

Digital Intimacies and the Construction of Social Capital in a Heteronormative Society: A Study of Dating App Users in Indonesia

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Dating apps are digital platforms that mediate meaningful relationships and facilitate digital intimacies. This study examines the construction of social capital by dating app users in Indonesia. Using Pierre Bourdieu's and Robert D. Putnam's concepts of social capital as well as the virtual ethnography method, this study focuses on how heterosexual and homosexual users of dating apps in heteronormative Indonesia manage to build digital intimacies and accumulate social capital. This study shows that dating app users in Indonesia assemble social capital through networked individualism and automated connectivity. The results demonstrate that dating app users exploit digital intimacies as resources to expand their networks, which enables them to gain certain benefits. Additionally, homosexual users build digital intimacies to gain a sense of acceptance and belonging in digital space. They show more efforts towards being inclusive and active in accumulating and exchanging social capital than their heterosexual counterparts.

Keywords: Dating Apps; Digital Intimacies; Heteronormativity; Homosexual User; Social Capital



INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital platforms mediating interactions between people has offered new opportunities amidst the weakening of social and personal ties (Baym, 2015). Deborah Chambers (2006), in her study of new social bonds in contemporary Western society, asserts that the development of communication and information technologies, such as the internet, email, and mobile telephone devices, has instigated new ways of experiencing relationships and a sense of belonging. Communication technologies allow the construction of social networks that transcend various spatial and temporal constraints. Social connections and personal closeness with family, friends, neighbors, and couples

in an intimate relationship are increasingly mediated via and through online dating applications (or dating apps). The global outbreak of COVID-19 has become a showcase of how communication technologies, including digital platforms, have enabled people worldwide to keep connected (Vargo et al., 2021). Further triggered by the pandemic, intimacy has undergone a notable transformation due to social distancing policies and reduced physical mobility. Traditional face-to-face intimate relationships increasingly transition towards so-called virtual or digital intimacies (McGlotten, 2013; Thorpe et al., 2023).

The popularity of digital intimacies is marked by the increasing number of online dating app users, which has surged since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Data from *businessofapps.com* shows that online dating app users worldwide reached 323.9 million in 2021 (Rizaty, 2022). In Indonesia, online dating apps also gained high popularity during the early days of the pandemic. The subscription costs of Indonesian users for dating apps throughout 2020 reached USD 11.94 million. This number decreased slightly in 2021 when the total costs spent by Indonesian users on dating apps reached USD 10.93 million (IDR 157.24 billion) (Mahdi, 2022). These data show that the utilization of virtual platforms for dating has emerged as a viable alternative for fostering intimacies and sociality.

During the pandemic, people turned to dating apps primarily seeking affective connections, including both sexual relationships (Banerjee & Rao, 2021) and friendships, to overcome loneliness resulting from decreased physical contact (Asti, 2021). Moreover, some cases show that dating apps are also used to build transactional relationships to gain economic or commercial benefits (Andhika, 2022). Others show that digital intimacies offer transformative relationships, especially for individuals who occupy non-dominant positions regarding gender, race, sexuality, and other social differences. For example, gay and lesbian subjects, as part of non-dominant subjects in a heteronormative societal structure, have found greater flexibility in establishing and performing intimacies in virtual spaces. Digital platforms provide homosexual individuals with avenues to oppose or negotiate social expectations and pressures that frequently restrict their activities and expressions in offline spaces (Chambers, 2006; McGlotten, 2013). In Indonesia, where public expression of sexuality by gays and lesbians, as sexual minorities, is constrained, dating apps serve as important channels for expanding their connections within the gay communities (Listiorini & Davis, 2017). However, since the heteronormative Indonesian government considers homosexuality a threat to the perceived moral fabric of society, it has banned gay networking websites and dating apps, such as Grindr, Blued, and BoyAhoy (Greenhalgh, 2021; Solomon, 2016). This limits the choices of Indonesian gays and lesbians since they are unable to access the banned dating apps unless they utilize a VPN service.¹ Consequently, since 2016, Indonesian gays and lesbians have come to use perceived heterosexual dating apps to get connected to gay/lesbian communities, such as Tinder. Based on a survey by Rakuten Insight in September 2020, Tinder is the most popular dating app in Indonesia (Asti, 2021).

¹ Before the state formally banned LGBTIQ-affiliated apps and websites in 2016, gay dating apps were available and accessible in Indonesia.

Dobson et al. (2018) argue that intimate relationships mediated by digital platforms are resources for social capital accumulation. By building digital intimacies, individuals can broaden their network of relationships. At some point, social capital can be exchanged and converted into other forms of capital. Consequently, digital intimacies established via and through online dating apps are potential sources of social capital, which can be exchanged and mobilized to gain advantages. One of the striking examples is the case of a Tinder male user from Singapore who deliberately built intimate relationships with female matches on Tinder. Once rapport, leveraging his role as an insurance marketing agent, he proceeded to promote and sell life insurance programs (Hestianingsih, 2022). In this sense, he deliberately used dating apps to broaden his relationships for commercial purposes.

Following this background, this study aims to scrutinize how online dating app users in Indonesia use digital intimacies as tools for cultivating social capital that is subsequently exchanged and mobilized to serve specific interests. Based on the idea that digital intimacies promise transformative relationships, particularly among marginalized groups, the study aims to examine differences between heterosexual and homosexual users of dating apps in heteronormative Indonesia in building digital intimacies and accumulating social capital. This study draws on the concept of social capital from Robert D. Putnam (2020) to examine the manifestation of togetherness and connection between individuals via and through dating apps. Additionally, it incorporates Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital to examine how social capital, built through digital intimacies, is converted and exchanged by heterosexual and homosexual users of dating apps to gain certain benefits.

DIGITAL INTIMACIES AND TRANSFORMATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Digital intimacies are often defined as forms of intimacy that are present in the virtual or mediated realms. According to Shaka McGlotten (2013, p. 1), cyberspace has rendered intimacies virtual by building a connection with another party and a sense of belonging through communication technologies. Similarly, mediated intimacies refer to the intimacies and personal connectivity built and facilitated through digital platforms (Attwood et al., 2017; Chambers, 2013). Various digital platforms, mainly social media platforms, have played a significant role in facilitating intimate relationships but also in rendering intimacy public. In this sense, digital platforms make forms of intimacy, previously considered personal and private, accessible to many people (Baym, 2015). Affective closeness and connectivity between users can be built and publicly shown through social media.

Constitutive of digital intimacies, relationships can be built through the exchanges of messages and information, both verbally and visually. Virtual spaces also allow for identity games, wherein individuals can present Do-It-Yourself (DIY) biographies and polish or select self-narratives they want to display. Interactions tend to be temporary, short-lived, and quickly lost (Chambers, 2006), causing increasingly fluid, fluctuating, and flexible social bonds. Notwithstanding, as our observations show, digital intimacies are a stepping stone towards more established and stable relationships offline.

The concept of intimacy itself is not limited to relationships based on romantic love or sexual desire, as in dating. Francine Klagsburn asserts that intimacy refers to

the individuals' ability to open up or reveal information about themselves to others, as well as to the need to be listened to by others (in Shumway, 2003, pp. 140-141). Individuals need intimacy to avoid and eliminate unpleasant feelings, such as loneliness. Accordingly, intimacy can develop through friendships, family relations, as well as through romantic and sexual relationships with partners.

In digital intimacies, virtual spaces underpinned by digital media platforms enable the articulation of transformative relationships. In their study of virtual intimacies, McGlotten (2013, p. 2) assert that when intimacy has gone virtual through various communication technologies, virtual spaces promise unlimited pleasure and freedom from various restrictions and social pressures that prevail in society. Those virtual spaces provide a kind of liberation for a subject to explore, express, and experiment with intimacy. McGlotten's example highlights how gay men utilize virtual spaces to envision and create relationships and a sense of belonging that may diverge from the dominant notions in society. Digital platforms allow sociocultural meanings of intimacy to be contested (Dobson et al., 2018). Such platforms provide a liminal space where possibilities and boundaries become intertwined and private and public matters twisted. Moreover, in such virtual spaces gender and sexual relations are fluid, not necessarily corresponding to perceived ideal sets dominating in society.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

The concept of social capital has been employed to examine the challenges and opportunities of both individuals and groups in diverse social and economic settings (Kim & Yoon, 2021; Sunanta, 2022; Trupp, 2015). Digital intimacies established via and through online dating apps are potential sources for constructing social capital that can be exchanged and mobilized to gain profit. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) outlines four forms of capital. In addition to social capital, he presents economic, cultural, and symbolic capital. These forms of capital are essential factors in defining an individual's class position within society. According to Bourdieu (1986, p. 21), social capital is an aggregate of resources related to an individual's social networks and group membership. The volume of social capital an actor owns depends on the network of connections the actor can have and mobilize (Anthias, 2007) and the volume of other forms of capital he or she possesses. Bourdieu's idea of social capital emphasizes the collective and individual strategies in building permanent networks of relations that allow the accumulation of other forms of capital. Moreover, he highlights the presence of conflicts and competing interests among actors, detailing how they leverage and mobilize their various forms of capital to navigate and prevail in a social arena.

Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital differs from Putnam's approach. In his book *Bowling Alone, Revised and Updated: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam (2020) refers to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation and collaboration within communities. He argues that a decline in social capital, evidenced by reduced participation in civic activities, has detrimental effects on societal well-being and civic engagement. Hence, social capital includes both individual and collective aspects (Portes, 2000). The individual aspect refers to how individuals build connections that benefit their interests. The collective aspect is related to how communities develop and maintain social capital as a collective asset.

Norms of reciprocity and trust are inherent in these social networks. In this context, Putnam distinguishes between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is related to inward-looking relationships within groups of similar interest or status, which can reinforce the exclusivity of homogeneous identities and groups. Meanwhile, bridging social capital is a form of outward-looking social capital that tends to embrace and bridge differences between heterogeneous groups and individuals. While bonding social capital is considered valuable for strengthening reciprocity and mobilizing social solidarity within a particular group of people, bridging social capital is beneficial for building connections with outsiders and external stakeholders, serving an essential function in the diffusion of information. Crucially, Putnam's concept of social capital does not consider conflict and power relations between individuals, as underlined in Bourdieu's concept.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study uses a virtual ethnographic method based on Hine (2000). In an increasingly complex and mediated society, the virtual ethnographic approach seeks to explore empirical phenomena in virtual spaces where face-to-face relationships are no longer needed (Hine, 2000). The data were obtained through in-depth virtual interviews and by tracing virtual spaces where informants established their digital intimacies. Tracing the virtual spaces allowed us to collect and document data on the online environment of dating apps and social networking sites used by the research participants to form and develop digital connections and intimacies. We used the collected data to examine and map the connections established within these virtual settings. These connections encompass interpersonal links between individuals engaging in online interactions and technological links between users and digital platforms facilitating their interactions. Informants in this study were recruited through online invitations on social media platforms.

We collected data from June to November 2022 by inviting individuals of any gender orientation who were active users of dating apps for at least two years. We chose informants aged between 20 and 30 because they are the primary target audience of various dating apps (Asti, 2021; Rizaty, 2022). Additionally, in heteronormative Indonesia, there are significant social pressures and expectations surrounding formal intimate relationships, particularly regarding marriage. These pressures notably impact individuals under the age of 30, regardless of gender (Noviani, 2009; Swandari, 2011). Consequently, we expected users aged between 20 and 30 to be active users of dating apps in response to these societal pressures.

The final interview data derives from eight informants who self-identified as men and women, representing heterosexual and homosexual orientations. Among these eight informants, there were two heterosexual men (P and I), two heterosexual women (A and R), three gay men (B, S, and F), and one lesbian (V). The data were organized based on three primary aspects: (1) the specific dating apps utilized by participants; (2) the reasons for their usage; and (3) the personal experiential narratives shared by the participants as they interacted with these apps. Subsequently, the data were analyzed by identifying the established connections, outlining the development of connections enabled by dating apps, and exploring the shift towards social

networking sites outside the realm of dating apps. The data analysis was conducted by using the frameworks of social capital put forth by Pierre Bourdieu and Robert D. Putnam, as outlined in the previous section.

DIGITAL SOCIAL CAPITAL IN AUTOMATED CONNECTIVITIES

Our analysis shows that both heterosexual and homosexual users of dating apps in Indonesia acknowledge that these platforms have facilitated connections. They have aided in the establishment of digital intimacies. Participants express that their main expectation on dating apps is cultivating and broadening like-minded friendship networks. While they view romantic or sexual intimacy as a welcomed addition, they do not discount the potential of finding a long-term romantic partner. Consequently, they try to build as many dyadic relationships as possible. Informant P, a heterosexual man, and informant B, a gay man, advocate the strategy of ‘spreading the net’ to actively accumulate social capital via online dating apps, as P explained:

I just spread the net like clicking here and there until I find a match. Well, for me, the important thing is to match first; find as many as you can ... not everything we click on will result in a match. The important thing is we can match first. (P, 1 October 2022)

Similarly, B shared:

On Tinder, when it comes to matches, there are many. If I intensely tap in a day, I can go through 50 to 100 [profiles]. In a single day, if I just focus on playing Tinder, continuously tapping, it turns out that many people choose me, you know. It's crazy. They are abundant. (B, 28 September 2022)

An individual can be positioned as a match if they match the preferences set by a user. Like informants P and B, when entering a dating app, they will provide data about themselves, including visual data in profile photos, written personal biographies, and desired match preferences, such as height, age, educational background, and gender. P and B can then browse through other users' profiles and indicate interest by tapping, swiping, or sliding right. However, not all who are right-swiped can automatically become a match. The application's algorithmic system will process the user-inputted data to detect those whose profiles match the preferences of P and B. The app's algorithmic system eventually claims those who are compatible as matches. In other words, the mediality of the dating app assists P and B in filtering out who can be called a ‘match.’

The strategy of ‘spreading the net’ is also implemented by using multiple dating apps simultaneously with the hope of obtaining more matches. The homosexual informants in this study, B and S, for instance, state to use four dating apps, all of which are active. By doing so, they have more opportunities to seek chat buddies and even friends who do not necessarily share the same sexual orientation as them. According to S, each app has different user segments and rules, allowing him to get a more varied network of friends. The experiences of our research participants

underscore the way users of dating apps build connections with one another, thereby establishing a foundation for their digital social capital. Digital capital has been defined by Ragnedda (2018) as the transformation of digital resources into social resources which individuals can benefit from. The connectivity between online users is pivotal for fostering digital social capital and arises not from organic interpersonal relationships but is a product of technological inscriptions and algorithmic systems. José van Dijck (2013, p. 12) terms such connectivity “automated connectivity”, facilitated by digital platforms perpetuated through the engineering and manipulation of these platforms’ technologies.

In dating apps, connectivity between users and matches is a product of the work of the app’s algorithmic system through datafication. The connection between one user and another is possible because of the database and information inputted by each user in their profiles. User-related information, including the preferences of the desired partner or match, is detected and encoded by the automated system, allowing the users to automatically receive a list of matches deemed suitable by the system based on their preferences. Furthermore, the decision for a relationship to continue or discontinue is not an autonomous choice of the users but is rather regulated, directed, and designed by the application. The Bumble dating app, for instance, ‘forces’ users to respond to a chat immediately within 24 hours. If, within 24 hours, an incoming conversation is not immediately responded to, the match will automatically disappear as the user is deemed uninterested in opening or continuing a relationship with that match. On the other hand, according to the informants, the Coffee Meets Bagel app also ‘forces’ users to exchange telephone numbers or social media accounts only within seven days. Informant R, for instance, explained:

Seems like the app gives better treatment to those who pay for premium features. If we stick with the free version, we’re stuck with just a few slides and limited choices. It’s as if we’re collecting points, and that’s how the bagels are involved. So, we need to purchase bagels in order to secure someone we’re fond of. We must exchange phone numbers before the seven-day countdown ends, or else you’ll lose touch with them. (R, 28 September 2022)

Digital social capital built through automated connectivity is not based on interpersonal ties and mutual acquaintances that are institutionalized through group membership, as stated by Bourdieu (1986), or collectively constructed resources, as suggested by Putnam (2020). The character of social capital in the digital space is slightly different because it is built upon automated connectivity that facilitates individuals to initiate and maintain contacts. Moreover, digital social capital is not necessarily built on networks of collective interaction. In the context of dating apps, an individual’s effort to access and engage on a dating app marks their membership in a virtual dating community. However, a strong bond between members is not part of the virtual community characteristics. As Barry Wellman (2001, p. 238) asserts, digital connectivity relies on networked individualism, which refers to person-to-person relations that are spread out and have looser ties. In digital intimacies, relationships and connectivity between users are also established via networked individualism, which revolves around unique individuals who are connected because of their shared

social and emotional needs. For instance, the need to cope with loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic has motivated dating app users to connect virtually with other people, as informant P shared:

I installed dating apps for the first time when the pandemic hit. With all the quarantine and social distancing in place, not being able to hang out with friends and working from home really got me down. Things were tough, especially in the early days of the pandemic, and I felt pretty lonely. That's when I thought, why not install some games and dating apps? Chatting with my matches on those apps became my daily dose of connection and helped me shake off the loneliness. (P, 1 October 2022)

The participants in this study acknowledge their pursuit of relationships with numerous individuals to ease their loneliness. However, such relationships tend to be superficial and short-lived. The network of individualized and discrete person-to-person relationships they maintain lacks a strong bond and sense of belonging as a community.

KNOWLEDGE ACCUMULATION AND BENEFICIAL ENGAGEMENT

Social capital enables individuals to access diverse sources of information and knowledge. In some cases, individuals must use economic resources to further develop their social capital. Such situations are experienced, for instance, by informants P and F, who subscribe to paid dating apps with premium or VIP features. By subscribing to a VIP membership, P and F can actively search for profiles aligning with their preferences and obtain information about their matches on dating apps. Furthermore, it enables them to identify individuals who express interest in them. Social information seeking, according to Ellison et al. (2011), refers to individuals' efforts to gather information about newly connected parties, as cited in Rui et al., 2015, p. 502. This information can then be utilized to enhance interactions with these individuals. Research participants P and F exemplify this behavior, as they extract valuable information from their selected matches to facilitate interactive communication. Information-seeking efforts may also be utilized to develop stronger relationships, reduce uncertainty, and support the formation of bridging and bonding social capital (Rui et al., 2015, p. 500). The four homosexual participants in this study actively engage in forming multiple close connections through dating apps to gain insights into the gay community. Furthermore, participants F and B actively seek to broaden their understanding of the various experiences of gay individuals in a heteronormative society by familiarizing themselves with and exploring various gay dating apps. They claim to be able to map the diverse characters of gay individuals, connect with them, acquire extensive knowledge, such as sexual relations or role switching, and commonly used terms in gay interactions. Participant F shared how he explored gay dating apps:

When I initially came out as gay, I decided to give Grindr a try in the hope of connecting with others who are as queer as I am. While using the app, I encountered several users who held a fat-phobic view. So, I switched to GROWLR,

where I found that physical appearances weren't always prioritized in interactions. I observed that GROWLr serves as a welcoming space for individuals of larger sizes ... It's a space for Bears and Chasers. By using the app, I gained valuable insights into the diverse personalities and attitudes present within the gay community. (F, 4 November 2022)

The accumulation of knowledge obtained from social information helps to expand their social interactions and engage in activities that are beneficial to them. For example, research participant S became more flexible and confident in initiating communication and fostering intimacy on dating apps. On the virtual platforms, he can more easily connect and engage with both homosexual and heterosexual individuals, resulting in a diverse range of friends that offer various rewards and benefits. Participant S also actively maintains ties with his friends on virtual platforms through regular chats, both on dating apps and social media accounts he has shared with them. While these networks of digital intimacy do not directly benefit him economically, they have proven to be advantageous in other ways. For instance, through his network of friends on dating apps, he receives much help with various tasks, such as completing job-related assignments or receiving guidance for research projects.

Participant B also gained numerous non-commercial benefits from his friendships on dating apps. For example, he received access to free dental care from a friend of his dating app match who knew someone who happened to be a dentist. This way, social capital is mobilized to connect to an actor outside of participant B's usual network; social capital functions as a resource that helps individuals to get active support that is not easily obtainable by others.

On multiple occasions, participant B received assistance in finding jobs from another match with whom he has developed an intimate relationship on dating apps. The benefits obtained by B are the result of mobilizing social capital by nurturing his virtual social relationships. Bourdieu (1986, p. 21) emphasized that social capital needs to be cultivated and must be maintained and strengthened. Informant B possesses cultural capital in the form of excellent communication skills, which enables him to mobilize social capital. He shared how some of the matches he met on dating apps state:

How come you are so friendly in the initial encounter? You are different from others, who are so arrogant. I'm impressed with you. (B, 28 September 2022)

Participant R, who is an employee in a human resources department, yields a different experience. Several matches on dating apps approach informant R to seek job opportunities, a situation arising from her job title disclosed in her app bio. These matches explicitly inquire about job vacancies and, in some cases, even submit their CVs to her. She suspects that many people choose her as a match because they seek job opportunities. They are interested in relating to R primarily because they read her professional data on dating apps. These connections approach R with the intention of leveraging her position, seeking to convert the social relationship into economic capital by securing employment opportunities. In response to this approach, R showed understanding of her matches' circumstances and did not reject any papers handed

to her. However, R acknowledged that her reaction was just a display of empathy, and she never took the time to go through those papers.

In the context of social relationships mediated by digital technology, Andreas Wittel (2001) states that the connection between individuals no longer relies on the shared narratives and life experiences acquired during a particular time. Instead, it is based on virtual data and information exchange. In the digital era, everyone can create a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) biography, upload it, and share it on social media accounts, including dating apps. The users' self-perception is shaped by the extent to which they disclose and reveal information about themselves. As mentioned earlier, users are connected and defined as matches based on data read by the platform's algorithmic system. Whether or not one can get many matches depends significantly on the data uploaded to each account.

Another example is informant A, who invites suitable matches to become friends on Instagram. After establishing a good connection with individuals she met on dating apps, A takes their relationship further by engaging with them on Instagram. Then, she and her friends mutually follow each other's Instagram profiles. By doing so, A and her matches increase the number of followers of their respective Instagram accounts. In addition, informant A occasionally uses her Instagram account to market and sell products. The increasing number of followers on her Instagram account means an enlargement of the target market she addresses through promotions posted on her account. According to van Dijck (2013, p. 13), social media followers are often a marker of one's connectivity and sociability on social media. Van Dijck asserts that connectivity tends to be quantified and interpreted using the logic of the popularity principle: The more contacts you own and make, the more valuable you become because more people think you are well-known and, hence, want to connect with you. Followers, in other words, can be a resource that builds digital social capital, which can be profitable and converted into economic capital. Although informant A claims that the increase in followers on her Instagram account is insignificant, she does not deny that the more followers she has, the more opportunities there are to sell products on her account. Like informant A, informant I doubts that he can significantly increase the number of followers by moving his intimate relationships from dating apps to Instagram. He admits that his follower count has not significantly skyrocketed, but at least he can gain more audience to access and view the content he uploads on his Instagram account. Informant I's job as a content creator is to promote clients' products by creating content that includes reviews of the promoted products. He concedes that some of his clients are his existing followers or those who can access his posts on Instagram. By moving his connections from dating apps to Instagram, Informant I has expanded his client base, potentially attracting more individuals seeking his product review services. To sum up, the increase in followers indirectly brings economic benefits to I and A.

SENSE OF ACCEPTANCE AND BELONGING IN THE DIGITAL SPACE

The mobilization and distribution of social capital tend to be uneven and reproduce social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986). There are clear differences in the activeness of informants in this study in building social capital on dating apps. Data suggests that homosexual participants tend to show more effort in being active and open to

relationships established through dating apps compared to heterosexual informants. The four homosexual informants in this study express a desire for a safe space where their identity is respected and recognized. Negotiating their homosexuality within a heteronormative society like Indonesia presents unique challenges. They experience social pressures and intimidation from authorities at the state level and members of society in everyday life. Informant F, for example, attempts to find a safe space through dating apps. He feels a sense of acceptance of the fact that he is gay. By accessing gay apps such as GROWLr, F feels he has a channel to express his experiences as a gay man and can be honest about his sexuality. The experience F refers to is not solely about sexuality; it encompasses interactions with other gay individuals, sharing insights on sexual health, and identifying with communities that share his sexual orientation. However, the fact that gay identity is still not accepted in Indonesian society compels F to consistently suppress his perceived non-conforming sexual orientation in the face of the prevailing heteronormative social system.

Similarly, V admits that as a lesbian, she feels pressure to remain silent about her sexual identity. She decides to hold back from disclosing and sharing her sexual identity. Even when she decides to use dating apps to get connected with other lesbians nearby, she chooses to use her alter ego to hide her real personal information. She argues:

I'm not the type of person who wants to display myself on social media. So, on dating apps, I don't upload my photos either. If using a photo of me, I will choose the one in which my face is blurred. (V, 22 September 2022)

Despite restricting online self-disclosure, V admits that dating apps enable her to connect and gain information about the gay and lesbian communities in her vicinity. It is important to note that since 2016, the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology has been blocking LGBT networking apps, including gay dating apps, out of fear of promoting gay lifestyle and sexual deviancy (Dina, 2018; Solomon, 2016). Homosexual informants in this study admit that the homophobic government policy not merely stigmatizes sexual minorities like them but also disregards their rights to freedom of speech and communication. Despite the bans, many continue to access gay dating apps like GROWLr, Grindr, Blued, or Her by using a VPN server to keep connected with gay communities, alongside using the perceived heterosexual dating apps, like Tinder or Bumble.

In their study, McGlotten (2013, p. 4) state that virtual space allows what he calls a “queer space”, where social rules regarding normalized sexual relations, especially those defined by heteronormative ideals, can be suspended. This notion also resonates with the expectations and aspirations of homosexual participants in this study. Within the virtual space, homosexual dating app users of this study can define their sexual preferences and experience sexual relationships. Despite the existence of safe offline settings that can be defined as “queer spaces”, these environments are often perceived as “closets” lacking the liberating atmosphere sought by queer individuals (Wijaya, 2021, p. 175).

Drawing on Putnam's (2020) conceptualization of social capital, the actions of homosexual participants demonstrate an effort to build bonding social capital among fellow homosexual subjects through dating app platforms. According to Putnam,

bonding social capital pertains to inward-looking relationships that foster strong connections within a relatively homogeneous group. Bonding social capital can encourage a sense of intimacy and group exclusivity. All four homosexual informants in this study use dating apps specifically designed for homosexual users. They feel that accessing those dating apps enables them to connect directly, as the precise user segmentation facilitates the development of intimate relationships with fellow homosexuals as their in-group. Bonding social capital can be essential in building solidarity between individuals and groups that tend to be homogeneous. James Coleman (1988, as cited in Lambert, 2016, p. 2561) also asserts that social capital, cultivated through relationships and connections with many parties, can yield benefits, especially for marginalized groups. By owning, mobilizing, and converting social capital, marginalized groups can collectively overcome the various limitations they face in their social environment.

However, informant B admits that homosexual subjects are not inherently homogeneous and cohesive in interactions within the setting of dating apps. There are fragmentations and power relations that occur among homosexual users themselves. Participant B gave an example in gay relationships where feminized males are commonly labeled as *ngondek* [an Indonesian slang term used to describe men who exhibit feminine characteristics or behavior]. Within the homosexual social layer, *ngondek* men tend to experience role discrimination. According to B, *ngondek* men are positioned as “Bottom” in sexual relations, leading to their perception as passive and, therefore, subordinated and marginalized. This stereotype often makes B reluctant to continue relationships on dating apps, especially when his match suddenly asks him whether he is a Top or a Bottom person. For him, such a question does not have a clear function in building interactions and intimate relationships, as they inherently imply hierarchical classification. Informant F shared the same experience. He contends that he is not ashamed to admit that he is not a masculine man. As a result of his confession, his matches often left him, as he explains:

I once said [to his matches] that if my friend said that I am *ngondek*, I don't mind, I'm okay with it. But then, they stopped talking to me. There are also those who say, 'Oh, you suck, I think we should stop, I don't like people who are too fab'. (F, 4 November 2022)

The explanations of informants B and F show that even within homosexual relations, there is a reproduction of dominant heteronormative assumptions, where the feminized party is deemed deserving of marginalization and discrimination, similar to the position of women in a patriarchal framework. Thus, efforts to gain a sense of acceptance do not necessarily proceed smoothly, even though they are in the same circle of sexual identity.

Homosexual informants in this study also show efforts to build bridging social capital, which is oriented outwardly rather than inwardly, aimed at bridging differences and fostering social ties that tend to be weak. The actions of homosexual participants S, B, and V, for example, who try to initiate relationships with heterosexual users, demonstrate their efforts to be more inclusive and build relationships with users of different sexual orientations. For them, the primary goal is to establish connections and relationships with individuals who are compatible personally.

After all, their approach to relationships is not solely focused on establishing sexual intimacy. Hence, their experience differs from heterosexual informants. While the latter display endeavors to build bonding social capital, they do not actively work to foster social solidarity with their fellow heterosexual subjects. Furthermore, none of the four heterosexual informants attempted to access homosexual dating apps. They only install common dating apps, like Tinder, Tantan, or Bumble. The four heterosexual informants also show a clear line of demarcation that they only want to build heterosexual relationships through dating apps, even though only for friendships. Informant I openly acknowledged blocking the match upon learning that the individual was transgender, whom he unilaterally labeled as *shemale*:

I once had a match with a shemale, and as soon as I found out that she was a shemale, I immediately blocked her. There are a lot of shemales on Tinder, on Bumble too. She didn't say on her profile that she was a shemale. She only admitted to it later. If only I knew she was a shemale, I wouldn't tap. (I, 28 September 2022)

Informant I promptly restricted access to relationships with individuals outside the binary system of the heteronormative society. When he was asked about the possibility of merely being friends with gays in the digital space, Informant I still refused to do so. The fact that the existence of non-heteronormative subjects is not recognized by dominant parties in heteronormative Indonesia can also be retrieved from the usage of the word *shemale* in referring to transgender subjects. This term is pejorative with an offensive connotation used to describe transgender subjects and is frequently used in the sex work industry to name trans-women (Espineira, 2016; Vartabedian, 2017). Informant I said that this term was often used by his circle of friends in referring to transgender subjects. It seems he does not acknowledge that the term is derogative and demeans transgender subjects. It should be noted that the use of *shemale*, as done by informant I, is still found in several academic works in Indonesia (Fatayati, 2014; Sicaya et al., 2022; Usman, 2023). In their works, academics seem to position the term *shemale* as a refinement of the word *banci* [Indonesian derogatory term to transgender, which comes from the Javanese *bandule cilik* [small penis]], even though the term *shemale* is basically as offensive and derogative as *banci*. The act of labeling transgender individuals reflects the prevalent disregard for non-heteronormative subjects in Indonesia. The heterosexual informants in this study build social capital within the boundaries of heteronormativity. In Putnam's terms, they bond but do not bridge. While heterosexual participants may endeavor to establish relationships with individuals who hold different political viewpoints and visions but still adhere to heteronormative norms, they opt to shut the door on intimate relationships with non-heterosexual individuals, even if only in terms of friendship.

CONCLUSION

Digital technologies have become part of everyday life in Southeast Asia (Lengauer, 2016). As this research shows, online dating apps in Indonesia serve not only as facilitators but also as arbiters of interactions and connectivity within the realm of intimate relationships. The interactions and accrual of digital social capital by users

of dating apps are also linked to the automated systems embedded within these apps (Ragnedda, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). These platforms shape the dynamics of social interaction, influencing how users navigate and cultivate relationships. Users build relationships through networked individualism and automated connectivity where intimate relationships are not necessarily collective efforts but based on personal interests and similarities (Wellman, 2001). Through digital intimacies, users are building bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). This is primarily the case of dating app users identifying as homosexual. For them, the accumulation of social capital, both bonding and bridging, is pursued to gain a sense of acceptance and belonging in digital realms and within society. Dating apps allow homosexual users to build deeper bonds within their own group and encourage solidarity among fellow homosexual users in a heteronormative society like Indonesia. Homosexual users tend to build inclusive relationships and strive to bridge differences with both homosexual and heterosexual users. On the other hand, heterosexual users, as part of a heteronormative society, tend to be exclusive by closing themselves off from the possibility of relationships with non-heterosexual subjects. They do not actively strive to accumulate inward-oriented bonding social capital with fellow heterosexual people to gain a stronger sense of acceptance and solidarity. In contrast, non-heterosexual people show a more pronounced desire to cultivate connections both within the homosexual community and with heterosexual people with the aim of achieving a heightened sense of acceptance within society in general. Bridging social capital allows dating app users to mobilize and exchange their digital connections to accumulate knowledge and information actively and creatively, leading to other benefits, such as health care and assistance in job-related assignments. This also shows how digital social capital can be converted into other resources and benefits (Bourdieu, 1986; Ragnedda, 2018).

As our research shows, gender identities and sexual orientations are more complex than the homogenizing terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual” suggest. Therefore, future research can examine digital intimacies among dating app users, considering a broader range of gender identities and sexual orientations that we have not covered in this study. Digital intimacies are influenced by technological inscriptions and algorithms capable of transforming how intimacies are articulated and experienced; therefore, future studies may explore the mediality and platform mechanisms of budding dating apps and their potential in constructing and directing the articulation of gender relationships and digital intimacies.



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