COVID Compatibility and Risk Negotiation in Online Dating during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Apryl A. Williams¹, Gabe H. Miller²*, and Guadalupe Marquez-Velarde³

Abstract
We interviewed 31 individuals about their online dating life and behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic. We use literature on risk and health behaviors to generate four frames for dealing with risk associated with COVID-19 while dating: 1) Unconcerned about Risk, 2) Preliminary Risk Assessment, 3) Active Risk Negotiation, and 4) Risk Aversion. Further, we argue that risk perception causes daters to use implicit and explicit communication about health behaviors to determine COVID compatibility, a state of being in agreement with a partner about how to best minimize risk of contracting COVID-19. Daters want to know that their partner is behaving with similar regard for health guidance and that they are doing their best to keep those in their communities safe. Though daters may transition between frames throughout the course of the pandemic, we use these four frames to identify sets of beliefs, routines, and personal health practices across our sample that have relevance for social scientists, health communication scholars, and health care practitioners.

Keywords
COVID compatibility, health behavior, health communication, online dating, risk

¹Department of Communication and Media, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI
²Department of Sociology, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS
³Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology, Utah State University, Logan, UT

Corresponding Author:
Apryl A. Williams, Department of Communication and Media, University of Michigan, 105 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA.
Email: aprylw@umich.edu
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed almost every aspect of our lives and increased our dependency on digital technologies, online dating technologies notwithstanding. Individuals who were not partnered or in committed relationships relied more heavily on virtual opportunities for encounters because of the pandemic. Ultimately, online daters weigh the risks of exposure to COVID-19 based on perceived health risk (Dryhurst et al., 2020; Wong & Jensen, 2020). Social scientists have also uncovered shifts in dating, romance, and marriage due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the Kinsey Institute (Garcia, 2020) found that though people were having less sex during the pandemic, they became more creative about their sex lives with many of them adopting virtual tools to broaden their sex lives. Consequently, the use of online dating applications and platforms seemingly proliferated (Vinopal, 2020). Faced with the prospect of extended loneliness for the foreseeable future, many turned to online dating looking for safer ways to make new friends and connect with others during the “early days” of the pandemic.

Many popular media outlets argue that daters should embrace the “new normal” while trying to adopt practices that make dating safer. Our results demonstrate that individuals are attempting to do so. Yet we find that perceptions about COVID-19 infection risk and preventative health behaviors deployed to limit risk do not always align. In this paper, we explore social norms, discourse, and expectations associated with dating, courting, sex, and romance during the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to this nascent area of research. As an interdisciplinary team of scholars informed by technology studies, communication studies, and the sociologies of health, risk, and dating, we examine how individuals negotiate and communicate about personal health risk while dating during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also explore how daters communicate about preventative health behaviors such as personal hygiene, social distancing, and wearing face coverings with their online suitors. To our knowledge, there has been no previous research on risk negotiation and communication about health beliefs and behaviors in dating during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, we contribute to social science literature on how individuals perceive, negotiate, justify, and manage health risk in romantic and sexual relationships during a pandemic.

Ultimately, we find that perceptions about what constitutes “safe behavior” are fluid and differ in accordance with perceived personal risk and risks to others in one’s immediate personal physical sphere. Daters are more likely to engage in “risky” behaviors if they perceive the potential benefits to be valuable to their social and romantic lives in the immediate and long term. In the words of one participant who initiated and has maintained a new relationship during the pandemic, “I didn’t care [about the risks]. I really wanted to meet her; like ‘I’ll share my germs with you’”. Though individuals are aware of potential health risks associated with coronavirus, they are willing to take on some levels of risk if they believe the individual they are seeing is “COVID Compatible.” Based on themes in interview data, we define COVID compatibility as either implicit or explicit agreement on a ranging set of beliefs, discourses,
and health behavior practices (such as wearing a mask, desire to maintain six foot distance, and desire to visit locales where social distancing is enforced) related to dating during the COVID-19 pandemic.1

We borrow from literature about risk, health behaviors, and sexual health to formulate our risk frameworks and COVID compatibility. Using data from 31 semi-structured interviews from participants based throughout the U.S., we argue that those engaged in dating fall into four categories: Unconcerned about Risk; Preliminary Risk Assessment; Active Risk Negotiation; and Risk Aversion. In what follows, we begin with a review of the theoretical underpinnings of risk and apply them to the sociological study of online dating and online dating health risk literature. We position these bodies of literature together to support our framework on selective risk in dating during the pandemic.

The Sociology of Risk…in a Pandemic?

As an interdisciplinary team of scholars with expertise in media and communication, social theory, and the sociology of health, we are tasked with bringing together seemingly disconnected bodies of literature to bear on the study of dating during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though norms and health risks associated with online dating practices are germane to the present study, ultimately, our data tell a story about risk perception, the steps that individuals are willing to take to mitigate health risk while adapting to ever-changing perceptions about COVID-19 risk, and the discursive strategies they use to navigate risk while trying to date. Hence, we find it relevant to revisit the sociological discussion of risk. In our view, there are two oppositional forces of “risk” to conceptualize: personal health risk to daters and the risk that daters pose for the rest of society. We ask how those engaging in online dating think about risk. Should they prioritize their individual social and psychological needs over the risk that going on dates during a pandemic may pose for society?

First, we would be remiss if we did not characterize the COVID-19 pandemic under Ulrich Beck’s risk society framework (1992). According to Beck, “risk society” is characterized by reflexive modernity, a period in which human-made threats of global proportions will threaten our existence (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 2013; Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2020). Beck argues that in the risk society, we will constantly face and manage the unintended risks and hazards associated with industrial and technological developments (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994; Wimmer & Quandt, 2006; p. 336). When Beck conceptualized the risk society in the late 1980s, he predicted challenges of a modern globalized society but failed to foresee the stark inequalities that these threats have caused; underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic (Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2020; Pietrocola et al., 2021). Other theorists have expanded on risk society connecting it to inequalities in race, class, and gender (Curran, 2016; Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2020). Hence, if we apply Beck’s framing, the COVID-19 pandemic is a result of post-industrial modernization and environmental decline (Giddens, 1999; Pietrocola et al., 2021).
The effects of risk are felt everywhere but health risk perception especially varies by experience and available amount of quality information (Beck, 1992; Slovic, 2000, 2010). Risk perception is a complex construct, influenced by how we as a society think risk will affect us, and the ways we receive information about risk from institutions (Pietrocola et al., 2021; Wilkinson, 2001). Accurate risk perception is essential to the management of public health risks as it influences the public’s compliance with protective behaviors (Dryhurst et al., 2020). In the U.S., conflicting information issued by the federal government has generated divergent perceptions of pandemic risk; one where the pandemic is a real public health threat and another reality where it is practically non-existent, especially now that more individuals have access to vaccines. Hence, risk is politicized, especially during the period when our data were collected, a time in which national governing bodies appeared to operate on varying sets of scientific facts.

When natural disasters or epidemics occur, people have traditionally relied on experts for information about how to navigate health risk. But, as Lupton (2006) points out, in contemporary times, individuals question and become suspicious of seemingly conflicting voices of expertise. The politicizing of risk allows blame to be placed on individuals who align with particular viewpoints. The post-truth era (McIntyre, 2018) contributes to this historical moment in which individuals rely on politicized versions of truth to inform their perception and make personal decisions about risk and health both for themselves and the communities in which they live. Once individuals behave according to those decisions, others respond to their actions and determine whether those individuals are behaving in a way that is more or less risky than others. Part of the challenge faced by daters is mixed messaging from the U.S. government which muddies the waters in terms of finding reliable and factual information on which daters can make decisions about their safety. Still, perceived noncompliance with the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines may cause daters to be viewed as societal pariahs. Those who are perceived as posing a risk to society are viewed as a source of fear (Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006; Zinn, 2006). Simultaneously, individuals also view some health risk as an acceptable part of daily life (Gale et al., 2016).

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, risk-taking in dating may help ward off loneliness and isolation. In our study, daters use selective approaches to mitigating risk. They are faced with choosing whether the risk of contracting COVID-19 is worth the other risks associated with a temporary break in dating life: loneliness, isolation, and lack of affection among others.

**Theorizing Motivations for Online Dating Use in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Online dating encompasses a wide range of digital dating platforms and strategies. Digital dating platforms can be accessed via the web through a traditional webpage interface or through a mobile application. Dating platforms offer both short form and
swipe-based interfaces or long form biographies in which users detail elements of their lives, desires, and hopes. Though nuances exist within the digital dating landscape, for the purposes of this study, we collapse all digital dating tools under one umbrella. We use the terms online dating and digital dating interchangeably throughout this article to connote any digitally aided approach for seeking intimacy, both sexual and romantic (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Hutson et al., 2018). We are less concerned with the differences in dating technologies and more interested in how users engage these technologies during the pandemic to initiate relationships.

Generally, motivations for using online dating platforms vary widely. Opportunities to meet new people appears to be a common sense finding though it has been studied and well-documented by the scholarly community (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Wang & Chang, 2010). The pandemic necessitates particular considerations about why users might engage with digital dating. Pre-COVID-19, online dating had been examined by scholars across disciplines. Sociologists and social psychologists largely favor the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) perspective for understanding what motivates dating platform users to engage with each other online. U&G theory posits that daters seek out these tools to gratify various needs including companionship, attention, entertainment, positivity, social inclusion, friendship, affection, romance, sex, love, and fun among others (Bryden, 2017; Pornsakulvanich, 2005; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014). The U&G perspective assumes that users have an understanding of their social and psychological needs and seek out fulfillment (Miller, 2015; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014). In the age of COVID-19, one emotion seems to be more prevalent than others in popular media: loneliness (see Abad-Santos, 2020; Raza, 2020; Seabra, 2020; Vinopal, 2020).

Due to the nature of the pandemic, one that necessitates social distance, individuals reported increased levels of loneliness and increased mental health distress because of that loneliness. The literature on online dating supports the idea that users turn to dating platforms as a cure for loneliness. Borrowing from Wang et al. (2008), we view the COVID-19 pandemic as a communication disruption that may lead to increased feelings of loneliness that, in turn, causes users to seek out others through available means. Wang et al. (2008) argue that emotional and social loneliness indicate a lack of intimate bonds. Temporal loneliness (as opposed to chronic loneliness) may cause individuals to rely on digital media more heavily than they did before the pandemic. Accordingly, several participants in our study reported using online dating platforms with more frequency than before the pandemic. Hence, we argue that users are willing to risk their health in order to satisfy an emotional and psychological need for connection.

In the next sections, we discuss the existing literature on health risk and online dating. We situate risk within the sociology of health literatures while taking a macro level and micro level approach to understanding how individuals think about risk. We ask the questions: For whom is the practice of online dating during the pandemic considered risky? And as a society, can we ask daters to forgo their personal needs, desires, and mental health to benefit society?
Online Dating and Health Risks

Research on safety-related conduct and sexual health behaviors among online daters illustrates the approaches used to safeguard physical well-being. Thus, this literature might also illuminate some of the actions involved to stay safe during a pandemic whilst meeting online suitors. Meeting potential romantic partners through online applications carries an inherent risk (Couch et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2006). There are concerns of privacy and security including identity theft, cyberstalking, becoming the target of a sexual predator, and violence (Couch et al., 2012; Della Cava, 2004; Döring, 2009; Fischler, 2007; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). There are also issues related to trust, such as selective self-presentation, misrepresentation, and deception (Gibbs et al., 2006; Toma et al., 2008; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Due to these concerns, individuals actively gauge how much information to share while deploying strategies to reduce uncertainty (Gibbs et al., 2011). Technology allows online daters to appraise authenticity, gauge compatibility, and surveil the people they meet in online dating apps (Couch et al., 2011).

Besides the inherent personal risks of online dating, there are also health related risks. Individuals who date online tend to be more sexually active and some studies suggest that online dating is associated with unsafe sexual practices and increased risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Döring, 2009; McFarlane et al., 2000, 2004). Undergraduate students in the U.S. who use dating apps had higher rates of unprotected sex and engaged in sex after consuming alcohol or drugs (Sawyer et al., 2018). In another study, 43% of women reported having sex with people they first met online. These women were mostly White, older, and had more sexual experience than those who had not found a sexual partner online. They also reported a higher number of lifetime partners and used condoms frequently. Yet, they also reported higher incidence of STIs, suggesting condom usage fluctuates (McFarlane et al., 2004). Thus, risk avoidance is not a permanent feature of dating interactions. Men who have sex with men and use dating platforms were also more likely to have more partners and to be diagnosed with an STI (Lehmiller & Loerger, 2014). Overall, online dating is an effective medium to find sexual partners, and thus, daters need to be more vigilant about unsafe practices. Overall, health risks are often minimized and the enjoyment of online dating takes precedence.

Safe and unsafe sexual practices vary greatly among online dating platform users (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Choi et al., 2016). Some users wait to have sexual activity until their partners get tested for STIs while others generally intend to have safer sex (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007 p. 284). Online daters try to minimize sexual health risks by deploying a number of strategies. For instance, they assess promiscuity by paying attention to how people describe themselves physically and what sort of pictures they share; explicit photos are used as an indicator of high levels of sexual activity (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007). Online daters tend to be very confident in their ability to minimize or avoid risk. They feel they have the ability to determine who is a safe sexual partner and even with whom they need to use a condom, based on online
interactions. These assessments take into account appearance, attractiveness, cleanliness, built trust, and gut-instinct (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Couch et al., 2012; Peretti-Watel & Moatti, 2006; Skidmore & Hayter, 2000). Personal appearance and attractiveness seem to be particularly relevant. Online daters think they can determine if someone has an STI based on appearances (Clark et al., 1996; Krishnamurti et al., 2020). Similarly, daters in our study believe they can assess a person’s COVID-19 risk mitigation strategy by getting to know them virtually before meeting up in person. We probe whether this is a reliable way to determine “COVID compatibility.”

Methods

Qualitative data were collected during the months of July, August, and September of 2020. Scheduling was dictated by participant availability. We interviewed 31 individuals who were using online dating platforms. Participants were sourced from discussions on either public Facebook posts or posts in dating focused Facebook groups. Posts were created by Facebook users and included a variety of prompts such as: “How many of you are still dating?”, “What are some creative date ideas?”, or “Can folks share what their experience has been like trying to date right now?”. A member of the research team messaged every person who responded to such posts and interviewed every individual who chose to participate and met our inclusion criteria. Because this study is exploratory, we kept the parameters for the study relatively undefined. Daters needed only to have been on an in-person meet up (a non-virtual date) since the onset of the pandemic and be over the age of 18 to participate in the study. To ensure some degree of uniformity, we used a semi-structured interview guide. Each respondent was asked a similar set of questions and the interview guide is included as Appendix A. This research was approved by Susquehanna University IRB # 20190921.03. In accordance with the approval, all participants’ names have been changed and all were made aware that they would be audio recorded. They gave advanced consent for recording. Interviews were transcribed using the service gotranscript.com. All transcripts were checked by a member of the research team against audio recordings for accuracy and amended accordingly prior to analysis.

Interviews were conducted virtually and typically ranged from 15 to 20 minutes. All participants were asked the same set of core questions: How many in person dates have you been on since the beginning of the pandemic? How do you determine who is safe to meet up with? How do you discuss safety with your potential partner? and What is your safety protocol on dates? These core questions helped produce the frames generated by our reading of the data. Because this is an exploratory study—one that we hope to expand more fully on with a mixed-methods study—we use grounded theory to generate results.

Grounded theory is well-suited to this type of research in that it generates new knowledge which we seek to do here (Williams & Tkach, 2021). Though grounded theory can be used to derive inferences from data, it is best used in conjunction with another methodological strategy. Hence, we employ the constant comparative method.
to produce discursive frames. Using the conventions established by Boeije (2002), we maintained a constant comparative method that codes individual interviews in context of the respondent. Once each individual interview was coded, we compared all coded interviews to each other to generate themes that repeated across respondents. One author coded for themes using ATLAS. ti and conferred with the other two about the validity of emergent themes. We met to identify, name, and contextually situate dominant themes. After themes were identified, the authors recoded each interview to generate the data used in this article.

**Results: COVID Compatibility + Selective Risk**

This study focuses on how daters are using digital dating platforms to adapt to health risks and threats posed by the uncertainty and spread of COVID-19. We hope to provide a nuanced understanding about dating during the pandemic with respect to health risk. Using the constant comparative method, we generate four themes that center on approaches to risk and safety: 1) Unconcerned about Risk; 2) Preliminary Risk Assessment; 3) Active Risk Negotiation; and 4) Risk Aversion. These approaches to navigating personal safety and health risk are broad categories encompassing different beliefs and practices around wearing a mask or face covering, holding hands on dates, hugging, kissing, and sexual intercourse on the date. In the discussion section, we provide a detailed framing of each of the four approaches to navigating risk and safety and offer broad social context for each. It is worth noting that these frames are not mutually exclusive. Particularly in the case of the latter three, a person can engage in all of these frameworks while online dating to adapt to ever-changing public health guidance and circumstances.

Our sample consists primarily of women (74%), with ages ranging from 21 to 48 years old (average age, 32), is made up of various racial/ethnic groups, and includes daters from across the United States. Additionally, most participants had used online dating prior to the pandemic (86%). In terms of dating behaviors, individuals had been on dates with 1 to 8 people since the onset of the pandemic (average: 3), and engaged in both high safety and high-risk activities. Seventy-four percent of participants wore masks on dates during the self-reported period of March through September 2020. However, a high prevalence also held hands (61%), hugged (90%), kissed (81%), and had sexual intercourse without a face covering (61%). Daters, on average, kissed two different individuals (range, 1–4) and had a sexual relationship with at least one individual they reported dating (range, 1–4). Finally, COVID-19 has impacted the majority of participants, with 77% reporting they know someone who had tested positive for COVID-19. Importantly, these findings are based on data from the “early days” of the pandemic. We anticipate that the negotiation of safety and risk will continue to be an iterative process as circumstances change.

Prior to providing a detailed framing of each approach to risk, we situate these frames within the larger social context of the pandemic. Here, we introduce *COVID compatibility*: a state of being in either implicit or explicit agreement about how to best
date in the COVID-19 pandemic. Our positioning of risk in dating considers various elements of personal choice. Though seemingly simple, *COVID compatibility* is actually a decoding of social signifiers about which behaviors are acceptable during the pandemic and could even provide a hint at prospective partners’ broader belief and value systems. Individuals in our study tend to date others who follow the same frames as them. For example, an individual in the “Risk Aversion” frame would not want to date someone in the “Unconcerned about Risk” frame. Someone who doubts the existence of the virus (a COVID denier) likely would not want to date someone who engages in strict health measures such as a socially distanced meet up (a Risk Aversion framed dater). A participant, Jess, best demonstrates *COVID compatibility*:

“Obviously – so on certain apps like Bumble you can say what your preference is about masks, so generally I can get a good sense of what kind of *COVID compatibility* we are at. When I first started dating, I was more anal about 6 feet apart but then I showed up and one guy wasn’t wearing a mask and I’m like ‘Dude put that mask on!’ And I knew at that point – this isn’t gonna work because it felt like *COVID compatibility* is huge right now. Like the guy I’m currently seeing – I include him in my pod. So, when you first start dating you don’t know if they are only seeing you and you don’t want to risk COVID or other things. When I felt like he was ready to commit to me, that’s when I felt it was safe to include him as part of my pod.”

Jess mentioned that she did not proceed into relationships with previous dates because they were not on the same page about safety practices. She only entered into a relationship with a person that she believed to be safe. Others in our study indicate an implicit reading of beliefs and behaviors to determine compatibility as well. Jess spoke about a person she is now in a relationship with: “we weren’t leaving the house much, either of us. We both learned that we weren’t recklessly outgoing. If I would see friends it would be socially distanced at a park. Smaller risks we would take. Calculated risks – try to keep the number of people we meet low.” Jess spoke about selective or calculated risks that she and her partner agreed upon together. They were unwilling to completely stop seeing their friends; however, they both agreed upon the types of behaviors that were worth the risk, indicating a level of *COVID compatibility* and the desire to negotiate selective risk.

Selective risk refers to the decision-making process of whether to put yourself at risk in a social interaction based on others’ characteristics. For instance, intravenous drug users assess their social proximity to others before sharing needles in an attempt to avoid contracting HIV (Valente & Vlahov, 2001). In the context of the COVID pandemic, our respondents gauge how “risky” it is to interact physically with their suitor by engaging in strategies commonly used to assess safety in online dating. They ask questions or check social media profiles in order to explore whether the other is following COVID-related guidelines (Gibbs et al., 2011; Couch et al., 2011). They ultimately rely on others’ characteristics and a “gut feeling” to decide whether to take the risk. Josh’s practice for determining if someone was safe to meet exemplifies this approach:
“Umm I kind of like just have a sense of feeling with a person. If they seem like a person who would go out often or do a lot of dangerous stuff – a feeling like they might not be cautious. If I actually meet them, they might have some potential risk. Compared to someone who may be more introverted and not very social then that’s more likely for me to meet them.”

Here, Josh believes that he can assess risks of physical dating based on a feeling, the suitor’s activities, and personality traits. This echoes the literature on sexual health behavior among online daters. Daters use instinct-based approaches to decide whether to engage in risky sexual practices like not using condoms (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Couch et al., 2012; Peretti-Watel & Moatti, 2006; Skidmore & Hayter, 2000). Thus, this decision-making process has its basis in their ability to properly assess risk even when there is no empirical evidence to support that their “feeling” is better than chance (Krishnamurti et al., 2020). Ultimately, some characteristics will have greater persuasive weight including attractiveness (Blanton & Gerrard, 1997), in which case respondents seem to be more willing to take a risk, minimizing potential danger and prioritizing the gratifying aspects of online dating (Couch et al., 2012). As Dan puts it:

“At first we wanted to – we were gonna meet up and be socially distanced between ourselves – I think she was more worried about me – but I didn’t care, I really wanted to meet her, like I’ll share my germs with you.”

Implicit in Dan’s statement is the belief that the potential gratification of meeting up outweighed the risk of sharing germs or contagion with a date. Under the Uses and Gratifications perspective, this sentiment confirms that daters are willing to forgo physical health and safety, even in the pandemic, in order to gratify a psychological and social need (Bryden, 2017; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014). Importantly, Dan had a close family member pass away from complications associated with the virus. In his view, the risk of COVID-19 was worth it as he reported loneliness due to social isolation. Dan conveyed later in the interview that he was in a serious relationship with the person mentioned above. Discussing his feelings surrounding grief, and his desire to minimize risk with his new partner, particularly as a result of losing a family member, was an integral piece of setting boundaries and communicating expectations in the early days of their relationship. Hence, COVID compatibility helped them to find common ground and establish healthy relationship patterns.

In summary, the patterns of behavior observed in the selective risk assessment process among online daters is supported by the literature that frames daters as more likely to engage in riskier health behaviors (Döring, 2009; McFarlane et al., 2000). Yet, we find that individuals understand (to some degree) risk and choose when and how to examine, mitigate, and negotiate risk; finding compatibility with potential partners in the process. This selective risk assessment may be viewed in light of the U&G perspective, wherein individuals engage in risk because social-psychological needs outweigh potential negative outcomes. In what follows, we explore how daters using
each of the four frames to assess, navigate, and mitigate personal and social risk during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Discussion: 4 Approaches to Selective Risk**

**Unconcerned About Risk**

Individuals (26%) who fall into this frame demonstrated minimal or low concern about risk. Compared to other frames, these daters engaged in more risky dating behaviors. They met up with four different individuals on average, and frequently held hands (63%), hugged (100%), kissed (88%), and had sex (75%) on their dates. To understand how participants assessed and navigated risk, we asked “How do you determine who is safe to meet up with?” Daters who fit in this frame suggested a lack of concern for safety protocols and general lack of concern for the pandemic. For example, one respondent, Abby, who had been on four dates within 5 days of her state adopting pandemic protocols responded, “I have not been nervous about it.” When we asked if she had been wearing masks on dates she responded “I haven’t worn a mask when I go out for the most part and he (the date) definitely did. I went to stay with him for a couple of days and we went to the grocery store and he had an extra mask in the car he wanted me to wear. I was like I’ll do it because it makes him comfortable. But the second time we went to the store, I felt comfortable enough to tell him, “Look, you can wear a mask, but I don’t want to”. Abby did not find COVID compatibility with this partner because of their differing views about how to best approach safety in the pandemic and she decided not to see him again after this interaction.

Others in this category took a less adversarial approach to safety but still did not express concern for their safety. Andrea reported a relaxed approach to wearing masks on dates: “I haven’t had any safety steps because of the circumstances of the people I’ve been dating.” In her case, because she perceived those she was dating to be safe, she did not bother suggesting safety steps during dates. Andrea’s perception demonstrates that she is confident in her ability to assess risk, a common practice among online daters (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Couch et al., 2012; Skidmore & Hayter, 2000; Peretti-Watel & Moatti, 2006). Andrea also demonstrates COVID compatibility within the Unconcerned about Risk frame. Her and her partner’s communication about the nature of their relationship allowed for an implicit understanding about COVID-19 risk. “Do I discuss safety? I’m trying to think… I think with this guy in the navy, we talked about it because I mean like there wasn’t a huge concern at the time and I wasn’t seeing anyone and quarantine was very strict and I wasn’t seeing anyone but him. There wasn’t a need for a conversation because we were very aware.” Because of relational elements of dating norms and openness about who else they were seeing, they determined that they could forgo risk mitigation steps, conveying an implicit agreement about health risk with the statement “There wasn’t a need for a conversation because we were very aware.”
Collectively, in an effort to reach *COVID compatibility*, daters relied on implicit behaviors and non-verbal communication in the Unconcerned about Risk frame. Notably, respondents reported forgoing safety protocols to optimize their date’s comfort (in order to increase the chance of compatibility or chemistry). “I like to keep that positive energy. When I meet up with her, I like to have my mask on if she has her mask on. If she is not wearing a mask, I take my mask off. You don’t want too much negative energy in there.” This respondent, Marcus, was more concerned about the comfort of his date than risk associated with the pandemic. Marcus indicated he was used to traveling and seeing family and friends more often than the constraints of the pandemic allowed. Hence, he was willing to take risks to increase opportunities to connect with others in person.

**Preliminary Risk Assessment**

Those who fall into the *Preliminary Risk Assessment* frame (71%) use a variety of approaches to assess the risk level of partners before committing to go on in person dates. Online dating platforms afford chances for virtual meetings, which provide opportunities for initial assessment of risk mitigation behaviors (Couch et al., 2011). Participants reported going on virtual dates before planning a meet up to determine the level of *COVID compatibility*. They reported asking questions such as “Does this person wear a mask?”, “Does this person hang out in large groups”, and “Are they more introverted or extraverted?” (to determine if the person had an intuitive need to connect with others). Daters assessing risk preliminarily met up with three different individuals on average, wore masks regularly (72%) and frequently held hands (59%), hugged (86%), kissed (72%), and had sex (55%) when they made it to physical dates. Those who fall into the Preliminary Risk Assessment frame may also fall into the Active Risk Negotiation frame as they would try to mitigate risk while on the date.

Kendra, Wendy, and Sean described their approach to preliminary risk assessment:

“First, I get an idea whether implicitly, or explicitly, what activities they go to and how risky that is, and then figure out how much they use PPE and when it comes to setting up the date, you start off by video chatting and build a rapport – that dynamic was super weird”.

“I ask guys, what have you been doing? Have you been wearing a mask?...to try to make sure they’re following the rules”.

“Definitely gauging how seriously they take the pandemic, are they working from home, have they been laid off, how many people do they come into contact with, do they believe in the coronavirus, and masks”

Though each person adopts a unique strategy, the pattern that unifies this frame is that daters ask explicit questions about everyday behaviors to get a sense of individuals’ behavior during the pandemic. Interestingly, Sean questions whether individuals...
believe that the coronavirus exists suggesting that belief in the virus itself is fundamental to determining COVID compatibility as (non)belief in the virus would cause an individual to be more or less likely to adhere to health guidelines. Daters also inquire about whereabouts, whether dates are working from home, about how many people individuals are spending time with, and try to determine if their date wears a mask in daily life. Across these responses and others from participants using this frame, wearing or not wearing a mask is a key indicator of risk mitigation for daters. Adherence to suggested health guidelines conveys a belief that daters are “following the rules.” Hence, not wearing a mask would likely preclude one from going on a date with those within the Preliminary Risk Assessment frame. This finding supports previous research on daters’ strategies for assessing and managing risk (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Couch et al., 2012; Peretti-Watel & Moatti, 2006; Skidmore & Hayter, 2000).

**Active Risk Negotiation**

Similar to those who fall into the Preliminary Risk Assessment frame, Active Risk Negotiation (81%) involves using active cooperation while physically on in-person dates to negotiate COVID compatibility. These daters met up with three different individuals on average, mostly wore masks (81%), and frequently held hands (54%), hugged (88%), kissed (77%), and had sex (58%) while dating, indicating that though daters attempt to adhere to health advice, complete risk avoidance is impossible. Below, Troy details his approach to actively mitigate risk:

“We practice social distancing, making sure we aren’t in each other’s face like that – you know give each other some space. I try to minimize face-to-face contact. Without making things weird. I’ll keep my mask on, take it down when it makes sense to, and also respect the other person’s boundaries you know – uh, however they feel about boundaries and safety, I respect that and you know just work from there.”

In the moment, Troy relies on communication and social cues from his date to determine how to best adhere to health guidance. Though Troy’s approach is more relaxed, he tries to maintain social distance while engaging in the traditional rituals of courtship. Respondents also frequently mentioned creativity needed when planning in-person dates. Olivia explicitly references creativity and the challenges of navigating new relationships in the pandemic. She also adds further context to Troy’s point that daters try to manage risk while being mindful of their partner’s comfort levels.

“So, during more of the serious lockdown we would go meet at Costco so we had to wear masks, I try to make things fun like let’s have a date at Costco or let’s grab food and go to the park. I like to be as creative as possible so I think it was interesting to think outside the box – I’ve also just like grabbed coffee and done crafts at the park out in the open.”
Olivia planned dates in spaces where she knew health guidance would be followed without her actually having to be the one to enforce rules such as wearing a face covering. By taking dates to Costco, she knew that she could be socially distanced and that both daters would be expected to wear a mask while inside the store. Daters’ attention to comfort and perceived awkwardness about being a rule enforcer suggests that a possible barrier to safety may be social stigma associated with being overly cautious about the pandemic. Again, we attribute this social stigma around being overly cautious to mixed messages from governments about how to best handle the pandemic within the risk society (Beck, 1992; Lupton, 2006).

Risk Aversion

Perhaps in complete contrast with those daters who are unconcerned about risk, the Risk Aversion frame (13%) includes daters who do everything possible to avoid risk of contracting COVID-19 while dating. Compared to those in the other frames, they met up with fewer different individuals on dates (average, 2), wore masks frequently (75%), and engaged in less risky dating behaviors (25% held hands; 75% hugged; 75% kissed; and 25% had sex). Participants within this frame demonstrate that clear, direct communication about safety and risk is key to finding and maintaining COVID compatibility. They explain to dates in advance that if certain expectations cannot be met, they will not meet up with them. Jasmine said, “my safety protocol is wearing a mask, agreeing to a location that we both find suitable – you know, giving an option where more time is spent out doors and keeping the time limited. And if those things can’t really be followed, then it’s just gonna be a virtual meet up.” Jasmine employs the preliminary risk assessment strategy along with direct communication about expectations. Similarly, Sarah explicitly tells men that she is not comfortable meeting in homes for first encounters: “It depends on the person, I lay out expectation that I do not want to meet at their home for the first time.” Preliminary risk assessment coupled with direct communication used in the Risk Aversion frame may result in less risky behavior overall because it precludes meet ups from happening with individuals who may not adhere to safety guidelines, especially as these daters met up with fewer individuals than other respondents. This suggests that the Risk Aversion frame may be a preliminary strategy that becomes more relaxed once individuals reach COVID compatibility with an invested partner.

Daters that fall into the Risk Aversion frame also convey that trust is also an integral part of COVID compatibility. When asked about determining partner safety, Michael said, “Ask a lot of questions, ask about people they are around, and if they are super social. I just generally don’t spend time with those people right now. I like to kinda know their circles. I was tested myself, and my friend has been tested as well. Part of this is trust in the other person.” Several other participants reference either low or high trust in the person they are hoping to date. Those in the Risk Aversion frame chose not to spend time with those that they did not trust. Daters in the other frames may choose to meet up with someone with whom they have low trust while trying to maintain
adherence to health protocols. However, as other participants in our study and previous research demonstrate, this is not a good strategy where health risk is concerned. Even when well-intentioned, if expectations are not communicated in advance with someone who is not trusted, things may go awry in terms of mitigating risk. When we consider that trust itself is on shaky ground with someone whom you have just met, coupled with the fact that trust assessments can often be incorrect (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Couch et al., 2012; Skidmore & Hayter, 2000; Peretti-Watel & Moatti, 2006), clear communication about safety expectations may be more fruitful and less risky than relying on gut-based instincts of trust.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to understand how online daters recognize, manage, and negotiate health risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. We emphasize that risk perception is socially constructed, for both individuals and society (Pingel et al., 2013). While daters can be framed as a risk to the collective because of their propensity to propel the spread of COVID-19, we focus more on personal understanding and assessment of health risk. We find that daters in our sample use four frames for dealing with risk: 1) Unconcerned about Risk, 2) Preliminary Risk Assessment, 3) Active Risk Negotiation, and 4) Risk Aversion. Importantly, we want to emphasize that daters may transition between frames throughout the course of the pandemic and many respondents reported being more or less strict over time. Hence, understanding about what constitutes risk is fluid, as are approaches for dealing with health risk. Further, we argue that daters use implicit and explicit communication about health behaviors to determine COVID compatibility; a state of being in agreement with a partner about how to best minimize risk of contracting COVID-19. Further, trust seems to be a critical component of COVID compatibility. Daters want to know that their partner is behaving with similar regard for health guidance and that they are doing their best to keep those in their communities safe.

As pandemic fatigue (Meichtry et al., 2020) looms, people are becoming laxer in their approach to mitigating risk associated with COVID-19. Though there are no ways to completely eliminate health risk, digital dating platforms do provide those looking to date with tools to better ensure their own safety and the safety of their partners. To that end, we provide the following recommendations for practitioners, scholars, and individuals using these platforms: 1) be clear, open, and honest with yourself about your comfort level and the steps you need to take to make yourself comfortable before engaging with someone; 2) directly communicate these needs to those you intend to meet up with; and 3) do not be afraid to enforce strategies that could potentially minimize your risk while meeting up with individuals.

Finally, we conclude with a brief discussion on opportunities to expand this research. To debrief with participants, we asked if they knew anyone who had tested positive for COVID-19. Several respondents indicated that they had and that seeing someone personally deal with the disease influenced a change in behavior: “I really
don’t trust anyone now that I know someone personally that’s had it.” Simply put, seeing is believing. We hypothesize that due to mixed messaging from government and health agencies, individuals are somewhat reluctant to adopt stringent health routines that may stunt their dating lives and limit access to social interaction. However, as the pandemic rages anew with emergent strains, we hope that daters will be more vigilant. We are in the process of collecting large-scale, longitudinal data to assess the changing behavior, beliefs, and discourses of dating throughout the pandemic. We hope that other scholars will join us in studying everyday strategies for risk mitigation in what is likely an unparalleled opportunity to understand human behavior in a global health crisis.

Appendix A

Interview Guide

1) Please state your age and gender identity.
2) How do you racially and/or ethnically identify?
3) What state do you currently live in?
4) Approximately when did your state shut down and reopen?
5) Were you using online dating platforms before the pandemic?
   a. Would you say that your usage has increased, decreased, or stayed the same?
6) How many dates (may alternatively word as: in person meet ups) have you been on since the beginning of the pandemic?
7) How many virtual dates have you been on?
   a. Were you going on virtual dates before the pandemic?
8) How do you determine who is safe to meet up with?
9) How do you discuss safety with partners?
10) What are your safety protocols during dates?
11) I’m going to ask you explicitly about physical interactions with dates. As a reminder, you may choose to skip any question at any time.
   a. Do you shake or hold hands with date(s)?
      i. If yes, with how many people?
   b. Do you hug your date(s)?
      i. If yes, with how many people?
   c. Did you kiss your date(s)?
   d. Did you have sex with (may alternatively word: did things progress to fully physical intimacy + clarify) your date(s)?
      i. If yes, with how many people?
12) What do you believe is the racial and/or ethnic background of your partners?
13) What is the age or age range of your partners?
14) Are you currently working from home or on location?
15) Are your dates currently working from home or on location?
16) Do you have any known exposure to COVID?
17) Do you personally know anyone with a positive COVID diagnosis?
18) Is there anything else you want me to know about your dating experience during the pandemic?

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ORCID iD
Gabe H. Miller https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5606-5079

Notes
1. Data were collected before distribution of the vaccine however agreement about vaccines likely factors into COVID compatibility.
2. Because users were sourced from semi-public discussion posts, we choose not to include the exact language of posts, nor the exact discussion boards or interview dates to protect identities of respondents.

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**Author Biographies**

**Dr. Apryl Williams** is a jointly appointed assistant professor in the Digital Studies Institute and the Department of Communication & Media at the University of Michigan. She is also a 2021-2022 Faculty Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies and the Technology Ethics Center at the University of Notre Dame and a Faculty Associate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. She theorizes digital media and digital platforms as they converge with issues concerning race/ethnicity, gender, and popular culture.

**Dr. Gabe H. Miller** is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Program in African American Studies at Mississippi State University. His research primarily examines the political and policy determinants of racial and LGBT+ health disparities.
Dr. Guadalupe Marquez-Velarde is an assistant professor of sociology at Utah State University, with a focus on intersectional population health. Her current research focuses on health inequalities among Black Latinxs, immigrants, and the LGBTQ+ community.