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Research Proposal

Title

Inequality and Matching in Dating App Ecosystems

Key Words

Dating Apps, Sexual roles, Digital Platforms, Algorithmic inequality

Project/Program Description (300 words max)

This project entails a new research collaboration between researchers at the Universities of Manchester (PI Rampazzo, Szulc) and Washington (PI Goodreau, Godwin). The project focuses on comparative analysis of profiles on two global geospatial apps that cater primarily to gay/lesbian/bisexual communities: Surge (primarily males) and Zoe (primarily females). We aim to identify predictors of matching and engagement, including demographic characteristics (e.g. age, sex) and profile features (e.g. bio characteristics, number of images). A main focus will be on cross-national variation. We imagine additional exploratory and descriptive analyses, including NLP-based analyses of profile bio narratives across platforms, as well as examinations of urban–rural concentration patterns. The shared research question guiding the project is how sexual role identification, sex, and platform design shape patterns of visibility, partner selection, and matching in dating apps, and how these micro-level processes aggregate into broader network-level inequalities.

The core research effort will be supported through existing university-supported research time for the team's three faculty members, and through a 25% in-kind support match from UW's Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology (CSDE), to cover FTE for Godwin (a research scientist). UoM PI Rampazzo is already in possession of the data. Support is sought for two events: (1) a preliminary team meeting in Manchester, and (2) a session at the Population Association of America 2027 meeting, in Seattle, with a preceding team meeting at UW's Whitely Center. The first meeting will allow this new research team to meet, share expertise, and brainstorm details for the full analysis set. The PAA workshop could take either of two themes: digital union formation, and/or practical and ethical considerations for use of dating app data. The Whitely Center meeting would comprise a manuscript writing retreat.

Timeline: xxx

Project/Program Impact and Outcomes (250 words max)

Needs to be reduced considerably for UW version

The primary scholarly impact of this project lies in advancing interdisciplinary understanding of how sexual roles and platform design shape partner selection, matching, and network formation in dating apps catering to gay/lesbian/bisexual populations. By integrating demographic modelling, sexual network analysis, and cultural interpretation, the collaboration enables theoretical and methodological advances not achievable within a single disciplinary framework. The proposed cooperation and mobility between the University of Manchester and the University of Washington are central to aligning these perspectives and developing shared analytical approaches.

The project is expected to generate multiple jointly authored empirical journal articles targeting leading international outlets, including *Social Forces*, *Demography*, and the *International Journal of Epidemiology*. These publications will contribute to debates in social stratification, population processes, and health inequalities, while also advancing the use of non-traditional digital data sources in the social sciences. By explicitly linking micro-level app interactions to network-level and population-level outcomes, the project will offer insights relevant across sociology, demography, epidemiology, and digital studies.

A further key scholarly impact concerns research training and capacity building. PhD students at both the University of Manchester and the University of Washington will be actively involved in the collaboration and will participate in three structured Zoom meetings focused on ethical and methodological challenges of using non-traditional data in social science research. These meetings will provide doctoral researchers with exposure to interdisciplinary dialogue, comparative perspectives, and best practices in responsible data use, strengthening their methodological skills and international research networks.

The project aligns closely with the strategic priorities of both the University of Manchester and the University of Washington, particularly their shared commitments to global engagement, interdisciplinary research, equity and inclusion, and societal relevance. At Manchester, the project supports the Manchester 2035 vision by addressing social inequalities through internationally connected, socially responsible research engaging with digital transformations. At the University of Washington, the project aligns with priorities around population health and cross-disciplinary collaboration linking social science research to societal challenges.

By focusing on dating apps as key infrastructures of contemporary intimacy, the project addresses questions of visibility, exclusion, and inequality with implications for social connection, well-being, and health-related outcomes. These themes resonate with both institutions' commitments to understanding how social and structural conditions shape lived experiences and population-level patterns for marginalised communities.

The anticipated benefits extend beyond academia by generating accessible, evidence-based insights that can inform public debate and encourage more equitable digital practices. Building on prior experience of international media engagement, the project will support dissemination through institutional communications channels.

The Manchester-based workshop will further amplify impact by convening academic experts, early career researchers, and selected industry partners from dating app companies. This forum will promote dialogue between research and practice, support early career development, and foster discussion around ethical responsibility, inclusion, and fairness in digital platform design.

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Support for Project/Program Goals (250 words max)

This award will allow us to convene a new research team that has not previously worked together. We have reached out specifically in relation to this mechanism, recognizing that our shared and complimentary expertise represent a natural collaboration in the making. This includes Francesco Rampazzo (social statistics and demography), Steven M. Goodreau (anthropology, epidemiology, and sexual network analysis), Łukasz Szulc (media and cultural studies), and Jessica Godwin (demography and population health), four researchers who examine dating apps, sexual roles, and population-level inequalities from complementary disciplinary perspectives.

The Manchester team contributes access to large-scale proprietary behavioural data from dating platforms and expertise in demographic and statistical modelling of digital trace data, enabling rigorous analysis of how sexual roles, profile characteristics, and user activity translate into differential matching outcomes across countries and platforms. Łukasz Szulc contributes qualitative and cultural analysis of dating apps, focusing on user agency and the social meanings embedded in platform categories and algorithms.

The Washington team contributes expertise in sexual network analysis, demography, and population health. Steven M. Goodreau brings experience in modelling sexual networks from egocentric data and examining population-level implications of partner selection processes, while Jessica Godwin strengthens the project's capacity to link network structures and matching dynamics to broader demographic and health-related inequalities.

The added value of this collaboration lies in integrating demographic, network, and cultural approaches within a single research design supported by close collaboration between the Manchester and Washington teams.

More on the specific value of the meetings?

Project/Program Sustainability (250 words max)

The collaboration supports future international funding by laying the groundwork for a joint application to the UKRI–NSF Social and Behavioral Sciences Lead Agency opportunity, strengthening long-term UK–US research partnerships. Additional mechanisms will be sought, based on the directions the research takes, with the acknowledgment that this area of research is undergoing rapid evolution in its funding ecosystem. We will remain open to funding mechanisms from both public and private sources in both home countries

The strong demographic research environment in Seattle, including the presence of Sara Curran, recent editor of *Demography*, provides a valuable intellectual context for feedback, exchange, and the visibility of future outputs.

Something about Max Planck?

More?

Additional key outcome of the collaboration is the development of shared training and mentoring activities. The team will organise three structured online meetings involving PhD students and early career researchers from the Department of Social Statistics at Manchester and the Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology at Washington. These meetings will focus on research design, interpretation of results, and ethical and methodological challenges of using non-traditional digital data, strengthening skills development and cross-institutional ties.

The collaboration is expected to generate multiple joint publications rather than a single output. Target journals include leading interdisciplinary and field-specific outlets such as *Social Forces*, *Demography*, and a high-impact epidemiology journal, reflecting the project's contribution across social science, demography, and population health.

Background and Experience - Project/Program Leader (70 words max)

UW PI Goodreau has more than 20 years of experience in the collection, analysis, and statistical modelling of egocentric sexual network data. He is a co-developer of the Statnet suite of packages in R, along with their underlying statistical methods, which aim to

Assorted bits

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