 2016). At the same time, dating apps have made new forms of abuse possible (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016). To date, however, research on gender-based abuse has largely focused on physical violence in cohabiting or marital relationships, as reflected in the term domestic violence.

As dating moves online, so does gender-based abuse. Indeed, social norms that shape offline interactions have been reproduced online (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001). But early internet enthusiasts (see for example, Barlow, 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995) predicted that the web would be a liberating space "…different from real, embodied face to face interaction" (Baym, 2010: 152). Some

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.04.005
Received 8 December 2017; Received in revised form 11 April 2018; Accepted 11 April 2018

scholars envisaged an online experience distinct from the offline world (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002). This utopian vision imagined the internet as a potentially democratic space free from racism, sexism and xenophobia (Herring, 1996). Other early Internet researchers predicted dystopian outcomes such as "information overload, email addiction, uninhibited aggression, and the eventual breakdown of people's ability to engage one another face to-face" (Herring, 1996:1). Contemporary research points to a middle ground in which oppressive and liberatory potentials coexist online (Baym, 2010). Gender continues to be an important construct in mediated communication (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Indeed, the gender norms that underpin the harassment of girls and women in online spaces are the same in physical settings (Baym, 2010).

Scholars have begun to document girls' and women's experiences of digitally-mediated abuse and harassment (Jane, 2017; Woodlock, 2016; Ybarra, Price-Feeney, Lenhart, & Zickuhr, 2017). Scholars like Jane (2017: 117) have documented the insidiousness and harmfulness of "gendered cyberhate" in the face of feminist efforts of resistance. So far, most of the attention to gendered forms of digitally mediated abuse has been on the relatively public experiences of harassment and abuse of women around key incidents such as #gamergate (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2015); the non-consensual distribution of sexually explicit images referred to as image-based sexual abuse (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; McGlynn, Rackley, & Houghton, 2017); coercive or pressured sexting (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012); blackmail (Bluett-Boyd, Fileborn, Quadara, & Moore, 2013; Henry & Powell, 2016); and the ways that social media have exacerbated the impact of bullying on young people (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012; Weinstein & Selman, 2014). While shedding light on these problems, the research has primarily focused on different genres of abusive behaviours rather than how they fit into dating and relationship contexts.

In the absence of a dedicated literature on the subject, I consider three bodies of literature that can help inform future research on women's experiences on Tinder and other dating apps. First, I review the research on sexual harassment. Second, I review the literature on dating violence. This review is part of a larger project that focuses on Australia, and I primarily focus on the limited existing research that is specific to the Australian context. While international research exists, it is unclear how this applies to and differs from women's experiences in Australia. Accordingly, I critically assess the Australian literature to set a future research agenda. Third, I consider the emerging research on dating apps. I argue that intimate intrusions facilitated by dating apps are part of a continuum of sexual violence that have cumulative effects that are worthy of study alongside physical violence. It should be noted that while women and same-sex attracted people can be the perpetrators of sexual harassment and dating violence, these interactions may have different dynamics and warrant specific attention. This paper deals primarily with men's intrusive behaviour toward women.

I propose a theoretically informed research agenda for studying men's intrusive behaviour in the context of dating apps. I adapt Kelly's (1988) continuum of sexual violence to conceptualise women's experiences of intimate intrusions on Tinder and similar dating apps. While physical violence is widely recognised as abusive, this framework provides an opportunity to interrogate everyday patterns of normalised abuse that appear pervasive in mobile dating contexts. This is an increasingly pressing issue given the high uptake of dating apps and frequent anecdotal reports of harm. Ultimately, this paper argues that it is important to pay attention to the normalisation of abuse in mobile dating contexts, particularly as a factor that may reinforce a culture that supports abuse and violence against women.

Terminology

For the purposes of this article, I define intimate intrusions as women's experiences in mobile dating contexts that they "themselves perceive and/or experience as intimidating, threatening, coercive or violent" (Stanko, 1985, 1). Acknowledging the great terminological variation in research on gender-based violence, a small body of international research has focused on men's intrusive behaviour. Although scholars have used different language, for example, men's stranger intrusions (see for example, Vera-Gray, 2016); commonplace intrusions (see for example, Kelly, 1988); and intimate intrusions (see for example, Kelly, 2012; Stanko, 1985), the common denominator that links these definitions is men's disruption to women's lives through "everyday" forms of male violence (Vera-Gray, 2016). Returning to Stanko (1985), intimate intrusions is a useful term because it does not make assumptions about what the experiences are, where they occur, what they mean to women, how they affect women, how they respond to them, or the intent of the perpetrators. In this way, seemingly 'typical' events and those are that are widely recognised as abusive are open to investigation. Fundamentally, this terminology provides a holistic and useful lens for studying women's lived experiences of intrusions on dating apps.

A holistic approach is needed because we struggle to recognise and talk about abuse that does not meet current definitions of criminal behaviour. Popular media reports and social media users reveal the range of men's intrusive behaviour on dating apps. For instance, women report receiving lewd 'pick up' lines via dating apps (Instagram, 2018a), and experiencing physical violence when meeting in offline settings (Edwards, 2016). While these reports are good at identifying the behaviour, there remains a problem with conceptualising and naming the more 'typical' experiences as abusive. Crime and victimisation surveys shed light on women's victimisation and have the benefit of being regularly conducted; however, these often fail to reflect the range and extent of abusive behaviours women experience (Dragiewicz, 2011; Mooney, 1996). Using the intimate intrusions framing to investigate women's lived experiences could help to overcome existing measurement and terminological challenges.

Theoretical framework

Despite widespread contemporary condemnation of gender-based violence, men and boys' abuse of girls and women is so common it may be considered ordinary. Liz Kelly developed a theoretical framework to help explain how violence and abuse could simultaneously be widely condemned and pervasive and tolerated. Kelly proposed the continuum of sexual violence in 1988. The key points of the continuum of sexual violence are: gendered forms of abuse and harassment are not rare crimes. They are experienced by the majority of women and are therefore 'ordinary', rather than 'aberrant'; 'ordinary' experiences of abuse have cumulative effects that can be as important as physical violence; and the focus on the extreme forms of physical violence that are recognised as 'aberrant' distracts us from addressing mainstream cultural values that effectively normalise abuse.

The continuum demonstrates how seemingly mundane events share commonalities with those that garner legal and media attention (Kelly, 1988). While the continuum draws connections between events, it also assists women to consider their experiences by highlighting how 'typical' and 'aberrant' male behaviours shade into one another. Kelly's (1988) continuum seeks to better understand how women experience intrusive interactions. This approach provides a more meaningful way to understand women's experiences of abuse than quantifying the prevalence of decontextualised behaviours. According to Kelly's (1988) model, different forms of gendered violence are linked by social attitudes that minimise and excuse violence against women. These shared attitudes are what we need to understand in order to decrease violence and abuse rather than just responding to them. The continuum does not present a hierarchical determination of seriousness. Rather, Kelly (1988: 76) argues "the degree of impact cannot be simplistically inferred from the form a woman experiences or its place within the continuum". In fact, Kelly (1988) seeks to challenge hierarchies of abusive behaviours that allow normalised and 'quieter forms of intrusion' to be ignored (Vera-Gray, 2014: 125). Despite Kelly's call for