

Love in the time of COVID-19: InSound, the Dating App for Deep Connections and Common Networks.

A research-creation project by christian scott

1.—THE PROBLEM SPACE.

We live in a world where social connection, particularly in densely populated urban settings, is becoming increasingly technologically-mediated through mobile devices with geo-location capabilities (McCullough, 2006). These devices and practices have changed the way we understand ourselves and our relationships to others and our environment. Mobile dating apps have become the *space* where we search for companionship, love, sex, and intimacy.

Our current mobile dating app ecosystem—where Tinder, Bumble, OkCupid, and Hinge are widespread popular—is foregrounded in the normative assumptions that attraction is visual/physical. In addition, dating is understood as an individual matter between two people, and communication around risk, (Covid) safe-practices, and consent seems to be optional.

Today's Covid-19 reality has made (online) dating as we know it complicated. The need to socially distance and to reduce the number of interactions we have with people, as well as the widespread fear/anxiety experienced and the novel safety practices for physical contact (including sex) have changed the 'gamerules' of online dating. New practices—and design solutions—must emerge.

Hobbs, Owen, and Gerber (2016), argue that despite the bad rep, online dating apps have in fact positively increased our opportunities to meet potential mates—in an ongoing process that they call *networked intimacy*.

"Networked intimacy is, then, about flirting, courtship and the ongoing search for love and fulfilment via dating apps and smartphones. It brings new freedoms, opportunities and pleasures, as well as old and new anxieties about risk, self-image and love." — (p. 282)

However, the common experience around the use of online dating apps is dreadful for many. Users are faced with an endless stream of profiles, boring conversations, bad dates, and *ghosting*. Profile pictures and bio's often don't reflect the potential mate's true self, and feelings of disposability emerge from addictive-swiping and multiple active chats (Gieseeking, 2017). Moreover, concerns arise around processes of self-commodification and self-branding, as well as data privacy and security (Albury et al., 2017).

2.—THE SOLUTION SPACE.

What if dating apps were based on connecting with someone through the sound of their voice (without ever seeing their physique), and if online dating factored in the importance that shared friends and

networks (community) have when meeting a potential mate? What if engagement and connection were given the time and space to develop with intention and commitment? How?

As a solution to this situation, i designed my ideal dating app: InSound. InSound builds on the idea of connection through the sonic and on the expression “safe and sound”—something much needed during these C-19 times.

InSound, *the voice-dating app for deep connections and common networks* foregrounds: 1) primacy to connection through human voice, 2) a community-oriented mindset to online dating, and 3) the spacetime for more meaningful and intentional engagement.

Along with the information provided on *Covid-Safe Dating Practices* (embedded in the app’s home screen) these features, by design, afford safer online dating during the Covidcene by reducing the number of potential mates we’re exposed to (quality over quantity), and by even making the physical meeting irrelevant in certain cases where the voice-based connection satisfies the intimacy needs of users.

Building on academic papers, my own and others’ lived experience, and informal conversations and *playtesting* with friends i began sketching the app and grounding its design principles/features. As prototyping evolved, new questions emerged, taking me into new theoretical directions—a designing and researching loop.

3.—TARGET POPULATION.

The target population for this project is my immediate circle of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances that already utilize (or have utilized) online dating apps like Tinder, Bumble, OkCupid and Hinge. Specifically, my target users are people in the 25—40 age bracket, living in densely populated North American cities (e.g., Montreal, Toronto, NYC), which have a certain level of education (college degrees and above) and access to leisure time, technology devices, and resources. They’re racially and ethnically diverse, mostly queer, and either single or in non-monogamous relationships.

4.—EXISTING TOOLS WITHIN PROBLEM SPACE.

In the table below i review the most popular online dating apps that my target population uses, focusing on the features and the overall experience they offer.

Despite the particular affordances that each app offers, all of them give primacy to the photographs and bio-text of users (either self-generated or prompted), allow for multiple conversations to take place simultaneously, and don’t consider community-factors in potential dating. These factors reproduce and perpetuate a feeling of disposability and replaceability within the *swipe-economy* of dating.

In regards to Covid-19, these apps—with the exception of Hinge, and Bumble—are not by design trying to reduce the number of potential dates a user has, and/or providing health safety information.

Most Popular Dating Apps		
App	Interaction Design Features (UI)	User Experience (UX) ¹
Tinder (Match. Chat. Date)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swipe right to like. • Horizontal scrolling of pictures, open ended bio text. • Keywords (interests) and basic info-icons (job, gender, etc.). • Match unlocks private messaging. • ig/FB linkability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good for hookups. • <i>'The Tinder cess-pool'</i>: Many empty profiles and undesirable interactions.
Bumble (Date. Meet. Network Better)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Women" message first, 24hr time limit to begin conversation. • Swipe right to like. • Vertical scrolling of pictures and prompt-based bio text. • Sociodemographic/Biometric info-icons. • ig/FB linkability. • Bumble 'Friend' and 'Business Network' mode. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good for more serious connections (granular filtering for relationship goals, including a bio-icon for Covid risk level comfort). • More curated profiles.
Hinge (Designed to be deleted)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like and comment on specific content (a photo, or prompt-based text). • Vertical scrolling of pictures and prompt-based bio text. • Sociodemographic/Biometric info-icons. • Location is self-disclosed neighbourhood based. • Encourages video calls. • ig/FB linkability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Today's best dating app.' • Allows better connections (excellent granular filtering of mates). • Geared towards meeting and connecting (e.g., suggesting video calls). • App actively shares WHO safety guidelines.
OKCupid (Great connections make great dates)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profile-based matching existing along 'Double Take' stream of profiles. • Algorithmic %-based 'best matching' resulting from platform's survey questions. • Horizontal picture gallery. Vertical prompt-based biotext. • Sociodemographic/Biometric info-icons geared towards granular identity and sexuality. • ig linkability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Best queer dating app.' • Allows better connections (excellent granular filtering of mates). • Good for connections where discussion on identity/sex/consent is OK.

¹ User research was carried out using Facebook survey-posts and informal open-ended interviews.

As a final note on the existing tools within the problem space, it must be acknowledged that lesser-known apps that offer similar features to InSound were identified, among them *Once*, *Aloha* and *Waving*. Though, for the purpose of this essay, only the most known and widespread used apps were studied. These apps are *Once*, *Aloha*, and *Waving*. *Once* is an app that tackles the dreadful endless swapping; *Aloha* is a chat-with-strangers app; and *Waving* is an actual voice dating app—resemblance in the colour palette and logo with this app were unintended.

However, gladly for me as a designer and this project, InSound offers critical and engaging features that *Waving* oversees (features discussed further below in Section 6).

5.—DESIGN PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE A SOLUTION.

While some design principles were consciously intended, others came up as unintended realizations of the design process, and were pointed out to me through my informal playtesting with friends.

Incorporate Participatory Design. Keep the users in mind, inquire about their online dating-realities, and what their ideal situation would be. Prototype and playtest.

Be subversive/critical. While still relying on the ‘game mechanics’ of dating apps (set up a profile, establish parameters for matching, like and connect with others, chat and meet), as well as their UI graphic interfaces. How could the normative assumptions of online dating apps be subverted?

Be humane.² A driving desire i have is to design things that bring out the best in people (their authentic selves) without forcing them to brand/commodify themselves and experience anxiety-feedback loops. How can a space for (digital) realness and vulnerability be designed?

Be digitally-minimal. Building on Newport’s (2019) ‘Digital Minimalism’ book, i wanted InSound to be slick in its visuals, and to not rely on addictive dopamine-fix-swiping. Like Hinge: how can i design an app that is to be deleted asap?

Be inclusive. How can this app be used by as many (diverse) people as possible—beyond the default white able-bodied user—regardless of their ‘looks’ and the abilities they have in describing and photo-branding themselves? Unintentionally, i realized this app could find a target population (market) among visually-impaired folks.

Be data-just. Speculatively, i decided not to use FB/Google’s APIs, but instead use an encrypted third-party API like Signal for user registration. And to not allow any kind of profile-sharing or screen-capturing.

² As discussed by Scutti et al. (2018), who uses the Cambridge Dictionary definition: “*showing kindness, care, and sympathy towards others, especially those who are suffering.*”

6.—DESIGN SOLUTIONS & PROTOTYPE FEATURES.

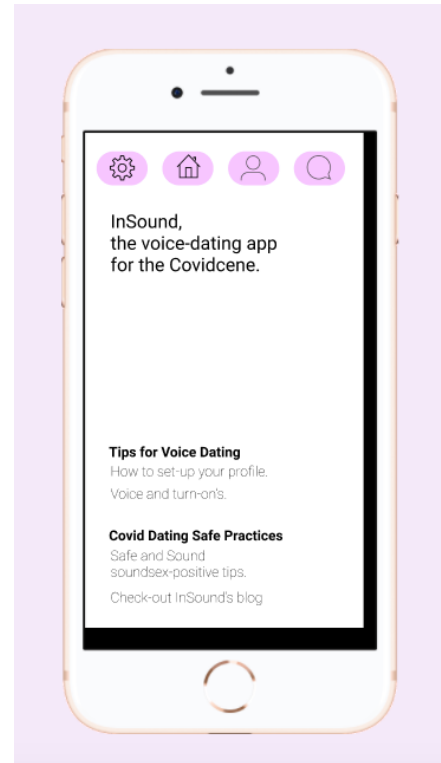
The three main features foregrounded in InSound are critical and generative at the same time, and provide a solution for online dating given the new realities imposed by the Covidcene.³

1. Primacy to voice. InSound critiques and engages current online dating practices based on profile pictures and descriptive bio-text. This feature eliminates issues around body image while giving the user the opportunity to listen to the match's voice before dating (something critical for attraction).

In addition, this feature opens up avenues for a different kind of intimacy (e.g., 'phone sex') which would allow users to satisfy their needs without needing to meet in person (flattening the C-19 curve)—while offering a channel for their imagination and fantasies to develop fully beyond the prescriptive visual field.

2. Community-oriented dating. By showing how many shared friends and networks a potential mate has, InSound moves away from the normative assumption that romance and dating is a matter of two individuals. For me, the networks of shared friends are crucial in developing and maintaining a healthy and potentially-stronger relationship—this is reflected by design. In addition, this feature would arguably create more accountability and care among the users—building on the idea of social solidarity among a group, given that during the Covidcene the 'social pod' is the new unit of relationality. Note: this is an allowance design feature that could easily be ignored by some users, but crucial for others.

3. Exclusive and time-locked conversations. By restricting (or allowing) users to have only 1 active conversation at a given time—for a 7 day timeframe—InSound creates a social spatio-temporal situation for matches to better connect, promoting intentional and durational connections. This feature would reduce the number of dates users have, helping to slow the spread of the C-19 virus, while foregrounding quality over quantity in matches (eliminating the oversaturation/overconsumption that endless swapping creates).



³ InSound and its features were *playtested* by two of my closest friends (both UI/UX designers), with a following feedback session with a more broad and general public which provided valuable insight for finalizing the details of the project.

7.—REFERENCES

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