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REVISED Ethnographic research on digital intimate platforms: a feminist look at ethical and methodological challenges

[version 2; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Ethical and methodological challenges are common in ethnographic research on digital intimate platforms, with which we identify digital platforms designed and used for intimate, sexual, and romantic interactions and encounters. Referring to the eight principles of data feminism for conducting justice-oriented research with digital data of data feminism, with particular attention to the affective experience of research, we explore some of the ethical and methodological challenges encountered in conducting digital ethnography on OnlyFans and mobile dating apps and propose strategies to confront them. Findings revolve around three key issues: *1) Users' privacy:* tensions between conducting ethical ethnographic research and respecting users' privacy; *2) Researcher's privacy:* Doing research on platforms that require identifiers, like facial pictures and/or identity verification creates a tension between protecting researcher's privacy and conducting research; *3) Researcher-user interaction*: digital platforms for intimacy are characterized by implicit norms of interaction and relational expectations, and the researcher's presence is interpreted accordingly; researchers experienced unwanted sexualised interactions, ghosting and blocking, and fatigue connected to information overload. Overall, the article shows how studying intimate digital spaces raises ethical and methodological challenges and proposes that feminist digital ethnography entails: (i) making labor visible, (ii) reporting the embodied experience of research, (iii) centering users' consent, privacy, and self-determination, and (iv) striving for diversity in the research team.

Plain Language summary

This article looks at the difficulties researchers face when studying online platforms where people connect for sex, romance, or intimacy, such as OnlyFans and dating apps. Drawing from research that strives

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for social justice and considers emotions as informative, we highlight three main challenges and suggest ways to handle them: 1) Protecting users' privacy: researchers want to observe and understand what happens on these platforms, but they also need to make sure they do not expose or misuse people's private information. 2) Protecting the researcher's privacy: some platforms require researchers themselves to upload personal information, such as identity documents or profile pictures. This creates a tension between staying safe and private while still being able to do the research, and 3**)** Managing interactions between researchers and users: on digital intimate platforms, people have unspoken rules about how to interact. Researchers can be drawn into these dynamics, leading to uncomfortable situations such as receiving sexual messages, being ignored or blocked, or feeling overwhelmed by the constant flow of information. Overall, the article shows how studying intimate digital spaces raises ethical and methodological challenges and proposes that feminist digital ethnography entails: (i) making visible the work behind the study, (ii) reporting the emotional experience of research, (iii) centering users' consent, privacy, and self-determination, and (iv) striving for diversity in the research team.

Keywords
Digital Intimacy, Digital ethnography, Mobile Dating, Onlyfans, Autoethnography, Data Feminism

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

This revised version of the article incorporates feedback from two external reviewers. The main changes include: an expanded literature review integrating additional methodological work on sexualized environments and digital platforms; a reworked section on digital platforms of intimacy that more clearly distinguishes between OnlyFans and dating applications while deepening the discussion of the social and cultural implications of digitalized intimacy; and a more nuanced treatment of the affective dimensions of fieldwork in sexualized contexts, including a reflection on the tensions surrounding desire and erotic response within the ethnographic role. Terminological inconsistencies have also been corrected throughout the text. The auto-ethnographic fieldnotes referenced in the article are publicly available in the Zenodo repository (10.5281/zenodo.20444115).

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

Data feminism: Ethical and methodological framework

Data feminism provides the critical lens through which we approach research ethics in this paper. Originally developed to expose systems of oppression in data science (D'Ignazio & Klein 2020), this framework provides valuable guidance across disciplines. It emphasizes the situated nature of knowledge, and the power structures embedded in data collection and analysis. D'Ignazio and Klein define power as "the current configuration of structural privilege and oppression" embedded in society, where some social groups enjoy unearned advantages while others face systemic disadvantages (2020, 24). Data feminism challenges researchers to identify the forces of oppression underlying these structural inequalities and to develop an evidence-based understanding of how they operate in the real world. In this study, we apply data feminism to examine the power structures that shape interpersonal interaction within digital intimate platforms. The same contradictions that characterize women's sexuality before the Internet are also evident in online spaces (Vance 1984). More than forty years later, the dialectic between pleasure and danger theorized by anthropologist Carol Vance continues to shape platforms' norms and vernaculars in relation to women's sexuality (Echols 2016). Digital platforms of various kinds often promote gendered and sexualized interactions in which women are conventionally expected to be agreeable, submissive, and flirtatious. Meanwhile, research on feminist self-expression on social media highlights that women often encounter hate speech from audiences (Mahoney 2022), censorship and restrictive platform mechanisms - such as banning and shadow banning (Are 2022). This tension creates an ambivalent relationship with platforms as spaces where women's sexuality can be both made visible (though often to fit logics of engagement) and abruptly silenced. Our research illustrates this struggle through our experiences as women researchers engaging with digital platforms for intimacy. Reflecting on how our gendered positioning influenced our fieldwork allows us to provide first-hand evidence of these power structures in action.

Through autoethnographies, we aim to highlight and contest these dynamics within specific digital landscapes designed for intimacy on demand. Digital platforms are not neutral facilitators of interpersonal interactions. Rather, their affective atmospheres (Lupton, 2017), shaped by platform affordances and vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015), actively structure user interactions in complex ways. By analyzing our affective experiences in the field, we seek to deepen our understanding of the platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015) that shape these unique digital spaces (Lupton, 2017). The approach we propose for navigating these issues contribute further to the validation of a feminist, affective approach to digital ethnographic fieldwork. The use of ethnography also resonates with data feminism's commitment to rejecting the apparent neutrality and objectivity of scientific data. By recognizing the situated nature of knowledge, this approach brings multiple perspectives into conversation and privileges the voices of those historically marginalized in knowledge production processes. The ethnographic methodological practices in this study prioritize intersubjective meaning-making, distinguishing between developing knowledge about participants and creating knowledge with them. Using a critical ethnographic lens, we acknowledge how platform affordances and platform vernacular shape our interactions with participants and the resulting data. This perspective aligns with data feminism's call to "make labor visible" (D'Ignazio & Klein 2020, 17), by acknowledging the subjectivity and emotional dimensions of fieldwork that shape interpretation. Reflexively tracing our own experiences allows us to highlight the role of affect in meaning-making. By centering the situatedness of knowledge and the experiences of women researchers, this framework deepens our understanding of digital platforms of intimacy and the potential for liberation and oppression within them.

Beyond a primary focus on large data sets, data feminism promotes diverse methodologies that capture the nuances of lived experiences. Ethnography's emphasis on situated meaning-making aligns with data feminism's call to contextualize data and privilege marginalized voices. D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) illustrate this through the work of Benjamin M. Schmidt (2017), whose data visualizations reveal the labor behind the digitization of the U.S. Library of Congress. Similarly, in this paper, we foreground the labor behind our research through an autoethnographic account, with

particular attention to emotional labor. In doing so, our contribution draws on data feminism's stance that systems of power operate not only in society but also in the production of knowledge, often disregarding the quality and validity of feminist work. While D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) demonstrate how power is structurally manifested through big data, we explore interpersonal power dynamics through a subjective lens. In particular, we embrace their call to "elevate emotion and embodiment" (D'Ignazio & Klein 2020, 17) by evaluating our affective experiences in the field to inform knowledge building. Similar to the process described by anthropologist Rosana Castro (2022), by reflecting on our affective experience, returning to fieldnotes, and discussing our emotional and embodied experience in light of the principles of data feminism, we visualized the remediation of systems of power in the context of digital intimate platforms. Moreover, the emphasis on the contextual nature of data helped us recognize how the social norms of interaction within digital platforms for intimacy, embedded in both platforms' affordances and platform vernacular, unavoidably shape our relations with participants and consequently our ethnographic findings.

Affects in research

While we often study our participants' emotions, most research tends to avoid discussing the researcher's emotions; the researchers' emotions have been hidden from research accounts as noise, incompetency, or weakness, unprofessionalism, or excessive engagement, until the questioning of the positive paradigm, which imposed a vision of the researcher as an objective and neutral observer. However, there is a growing consideration of the affective experience of researchers, both as a means of knowledge and as a matter that deserves ethical considerations and practices. The notion of affect reflects a conceptualization of the emotional experience as a changing emotional landscape, where emotions can be felt in the body in ways that may not be immediately clear or identifiable; thus, while emotions are usually thought of and studied as discrete, distinct experiential elements, the notion of affect introduces the indeterminacy of the affective experience (Fitzpatrick & Longley 2014). Mari Luz Esteban (2004), introducing embodied anthropology, shows how the researchers' affective experience is a fundamental part of research: through auto-analysis, the emotions of the researcher become instruments of knowledge in the field, they inform about the researcher's positioning, and they are fundamental tools for reflexivity; this auto-observation should then be articulated with the tensions between the social and political dimensions of the body, which allows using one's experience as a way to get to the cultural, political and economic dimension of the phenomena under study, with a continuous passage between the individual and the collective, the global and the local (Esteban 2004).

Researchers are familiar with ethics applications that endeavor to ensure the safety of their participants, but only recently have they been urged to examine the short- and long-term effects of research on themselves and consider the risks to their own safety and well-being. In the article "Vulnerability and emotions in research", Emerald and Carpenter (2015) consider concerns for the affective aspects of research by examining some emotional dangers the authors encountered while engaged in their own research. Through autoethnographies, they create a co-constructed narrative to identify some of the emotional risks that can be associated with being a researcher. The risks are discussed in terms of vulnerability, emotional labor, emotions as data or evidence, and emotionally sensed knowledge. The principle that "the ethnographic life is not separable from the self" informs the authors' efforts to understand, rather than simply know, the potential of emotions in research. The authors use their auto-ethnographic notes from research on the experiences of mothers whose children have a disability diagnosis. Both deal with feelings of exhaustion, lack of empathy, sorrow, though in different ways; where Carpenter feels the cognitive burden of not being able to *unforget and unrememeber* negative experiences that she has been handed by participants, feeling vulnerable and powerless, emerald deals with strong, bodily affects that trigger her migraines, making it impossible for her to work. By analyzing these accounts and sharing these experiences between themselves, the authors were able to recognize and articulate the emotional labor that is behind research.

Emotional labor refers to the effort a person invests in expressing or coping with his or her emotions to achieve objectives pertaining to his or her work (Hochschild 1983). Emotionality is often still constructed in binary to rationality, intellectual work, and professionalism. Adopting the feminist perspective that the personal is political and the autoethnographic stance that personal experiences can provide insight into broader social, cultural, and political contexts, qualitative research inherently entails both emotional and intellectual labor (Emerald and Carpenter 2015). Therefore, recognizing the researcher's emotions as evidence can inform "emotionally sensed knowledge". This kind of knowledge refers to the epistemology of emotion, where emotion contributes towards understanding and knowledge: the researcher uses their emotion in the field, in discussions with colleagues, during personal reflections and when analyzing the data, to gain insight and give meaning to their interpretations of the subject that they are investigating (Emerald and Carpenter 2015).

All research is, by its very nature, a messy, uncertain, and emotional practice, and emotions are indeed an integral component of the *mess* (Fitzpatrick and Longley 2014). Research reports tend to tidy up rather than expose such mess; this reinforces a pretense of objectivity, giving the sense that research should be devoid of emotionality, failure and incompleteness. What we often find in research reports is an oversimplification or, in fact, a masking of the messiness

"into more easily manageable, compartmentalized, dichotomous ways of thinking" (McLean 2022, 25). Because mess has connotations of being sloppy, researchers refrain from showing vulnerability and speaking of – and to - the mess of their own research processes. Women, gender-diverse individuals, and feminist researchers may be even more reluctant to reveal this aspect of their work due to how these groups are perceived in a field dominated by cisgender men. Mess in research is often treated as failure rather than as part of the process and an opportunity to learn or build knowledge (McLean 2022). Using poetry and narrative can expose some of this mess, helping us to come closer to understanding our own emotional embodiments (Fitzpatrick and Longley 2014). The messiness of feminist research has much to do with the nature of the work involved: deep listening (to the participants and oneself); reflexivity; critiquing, awareness, and seeking out and troubling of power and hegemonic positions. What adds to this messiness is compounded by traditional approaches to research that demand objective, neutral and value-free presentation of things *as they are* (McLean 2022). However, *things are not as they are*: what is presented is through the lens of the researcher's writing, the institution, organization, or other interest groups. McLean claims that approaching mess as an inevitable aspect of research allowed her to see it as an opportunity for growth. Much of her experience is rooted in the commitment to do justice to what the research collaborators had shared with her. In that process, she identified a tension between the desire to do justice to her participants and her own critical analysis of their accounts; she reveals that this tension has at times paralyzed her work. These affective experiences of research can paralyze us during our work, creating times when it becomes simply impossible to write, analyze, generate conclusions; these unforeseeable moments of paralysis should be considered as a normal part of an engaged research process, rather than failures; they also call us on the need to take time to reflect and elaborate. Anxiety, stress and low-self-esteem can be generated by the chaos that can manifest at some moments of our work. McLean proposes three principles to engage with that mess in research: reflexivity, talking with others, and embracing messiness as a form of care (McLean 2022).

In this paper, we explore the affective experience of doing ethnographic research on digital intimacy platforms and how chaos, discomfort, indifference, and surprise informed our understanding of the challenges at play. Such affective dimension is not always thoroughly problematized by ethnographers, and even less common is to find accounts of the challenges experienced on platforms dedicated to intimacy. Through several conversations, we discovered common difficulties that emerged, which often raised similar ethical tensions and methodological dilemmas. In this paper we try to situate these challenges in context and propose methodological strategies that may be useful for other researchers doing ethnographic research in digital intimate platforms, as well as more generally for those ethnographers interested in the ethics of digital ethnography, as young feminist researchers entering the deeply "affective atmosphere(s)" (Lupton 2017) of digital spaces for intimate and sexualized interactions, we draw from our embodied feelings, emotions, and sensations - felt and annotated during research - and from long focused conversations, to understand the environments under scrutiny, as well as recognize points of friction, tension, uncertainty and chaos that shape intersubjective encounters of ethnographic fieldwork. Acknowledging the messy parts of research, first to each other, allowed us to conceptualize the ethical and methodological challenges at stake, and propose strategies to confront them. Rather than hiding this affective aspect of research, we decided to dedicate extensive reflection to it, making it public so that it can contribute to a novel field of knowledge – that of the affective experience of research and embodied research – but also hoping it will inform other fields that engage with digital ethnography and similar methods. Finally, we believe that our reflections on the use and ethical management of *rich digital data* will contribute to discussions and regulations regarding the ethical requirements of anthropological and ethnographic inquiry.

Digital intimate platforms: presenting the context

In this paper, we introduce the concept of digital intimate platforms to delineate the commonalities of the digital contexts where our ethnographies took place. Rather than trying to define digital intimate platforms, we propose to think about this term as a "sensitizing concept" (Blumer 1954, 7):

> A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed benchmarks … a sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or bench marks and consequently it does not enable the user to move directly to the instance and its relevant content. Instead, it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look.

Drawing from Blumer's definition of sensitizing concepts as non-definitive areas of meaning that provide a general sense of reference and guidance when approaching empirical instances, we believe that it is appropriate to introduce the term *digital platforms of intimacy,* highlighting the commonalities of the contexts in which our ethnographic studies took place. The introduction of this lemma stems from the discussions between the two authors around the ethical and methodological challenges faced during research, as well as the recognition of common elements shaped by the vernaculars, affordances, and economic models of these digital spaces. The term digital platforms is now widely employed in several fields of research to identify "layered modular technologies" that "mediate actor-to-actor interactions

and leverage innovation" (Blaschke et al. 2019, 574). These socio-technical artifacts encompass a technical core and business networks mediated by that technical core (Blaschke et al. 2019). Through design choices based on expected use (Blaschke et al. 2019), digital platforms offer a set of digital affordances, which are "an action potential, that is, to what an individual or organization with a particular purpose can do with a technology or information system" (Majchrzak and Markus 2013, 3). Mobile Dating Apps (MDAs) and OnlyFans differ in their objectives, user bases, and forms of interactions envisioned within the platform. MDAs are social media platforms for intimate, romantic, and sexual encounters, and OnlyFans is a digital patronage platform that explicitly allows sexual content, differently from most digital patronage platforms. In the next two sections, we outline the environment of expected use (Light et al. 2016) of Only Fans and MDAs, the latter conceived as a cluster of platforms with similar vision, objectives, and interaction affordances. Despite the differences, we use the sensitizing concept of *digital intimate platforms* (or *digital platforms for intimacy*, which are used interchangeably in this paper), to point out the character of both contexts as places of intimacy. Conscious of the debates around the meaning of *intimacy*[1], we adopted the term *digital intimate platforms* because of the affective atmosphere (Lupton 2017) that characterized our autoethnographies and the interactions with users in our studies.

Mobile dating apps

MDAs are social media platforms that offer to put users in contact with others; their specificity relies on the fact that these platforms are envisioned by their designers as places for dating, romantic relationships building, finding sexual partners and friendship. There are more than 1,500 MDAs on the app market (Szaniawska-Schiavo 2024), with around 400 million MDA users worldwide, and a global revenue of almost $5 billion (Curry 2025). Developed based on online dating sites, which used lengthy questionnaires to suggest potential partners, MDAs brought online connections from cyberspace to geographic spaces by introducing geolocation technologies in the late 2000s, and their popularity exploded in the early 2010s (Sharabi 2022). Since then, MDAs popularity has been slowing down its growth, though this increased again during the COVID-19 pandemic (Curry, 2025), as people turned to online platforms for most of their social interactions.

Most dating companies own more than one platform. For example, Tinder is the most popular app of the giant Match Group, making half of the total revenue of the company (Curry 2025); but Match also owns OkCupid, Hinge, Hakuna, OurTime.com, Plenty of Fish, Meetic, Match.com, LoveScout24, BlackPeopleMeet.com, Chispa, The League, and ParPerfeito (Match.com, 2023; Rennò 2018). Similarly, Badoo and Bumble, which figure in the top three apps for number of users, are both owned by the Bumble Group (Bumble.com) (Curry 2025). MDAs tend to employ a freemium business model, which gives some services "for free" and offers extra services at the cost of a premium subscription (Nieborg 2016). Premium users of MDAs are estimated to be around 20 million (Curry 2025). The revenue of MDA platforms also comes from selling users' data to third parties, usually a very long list of companies that are only partially shared on the Terms of Use and can change according to the companies' interests (Rennò 2018). From the moment the user creates a profile, MDAs collect, store, analyze, sell, reuse, and trade personal data, including profile information like gender, sexuality, age, location, political views, and activity data, like the length and time of chats, with which profiles one has chatted, matched, left-swiped (Rennò 2018).

Dating apps tend to address specific users in terms of gender and sexuality, through commercials, logos, name, symbols, colors, and so on. Grindr is notoriously known as a dating app for Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM) (Wu & Ward 2018), Wapa, Her, and Zoe are envisioned for lesbian and queer womxn, Tinder presents itself as a "LGBT-friendly" platform but has been described as a mostly heteronormative environment (Comunello et al. 2021; Christensen 2021; Berkowitz et al. 2021; Ferris & Duguay 2020; García-Gómez 2020). Even within the same company, like Match Group, each specific platform envisions a particular place (Dourish 2006; Harrison & Dourish 1996), often defined by a *mission*, like finding stable relationships on Meetic.com (meetic.com), or a target population: Chispa is the app "for Latinos" (chispa-app.com), BLK is for "Black Singles" (blk-app.com), the League is designed for "the overly ambitious" and claims to provide a "well-balanced community" of verified "high-powered" people (theleague.com).

OnlyFans

OnlyFans, a platform launched in 2016 for the production and distribution of creative content, operates on a subscription-based model similar to that of Youtube, Patreon, Twitch, and Facebook. Scholars have theorized it as a digital patronage platform, where performers create their own visual content and the platform provides the technological and financial means to sell it (Bonifacio & Wohn 2020). Digital patronage refers to the act of financially supporting a content creator to show appreciation for their creative work. These emerging sociotechnical systems are distinguished from advertisement-

[1]The Brazilian author Beatriz Accioly Lins (2021), for example, discusses how the term "intimate" carries sexuality but also shame, modesty, and secrecy, contributing to an understanding of sexuality as a taboo, in the context of discussing the non-consensual dissemination of intimate pictures.

driven business models by their emphasis on financial exchange to support creative expression. The support can be provided on a regular or sporadic basis, depending on the business model and the preferences of individual content creators (Bonifacio & Wohn 2020: 221).

On OnlyFans, users (called *fans* in the platforms' jargon) can access various kinds of exclusive content (mostly pictures and video) by paying a monthly fee to subscribe to creators' profiles. Creators may charge an extra payment to allow their users to access specific content and request paid interactions. This function of *pay-per-view*, together with the platform's Terms of Service, which openly allow for sexual content, are what mainly distinguish OnlyFans from the other digital patronage platforms above mentioned (Bonifacio & Wohn 2020, 223). The platform OnlyFans categorizes its users into two distinct groups: *fans* and *creators.* The fundamental distinction lies in the fact that only creators are permitted to upload and monetize content. Prospective creators are subjected to a verification process involving ID and facial recognition. This process is often reported to be frustrating and time-consuming, as evidenced by Di Cicco's research participants, who had to repeatedly upload their pictures before their documents were approved. Additionally, creators must verify their credit card by making a one-time payment in order to receive payment from the platform. Conversely, ordinary users are required to verify their age through self-reporting and register with an email. They must also link their profiles to a credit card for payment purposes. Fans have the ability to subscribe to creators' accounts, granting them affordances such as liking and commenting on posts, sending direct payments (referred to as *tips*), and engaging in text-based interactions via chat.

Challenges and strategies

"Are you looking for test subjects?" Ethical tensions about users' privacy

Ethnographic research inevitably involves attempting to gain insights into someone's life. Immersing oneself in the observation of participants' everyday practices is a fundamental practice of ethnographic research and crucial to understand their subjective perspectives on the matter of interest. However, it is common for ethnographers to feel a sense of unease when intruding as voyeurs into a stranger's intimate sphere. During her ethnography, one of the most common messages Campaioli received from dating app users was, "are you looking for test subjects?". Messages of this kind suggest a legitimate worry that users may have when they encounter research profiles: will my data be used without my consent for research purposes? Of course, the answer is no, but the question is appropriate. She responded to these messages by reassuring users that she was looking for voluntary participants and she would not use users' data otherwise. A similar worry was expressed by some users of the app Her, when she posted the research flyer on a community board. "Are you going to use us as lab rats?," commented a user on the post. The researcher explained that she would not use their data without their consent, and that she was there to meet users who may be interested in consciously and willingly participating in her research. "Are you a member of the Her community?" was the question posted by the official Her profile on the post. She did not respond, and the platform banned the research account.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in digital spaces intensifies the issue of user's privacy for two main reasons. First, in traditional offline fieldwork most, if not all, participants are likely to become aware of the researcher's presence and objectives and can then adjust their behavior accordingly. Participation in digital environments, conversely, is characterized by fluidity. This fluidity has led digital research scholarships to question the fundamental notion of digital communities (Caliandro 2017). A significant number of users can simultaneously join a new social media platform and abruptly abandon it, often due to undesired changes in the platform's Terms of Service or the emergence of a more appealing competitor. This volatility creates inherent precariousness within the digital ethnographic field, which can present unique challenges regarding participants' consent. In fact, the researcher's attempts to ensure transparency regarding their role and objectives within the platform of interest can be undermined by the ever-changing nature of social spaces and users' tendency to overlook information provided in others' biographies. Additionally, online content possesses an inherent potential for permanence, as it can be saved through screenshots and shared without the author's consent. Consequently, participants in online ethnographies may feel particularly vulnerable due to the lack of control over their data. Put differently, users who generate content intended for a specific imagined audience may not consent to having their content analyzed for research purposes, regardless of whether the online content is materially downloaded or simply observed by the researcher.

In Di Cicco's research, the complexity of this issue is amplified by the prominence of sexual content within the platform's visual landscape and the participants' heightened sense of exposure, stemming by the pervasive societal stigma against sex workers. This tension permeated both the interview process and ethnographic observations conducted within OnlyFans. During the interviews, numerous participants expressed apprehension about signing the informed consent form, fearing potential unwanted exposure, despite the document's explicit purpose of safeguarding their data. Some participants agreed to sign the informed consent form using their legal names, while others preferred to use their stage names. The majority of participants opted for verbal consent instead. Alarmingly, a few participants even abruptly

withdrew from the research, without prior notice, upon being presented with the informed consent form. This gave Di Cicco the impression that the formal appearance of the document might be somewhat intimidating to many digital sex workers given their particular professional and social positioning. In order to mitigate the possibility of participants being deceived while respecting their legitimate privacy concerns, Di Cicco chose to handle consent through email, ensuring a traceable record of communication.

Anthropologists are increasingly required by their institutions, funders, and publishers to obtain the explicit and informed consent of informants, to ensure that the research does not violate people's rights to autonomy, self-determination, privacy, and wellbeing. Since the end of the 1990s, anthropologists have grown more aware of the ethical implications and risks of ethnographic research, and efforts have been devoted to developing ethical guidelines for conducting ethnographic research. Among these, the American Anthropological Association developed a Statement on Ethics that outlines the principles for professional responsibility (2012), including obtaining informed consent. However, obtaining the informed consent in digital ethnographic research encounters similar challenges to fieldwork ethnography: complex and chaotic situations, a high number of interactions, the difficulty or even impossibility of direct contact with users, the lack of a relationship of trust between researcher and informants; in some cases, like covert ethnography, asking for the informed consent is likely to compromise the success of research, for example when the observed environment presents illegal or pseudo-legal content (Semenzin & Bainotti 2020). In the case of intimacy platforms, collecting information on users can be even trickier as it often includes sensitive information.

On mobile dating apps, for example, Campaioli found that information like gender identity, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, age, location, face pictures, HIV status and other health-related information, are often displayed on users' profiles, making them visible to any user on the platform. With the aim of finding "best matches", MDAs collect information about political views and other sensitive information, especially during the process of profile creation. Data is continuously collected, analyzed, and sold by digital platforms with the explicit (though doubtfully informed) consent of participants, the moment they click on that "I accept the Terms of use" box (Caltrider et al. 2024); moreover, any user can potentially collect and use the information that others publicly display on the platform.

We argue that it is possible to collect ethnographic data in ways that preserve users' privacy and self-determination by keeping in mind two principles: the minimal information principle and the secure data management principle. The first principle summarizes the idea that the best way to ensure users' privacy is respected is to collect this information through field notes; observational field notes can provide rich descriptions without collecting unnecessary personal data on users. The second principle claims that data must be adequately stored in secure places, so as to prevent data leaking and the consequences of data leaking. This means storing data that is already anonymized, so that even in the unfortunate occasion of data leaking, users' privacy would be preserved. If field notes can be taken in such a way to anonymize any information about users, data collection methods like screenshots or videos are often rich with personal information, the leakage of which would pose serious problems. Therefore, we suggest saving only anonymized screenshots and videos, and making sure that the data storage location is secure.

Another approach is the one adopted by Semenzin and Bainotti (2020) in their covert ethnography of manosphere groups on Telegram, a particularly sensitive context for doing qualitative research, where the researcher's presence is obscure to participants. Through "data fabrication" (Markham 2012) extracts are rephrased in a way to maintain the sense of the testimony while preserving users' privacy. Regarding the ethnographic observation of users' practices on OnlyFans, Di Cicco abstained from saving any visual material on her device. Instead, detailed footnotes were written to capture the content encountered during the observation process. The only data that were tangibly collected comprised publicly accessible information, such as the platform's interfaces, Terms of Service, and official communications. When writing footnotes, meticulous care was taken to anonymize individual participants.

Researcher's privacy: developing a relationship of trust with participants

Ethnographic research on proprietary social media platforms often requires creating a profile to access and use the platform. Mobile dating apps encourage users to use the platform to initiate interaction and chat with other users, and to carry out that interaction to real-life encounters. Therefore, it is not surprising that MDAs encourage authenticity and revolve around appearance: they often require users to upload personal pictures, and the interface privileges the visibility of pictures over verbal self-presentation, such as bios. Most apps now allow profile verification, whereby the face associated with the name is verified as a real identity by uploading pictures of an official document and the user's face; these pictures are never visible to other users, though the data is collected and retained by the platform.

Thus, researchers who wish to conduct research on MDAs need to create a personal profile. One method is to create a "puppet profile" or "dummy account" (Light et al. 2018), a fake profile that is used to observe platforms' interfaces, users'

interactions, algorithmic profiling and so on. In these cases, using a fake profile may be considered ethically sound considering the use and aims of the research, which do not require being a trustworthy profile for users. However, the fake profile may disturb other users, who may consider it as real and attempt to engage with it (Light et al. 2018). Strategies for managing potential, unsolicited user interactions need to be considered based on the specific context of the research, before beginning with empirical work (Light et al. 2018). When, on the other hand, the research foresees interacting with and/or recruiting platform users (e.g. for interviews and other data collection that involves self-reporting), researchers may encounter an ethical and pragmatic necessity to build a relationship of trust with informants, and in these situations a puppet profile may hinder the development of mutual trust.

In 2021, Campaioli created a research profile on 12 MDAs[2] to explore the apps' interface and recruit participants for a diary study on romantic rejection and visibility affordances among MDA users. The aim of her presence on the platform was to interact with users as potential participants; thus, she needed the profile to be transparent enough so that interested users could rely on the information on her profile. In designing the study procedure, she imagined that users interested in participating in the study may double check the identity of the researcher to be sure that it did not constitute a fake or spam account; for example, they might have looked for information about her on the University website, or on other social media, to prove her affiliation with the research institution. In other words, just like MDA users may double check the trustability of a profile as a safety strategy before going on a date (Smith 2022; Cali et al. 2013), they might likewise double check the trustability of the research profile. In order to favor the construction of a relationship of trust from the first interaction with the profile, she opted for creating a profile as identifiable, transparent, and reliable as possible.

However, Campaioli was not comfortable with sharing *all* information on herself on mobile dating apps, especially her face, as mobile dating apps cannot guarantee the security of personal information to data leaks and stealing, and they are sites of frequent online and offline harassment, especially for women (Gillett 2018; Cali et al. 2013). She also did not want to appear as a "regular user" who is looking for personal connections. How to create a trustable profile without exposing too much sensitive information (e.g. face picture, name, location)? The more information, the more trustability for users, but also the more exposure of the researcher's real persona; the more protection of the researcher's privacy, the less information about the profile and thus less trustability for users. How to navigate this tension between the need to protect her own privacy and the need to build a relationship of trust with users/participants?

While some apps allow users to create a profile using any image, others require a face picture. Campaioli decided to find a half-way between transparency and privacy protection by uploading an AI-generated face picture but maintaining true information about the research on the bio. The bio stated: *"Hi! I am looking for participants for a study on the use of dating apps under University of Padua and Northumbria University. I am looking for participants who are currently using at least one dating app. If interested, follow this link for the questionnaire and informed consent: (link to questionnaire)"*. This way, users would be able to identify the profile as a research profile, understand that it aimed to recruit participants for a study on Dating Apps, access information on the research institutions and the researcher's affiliation, and interested participants would be able to find detailed information by following the link, to the informed consent form and recruitment questionnaire.

However, various MDAs declare in their terms of services that the app cannot be used for research purposes: technically, creating a research profile is against the Terms of Service of many MDAs. Thus, it was unsurprising that the research profile was blocked by the administrators on three apps (Badoo, Blendr, Tinder) for violating Terms of Service. In this case, privileging trustability and transparency invalidated access to the field. By banning research profiles, these platforms are co-agents in shaping these methodological and ethical challenges, insofar as researchers are forced to create either a fake profile or a personal profile in order to remain on the platform. However, these options raised ethical concerns, as Campaioli feared that users would not be able to recognize the nature of the research profile as such and thus may feel *tricked into research* and resist from developing a relationship of trust.

Di Cicco adopted an alternative approach, demonstrating that increased transparency offers certain advantages while also entailing potential drawbacks. The requirements of digital intimacy platforms often blur the boundaries between "users" and "researchers", especially when users are distinguished through different categories. To conduct an ethnographic study of the OnlyFans platform and recruit creators for interviews, Di Cicco initially created an unverified account. Since her primary objective was to analyze workers' practices, she did not feel the need to post on her own profile. In order to maintain her privacy while still appearing as an active user, Di Cicco employed abstract artistic images for her profile and

[2]The researcher adopted the principle of maximum variation sampling, selecting a sample of MDAs that target diverse groups in terms of gender and sexuality, according to the app's description, ads, logo, and name. The final sample included 12 apps: Grindr, Tinder, Badoo, Once, happn, Feeld, Romeo, Her, Zoe, OkCupid, and Taimi.

wallpaper pictures, along with a nickname. However, the response rate was low during this recruitment phase, and interactions with creators seldom resulted in interview arrangements.

In an effort to enhance trust with the research participants, Di Cicco decided to position herself as a creator within the platform. She replaced the nickname with her real name and utilized portraits for her profile picture and background image. Given her unwillingness to share explicit content, her profile primarily focused on promoting her study, advertising participant recruitment, and showcasing visual content related to her hobbies, such as pole dancing and aerial sports. The underlying assumption was that by being transparent about her role as a researcher while showing her involvement in various leisure activities Di Cicco would present herself as a relatable figure whom participants could identify with and trust. To ensure transparency, she opted for a free subscription so that all interested users could access her profile. Beyond its role in facilitating participant recruitment, Di Cicco's involvement with OnlyFans extended into the realm of autoethnography. She recognized the platform's potential as a valuable tool for gaining first-hand insight into the experiences of content creators. By actively participating in the OnlyFans community, she hoped to observe and document the platform's dynamics, creator practices and user interactions.

However, Di Cicco's position as a researcher funded by her university presented inherent limitations to her autoethnographic endeavors. Unlike creators who rely on OnlyFans for their livelihood and may feel pressured to produce explicit content to maintain a paying fanbase, she enjoyed the privilege of creative freedom. This lack of financial pressure undoubtedly influenced her content creation choices and may have limited her ability to fully understand the experiences of creators driven by economic necessity. Despite these limitations, Di Cicco's engagement with OnlyFans as a creator proved invaluable to her research efforts. Following this change, the response rate increased as well as the number of creators willing to get involved with the project. She was even contacted by a few creators proposing professional collaboration, who were then willing to contribute to the research with an interview once her goals were clarified. The direct experiences and observations she gained provided her with a deeper understanding of the platform's affordances and the nuances of content creation in this unique digital space. These insights, as the following examples illustrate, enriched her research and contributed to deeper understanding of the experience of OnlyFans creators.

Too sexy to be a researcher? Deviating norms and experiences of harassment

The primary challenge in interacting with content creators who were potential participants in the research was establishing communication beyond the standard mode of direct messaging on OnlyFans. Typically, creators share mass messages to their fans daily, informing them about available content for purchase and as sending short teasing messages to signal their availability for a paid text chat. Di Cicco struggled in the attempt to foster a deeper level of engagement and communication with the creators, moving beyond the transactional nature of these standard interactions. The researcher interpreted the creators' reluctance as stemming from their reliance on repetitive sexual scripts when interacting with users. Engaging in non-sexual communication seemed to be akin to an effort for which they experienced discomfort.

Carrying out the profile as a creator constituted an experience of immersive participant observation, involving interactions not only with potential participants but also with ordinary users (*fans*) who subscribed to Di Cicco's profile and interacted with her content. However, the immersion in the OnlyFans affective atmosphere made this activity emotionally intensive (Lupton 2017). The concept of affective atmosphere refers to the feelings generated by the interactions of human and non-human actors in specific spaces and places. In our case studies, we use this concept to reflect on how the design and vernacular of digital platforms for intimacy produces implicit social norms that normalize sexualized interactions. Di Cicco's positioning as a creator led her to increasingly internalize the implicit pressure to post regularly and respond quickly to users' direct messages.

While at the beginning of her experience interactions were rare and aimed solely at recruiting, Di Cicco was surprised to find that, despite the non-sexual nature of her content, her profile gradually gained a fanbase. Nevertheless, a persistent sexualization of her content permeated user's comments on the researcher's posts. The focus remained on the supposed seductiveness of her work, even when subscribers seemed to acknowledge her status as a researcher and amateur athlete. While she appreciated genuine compliments, the consistently flirtatious nature of these interactions created pressure to negotiate interpersonal boundaries. For instance, one user commented on a post featuring an aerial hoop pose, implying a sexual act. Another responded to a pole dancing exercise by fixating on her being a researcher with a "sensual side". These examples highlight the difficulty of maintaining boundaries when users consistently sexualize the researcher's content.

Despite the generally respectful attitude of her *fans*, Di Cicco felt a growing unease. Their attention, it seemed, was primarily fixated on her perceived erotic appeal. All other aspects of her identity, like her research and athleticism, appeared secondary. The core expectation remained that of a sexually available woman. As a result, the researcher found herself constantly trying to move the interaction away from the erotic sphere, actively trying to reiterate that her presence on the platform was not driven by erotic interests. This tension can be attributed to the distinctive affective atmosphere

(Lupton 2017) of OnlyFans, which leads users to form implicit or explicit expectations about the prevailing social norms of interaction.

This sense of uneasiness was exacerbated by the incidence of unsolicited sexualized interactions with subscribers through direct messages. Although the non-sexual scope of the account was clearly stated in the researcher's bio, many *fans* contacted Di Cicco to inquire if she could produce customized content or provide other kinds of sexual services such as explicit webcam shows. Although Di Cicco could have easily avoided interactions with her fans by simply not responding to their messages, she felt compelled to do so in order to maintain consistency with her decision to have a creator profile. Reading about her role as a researcher in the bio did not seem to discourage *fans*, on the contrary. Many explained that they found her identity as a non-sex worker particularly appealing because it was somewhat idealized in terms of authenticity. While such interactions allowed Di Cicco to learn more about audience expectations, they were emotionally distressing, especially when these requests involved users sending unwanted sexual images through private messaging. Although she had the intention to interact with users in accordance with her role on the platform as a creator, she preferred not to continue the interaction when explicit images were sent, as in one occasion when a user sent unsolicited intimate pictures and asked the researcher if she wanted to join him and his wife in their sexual practices. During the fieldwork, Di Cicco grew accustomed to the occurrence of unwanted sexualized interactions to the point where she developed a certain indifference towards them. This shift in her attitude led her to perceive the sexualized interactions as the standard mode of interaction on OnlyFans, eventually giving her the impression that she was internalizing the implicit social norms of the platform.

As Dobson, Carah and Robards (2018) argue, the online performance of intimacy functions simultaneously as social capital and as productive labour: the act of self-disclosure generates data, attention, and commercial value for platforms (Dobson et al. 2018). As Di Cicco's experience revealed, the intimate disclosure of OnlyFans creators is simultaneously a relational practice and an input to commercial systems over which they have little meaningful control. Hu and Ge (2025) describe this as the "dual logic of empowerment and commodification": platforms offer users genuine tools for connection and self-expression while simultaneously structuring those experiences to maximize data extraction and engagement (Hu & Ge 2025). On OnlyFans, this logic takes a particularly explicit form, as creators' emotional labour, including the maintenance of authenticity and intimacy with fans, is directly monetized, with the platform extracting a percentage of every transaction. The emotional pressure experienced by Di Cicco – the internalized compulsion to post regularly, to respond quickly, to manage unwanted sexualized messaging – reveals this extractive logic.

Digital platforms have a set of rules of behavior that are outlined in the Terms of Service and Community Guidelines, which users are asked to accept when they create a new profile. Appropriate behaviors are also suggested by the platform through their mission, or vision, which defines the purposes intended by developers: LinkedIn is a social media for connecting people in the job market, while Tinder is a mobile dating app, so while flirting is appropriate and expected on Tinder, a job proposal on Tinder may be "out of place" and generate surprise or even discomfort, and vice versa. However, the norms that regulate appropriate behaviors are not only those decided by the platform: they result from the adaptation and appropriation of the technology by user communities (Lievrouw 2014). This process unravels through time, as new members of the "space" learn the cultural norms of the environment, while they, with their presence and activities, contribute to shaping the culture of that space/place (Dourish 2006; Harrison & Dourish 1996).

Mobile dating apps are envisioned as places for meeting new people, and they often promise to help finding romantic and sexual partners. Therefore, while people meet online and flirt with pseudonym strangers on many social media, dating apps are designed specifically for this reason and thus these behaviors are facilitated by platform affordances (e.g. the swipe logic, the match, the taps on Grindr etc.) and expected by new users entering the platform. On top of that, each application has a specific mission and expected target that contributes to refining the environment of expected use of the platform: Hinge is presented as an app for finding long-term relationships (Hinge.com), while Grindr is proposed as an app to provide fast connection among geographically nearby gay, bi, and queer people (Grindr.com). During the diary study that informs this paper, Campaioli discovered that different users, with their different positioning (Wetherell 1998), have different ideas around the norms and appropriate behaviors of the same platform; these ideas are also shaped by the polymedia environment in which users navigate (Madianou and Miller 2013), so the meaning, publics, and uses of each platform are also understood in relation to the digital ecology of social media platforms.

For example, while gay, bi, and queer men proposed that "Grindr is for sex, Tinder is for dates", heterosexual women suggested that Tinder is for dating as well as finding casual sexual partners. Because of these implicit norms, those participants who used Grindr and Tinder expected interactions on Grindr to be fast, directed at meeting as soon as possible, and with more sexually explicit tones, while they expected Tinder conversations to develop more slowly and to be less direct: "on Tinder I expect the approach to be more chill like I do not expect them to write come to my house"

(Giacomo[3], Interview). On the other hand, the heterosexual women on Tinder expected users to be looking for sex: "A lot of people use Tinder fundamentally to get laid" (Astrid, Interview) and thus portrayed their intention to find a stable partner as an exception: "So yeah certainly on Tinder I am not looking for a one-time thing, […] so certainly the way I use this app is a bit particular, *sui generis*" (Camilla, Interview).

On the other hand, platform-specific norms of geospatial media are also influenced by the cultural norms of the user base in a particular geographical context; so for example, depending on the geographical place, norms around self-presentation and profile creation may be different. One of the diary study participants, Bruno, recounted checking how Grindr users curated their profile picture (e.g. only face, only body, face and body, etc.) in the new city where he would soon move, to orient his profile creation. Astrid, a heterosexual woman, claimed that users' intention also change depending on the culture of the place; so she found that in northern Europe "Tinder and other apps are more common than in Italy, especially that thing of meeting to … to have sex it works very well, it is much easier and people are more direct about it" (Astrid, Interview). Clearly, these norms do not come out of the blue. Following Castells, technology *is* society, and these implicit norms are often just reproducing existing socio-cultural norms. So, while northern European countries are generally known to be more progressive than Italy in terms of sexuality and gender norms, LGBTQAI+ users know that some places are more discriminatory than others towards non-conforming sexualities and genders; geolocated digital environments thus become also an instrument to discover the cultural norms of a particular place. Therefore, social media can be considered spaces characterized by implicit and explicit norms of interaction, which are nonetheless dynamic and continuously influencing users' expectations around appropriate behaviors.

When researchers enter these spaces, their profile will have to respect and deal with the platform's norms, too. As we have seen in the previous section, the profile may be more or less authentic, but anyway other users may consider it as real and attempt to engage with it. This is exactly what happened to Campaioli when conducting the cross-platform study on MDAs. During the time she had an active profile, the research profiles received plenty of messages and requests of messages. All of them were from men-looking profiles, and the most common messages were flirty messages: "How are you beautiful?" At first, the researcher felt surprised, then overwhelmed by the number of flirty messages she received despite having presented the profile as a research profile, stated that she was not looking for personal relationships, and included pictures of the recruitment flyer on the profile. Upon further reflection, Campaioli also considered the possibility that repetitive texts may be sent by inauthentic users, as suggested by Nicola, a heterosexual man who took part in the diary study and recounted recurring interactions with fake users.

As interviews with MDA users unraveled during the research, it also became clearer that certain behaviors were widely contemplated within the environment: not only on MDAs users should expect other users to be flirty in their first approach, but they should also expect their bio to be ignored. Many participants recounted, always with a certain frustration, that "users don't read bios" and it is a very common experience to have people interacting with you without reading your bio. However, some users do read bios, and thus writing a good bio is still useful, especially to craft a reliable research profile in a digital space envisioned for intimate intimacy. The second most common message that Campaioli received (always from men-looking users) was jokes about the research, like "ah, so you're looking for lab rats?" or "ah, so you're here to do research?", which may as well be funnier versions of the flirty messages, showing that they had read the bio and were curious about it. Finally, on one occasion Campaioli received an unsolicited dick pic. At first, she was surprised and slightly disturbed; on this app, Romeo, the research profile did not have a picture of a person, only the recruitment flyer, and the name of the account was "Dating Rejection Research". However, this behavior assumes a particular connotation on gay dating apps, where the exchange of intimate pictures is common, both with and without consent. Participants of the diary study recounted that Grindr users often have anonymous or pseudo-anonymous profiles, which they do to protect their privacy from harassment and homophobic hate and stigma, or to hide their "real life" as heterosexual married men. It is common then to have a profile that does not say much about you, and to exchange some personal pictures in a private chat. As one queer participant put it: "It is a way to get to know each other, even in the most intimate parts of our body, without shame and bigotry". On the flip side, participants of the study frequently received unrequested intimate pictures; despite this creating an expectation that it would happen again, it was also considered disturbing by all of them, who claimed that it shows a "lack of understanding of the principle of consent".

Conclusive remarks and suggestions for future research

This reflection on the ethical and methodological challenges encountered during our ethnographic explorations of OnlyFans and MDAs highlights several key areas for future research on platform-based interactions and user experiences. Our findings resonate with the emphasis on the affective experience of research (McLean 2022; Fitzpatrick & Longley 2014), as both of us experienced affective challenges related to interactions shaped by the platforms' design

[3]Participants' names have been anonymized with pseudonyms.

for intimacy. Rather than seeing our affects as an obstacle to the research, we dedicated extensive reflection and engaged in discussions about them; in this way, we were able to use our affective experience as relevant information that has contributed to gaining a better understanding of the platform vernaculars of digital intimate platforms. This relational exercise of reflexivity has also informed us of the ethical and methodological challenges that were common in our situated experience of ethnography in digital intimate platforms. The prevalence of unwelcome sexual advances within our fieldwork context highlights the vital necessity for researchers to maintain their safety and well-being in online environments. Discomfort may not be the experience of every researcher engaging with ethnographic research on digital intimate platforms. Future research should address researchers' affective experiences, which may differ substantially from ours. An intersectional feminist framework invites us, for example, to acknowledge and destigmatize the possibility of experiencing amusement, empowerment, or even desire. Nonetheless, it is of the utmost importance to develop robust ethical frameworks that address potential harassment, emotional strain, and data privacy violations. The exploration of informed consent practices specific to online platforms where anonymity and pseudonymity are prevalent aligns with the principles of justice-oriented research.

Our experiences reflected the emotional challenges commonly encountered in platform research, reinforcing the importance of attending to the affective dimension. Future research could investigate strategies for researchers to navigate these dynamics while managing social interactions with participants and ensuring both participant's privacy and researcher's safety. In-depth reflections on the impact of platform design on social interactions within the context of ethnographic fieldwork can effectively inform the development of more ethical research practices. Furthermore, future studies could investigate strategies for enhancing the well-being of researchers in emotionally charged online environments. The establishment of support structures and the encouragement of open communication regarding the emotional aspects of platform research are of paramount importance for the advancement of an ethically just and sustainable approach to this field.

Two additional areas require deeper investigation: the role of algorithms and the implications of resource-intensive research settings. In our case, this aspect was exemplified by the potential for greater recruitment through purchasing premium accounts on mobile dating apps or subscribing to OnlyFans creators' accounts. Future research could undertake a more detailed examination of algorithmic operation and impact on user/researcher visibility, content discovery, and ultimately, the formation of social connections or follower bases.

The inability of many academic institutions to provide researchers with budgets to cover these expenses may result in unequal access to certain research contexts, which in turn may lead to disparities in the production of knowledge about these topics. Acknowledging the privileged position from which we write about our affective experience and the messiness of ethnographic research on digital intimate platforms, we argue that increased awareness of the material costs of research would facilitate the development of a more ethically just and equitable approach to platform ethnography. By integrating a data feminist and affective approach to ethnography on digital intimate platforms, we presented the common ethical and methodological challenges that we have experienced on dating apps and OnlyFans from our situated position of young women researchers. Based on autoethnographic and ethnographic accounts, we propose that a radically feminist digital ethnography would integrate some of the principles of data feminist, and entail: (i) making labor visible, (ii) reporting the affective and embodied experience of research, (iii) respecting and centering participants' (and more generically users') consent, privacy, and self-determination, and (iv) striving for diversity in the research team.

Ensuring that research is conducted from a diversity of situated positions is central to challenging systems of power (McLean 2022; D'Ignazio & Klein 2020) and exposing the "whiteness of anthropology" (Castro 2022). As white, cisgender, Italian researchers affiliated with European institutions, we cannot know the subjective challenges of researchers with a different positionality, for example with limited access to financial support from their institutions. Marginalized subjects are the ones that have less power to speak (Kilomba 2016). In this sense, who is not able or allowed to speak about the challenges of ethnographic research on digital intimate platforms? Who is not speaking about the affective, embodied, and situated experience of doing research, and why? Science has been a predominantly European, white, male project until the twentieth century, embedded with Cartesian dualism and claims of objectivity (Gandorfer & Ayub 2021; Haraway 1988). We propose this contribution as an ongoing, relational process which challenges claims of universality and definition by foregrounding how affects informed our situated knowledge, thus hoping to challenge the objectifying power of objectivity (Gandorfer & Ayub 2021) in systems of knowledge-making.

Ethics and consent

The article is based on two autoethnographic studies, collected as field notes through first-person entries. When interviews and diary study are mentioned, the data related with these methods has been obtained with the informed consent of participants.

The corresponding author conducted the study on mobile dating apps during an internship program between the University of Padua, Italy, and the University of Northumbria, UK. The study was approved by the ethical committee of Northumbria University with the protocol number 35706. Participants to the diary study and follow-up interviews were given written and verbal explanation of the study before signing the consent form on data use. In a follow-up communication, they were informed of the study findings and renewed the possibility to withdraw from the study or request the removal of their data, though no participant exercised this right.

The study on OnlyFans was approved by the Doctoral Committee of the University of Milan. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to conducting the interviews and to observe their social media activity. In the OnlyFans study, most participants chose verbal consent. Among those who signed the written consent form, few used their legal names; most used stage names. The researcher agreed to this approach due to sex workers' understandable fear of exposure. Interview recordings were deleted after transcription, and all data have been pseudonymized. Participants have been given the opportunity to review and approve their interview transcripts before the analysis began. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study and to request the removal of specific content from their interview; however, no participant exercised this right, and generally, interviewees manifested genuine interest in contributing to the research.

Data availability

The datasets associated with this essay are partially available with CC-BY: data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

For the mobile dating study, the dataset regarding the autoethnography is partially attached to this article as extended data (autoethnographic field notes), and partially published online (cross-platform walkthrough and diary study).

Campaioli, G., & Ortega, F. G. (2023). "DATINGWALKTHROUGH: Gender and sexual categorization in the creation of a new profile on mobile dating apps", *CORA. Repositori de Dades de Recerca*, V1. https://doi.org/10.34810/data762.

Campaioli, G., Ortega, F.G., Cecchinato, M., Zamperini, A. (2025). Rejection, awareness cues and post-digital safety on Mobile Dating Apps, *CORA. Repositori de Dades de Recerca, V1*. https://doi.org/10.34810/data2183.

The data generated and analyzed in the study on Onlyfans are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions. The research is based on ethnographic and autoethnographic materials collected in the context of an adult entertainment platform, including observations of sexually explicit and highly sensitive interactions. Even when anonymized, such data carry a significant risk of re-identification and potential harm to participants, particularly given the stigmatized nature of the contexts and communities involved.

The study received ethical approval from the relevant departmental ethics board, which required that access to the raw data be restricted exclusively to the thesis author and that all identifiable research materials be securely deleted upon completion of the doctoral research. In accordance with these ethical requirements, the underlying qualitative data cannot be shared or made accessible to third parties.

The manuscript therefore reports only reflexive accounts, and analytically mediated excerpts, ensuring that no personally identifiable or sensitive information is disclosed.

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Open Peer Review

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Version 2

Reviewer Report 09 October 2026

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✓ **Lorenza Parisi**
Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

I do not have any further comment.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Internet studies, media and gender studies.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 20 March 2026

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✓ **Lorenza Parisi**
Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

The paper investigates a very interesting theme: the affective experience of researchers investigating digital platforms for intimacy. More specifically it describes the experiences as women researchers. The ethnographic methodological practices are analyzed looking at the emotional labor behind research on digital intimacy.

I think the authors should better explain some minor issues:

The authors claim " in this chapter'. Is it a paper or a chapter?

In the MDA paragraph I suggest mentioning at least a dating app for lesbian and queer people such as Wapa or Her.

You mention: 'In 2021, Giulia created a research profile on 12 MDAs'. Which are those apps? Which are the criteria informing this decision?

The authors claimed: the dataset regarding the autoethnography is partially attached to this article as extended data. Do I have access to extended data?

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Yes

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Internet studies, media and gender studies.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 17 March 2026

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?

Livia Motterle
Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Catalonia, Spain

The article provides a clear and well-structured account of ethnographic research on digital platforms of intimacy, focusing on dating applications and OnlyFans. The authors accurately describe the methodological and ethical challenges involved, including the privacy of users and

researchers, the role of affect, and the negotiation of trust on these platforms. Their approach incorporates a feminist perspective that values reflection on emotions, power relations, and gendered vulnerabilities in sexualized contexts, which enriches the analysis and adds depth to the discussion.

However, there are some areas that could be further strengthened. First, although the article adequately engages with debates on digital platforms and ethnographic methodology, the discussion could be enriched by incorporating additional work on methodologies in sexualized environments and sexual exchange platforms, such as Baker (2005), Campbell, Sanders and Scoular (2019), Döring (2002), Heino, Ellison, and Gibbs (2010), Miller and Horst (2012), Jones (2015), and Motterle (2022). Expanding this section would provide a stronger context within the field.

Second, the discussion of the sexual and affective dynamics experienced by the researchers focuses mainly on emotions such as discomfort arising from unwelcome sexual advances, and it could also consider other possible affective dimensions present in sexualized fieldwork. In particular, the article does not address the possibility that the researcher might experience attraction or desire, a dimension that may also form part of ethnographic experience in sexualized contexts. This perspective is often criticized, especially when researchers are women, which makes it particularly important to acknowledge it from a feminist perspective, even if it is not the main focus of the article.
Furthermore, some general statements regarding sexualization and gender roles on these platforms could benefit from further nuance. For instance, women are not always expected to be pleasant, submissive, or flirtatious; in some erotic spaces, dominant female figures may also be valued.

It would also be useful to establish a clearer distinction between the different types of platforms examined. OnlyFans and dating applications involve very different objectives, user bases, and forms of interaction (patronage, sexual exchange, dating, romance), and this distinction could be developed in greater detail. Clarifying these categories would allow for a more precise understanding of how each type of platform structures interactions and ethical risks.

Finally, although the argument is persuasive and supported by examples, a deeper analysis of the broader social and cultural implications of intimacy on digital platforms would further strengthen the contribution of the essay.

In conclusion, the article provides valuable insights into digital ethnography, ethical practices, and affective experiences on intimate platforms. Addressing the points mentioned above—expanding the literature review, nuancing some statements about sexualization and gender roles, considering the possibility of pleasure (and not only harassment) in fieldwork, clarifying the differences between platforms, and contextualizing their sociocultural implications—would make the manuscript even more comprehensive and robust.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?

Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Yes

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Comments on this article

Version 1

Author Response 29 May 2026

Giulia Campaioli

REVIEWER 1 Comment: The article provides a clear and well-structured account of ethnographic research on digital platforms of intimacy, focusing on dating applications and OnlyFans. The authors accurately describe the methodological and ethical challenges involved, including the privacy of users and researchers, the role of affect, and the negotiation of trust on these platforms. Their approach incorporates a feminist perspective that values reflection on emotions, power relations, and gendered vulnerabilities in sexualized contexts, which enriches the analysis and adds depth to the discussion.
Response: Thank you for highlighting the strong points of the article.

Comment: However, there are some areas that could be further strengthened. First, although the article adequately engages with debates on digital platforms and ethnographic methodology, the discussion could be enriched by incorporating additional work on methodologies in sexualized environments and sexual exchange platforms, such as Baker (2005), Campbell, Sanders and Scoular (2019), Döring (2002), Heino, Ellison, and Gibbs (2010), Miller and Horst (2012), Jones (2015), and Motterle (2022). Expanding this section would provide a stronger context within the field.
Response: Thank you for suggesting additional literature to integrate the article. We have taken the suggested readings into consideration, and we have expanded our references with some of these suggestions and extra references. We believe the article is improved by this addition.

Comment: Second, the discussion of the sexual and affective dynamics experienced by the researchers focuses mainly on emotions such as discomfort arising from unwelcome sexual advances, and it could also consider other possible affective dimensions present in sexualized fieldwork. In particular, the article does not address the possibility that the researcher might

experience attraction or desire, a dimension that may also form part of ethnographic experience in sexualized contexts. This perspective is often criticized, especially when researchers are women, which makes it particularly important to acknowledge it from a feminist perspective, even if it is not the main focus of the article. Furthermore, some general statements regarding sexualization and gender roles on these platforms could benefit from further nuance. For instance, women are not always expected to be pleasant, submissive, or flirtatious; in some erotic spaces, dominant female figures may also be valued.
Response: Thank you for highlighting these affective dynamics that may appear during fieldwork and often remain invisible, and stressing how sexualization and gender roles are contextual, and do not always mandate submissive femininity. We acknowledged (p. 24) the need to further explore researcher's affects in sexualized spaces, recognizing and de-stigmatizing desire, especially in sexualized contexts. However, it would be untrue to our experience to discuss these affective dynamics in the paper because this topic did not appear in our conversations of the affects and challenges experienced. We also agree that affective experiences in sexualized fieldwork cannot be reduced to discomfort arising from unwelcome sexual advances alone, and that attraction, desire, curiosity, or ambivalence may also form part of ethnographic experience in these contexts. In response to this comment, we expanded the discussion on the affective dimensions of fieldwork (p. 22), reflecting on the tensions experienced by Margherita while observing participants' explicit content. In particular, we discuss how the possibility of experiencing attraction itself sometimes felt difficult to inhabit within the ethnographic role, due to the fear of reproducing forms of objectification already characterizing the platform environment. We also reflect on how feminist researchers may internalize broader cultural assumptions that frame erotic response as epistemologically or ethically suspicious. By integrating these reflections, we aimed to further problematize the messy, contradictory, and embodied nature of ethnographic research in sexualized digital environments. At the same time, we did not want to overstate affective dimensions that did not significantly emerge in our original conversations and field reflections. Rather than centering desire as a primary dimension of the fieldwork, we therefore chose to situate it as a latent tension that became more visible through the reflexive process of revising the manuscript. For this reason, we particularly appreciated the reviewer's comment, which helped us further articulate and reflect on this previously underexplored dimension of the research experience. **Location of changes:** p. 24; p. 22

Comment: It would also be useful to establish a clearer distinction between the different types of platforms examined. OnlyFans and dating applications involve very different objectives, user bases, and forms of interaction (patronage, sexual exchange, dating, romance), and this distinction could be developed in greater detail. Clarifying these categories would allow for a more precise understanding of how each type of platform structures interactions and ethical risks.
Response: Thank you for this useful suggestion. We agree that the section needed to be reworked to make clearer the differences and similarities between OnlyFans and dating apps, to better justify why we treat these two different platforms as "digital intimacy platforms." However, the paper focuses on the common challenges encountered during fieldwork despite the differences, so a discussion of the challenges particular to each platform falls outside the objectives of this paper.
Location of changes: p. 9

Comment: Finally, although the argument is persuasive and supported by examples, a deeper analysis of the broader social and cultural implications of intimacy on digital platforms would

further strengthen the contribution of the essay.
Response: Thank you for highlighting how we could improve our work. We reworked the section on digital platforms of intimacy to strengthen the argument, diving deeper into the social and cultural implications of the digitalization of intimacy — particularly the monetization of self-disclosure, pseudoauthenticity, and continuous content production — and what this means, methodologically and ethically, for ethnographers. **Location of changes:** p.22

Comment: In conclusion, the article provides valuable insights into digital ethnography, ethical practices, and affective experiences on intimate platforms. Addressing the points mentioned above — expanding the literature review, nuancing some statements about sexualization and gender roles, considering the possibility of pleasure (and not only harassment) in fieldwork, clarifying the differences between platforms, and contextualizing their sociocultural implications — would make the manuscript even more comprehensive and robust.
Response: Thank you for suggesting ways that the article may be improved. We appreciate your input on how the article makes a contribution to the field.

REVIEWER 2 Comment: The paper investigates a very interesting theme: the affective experience of researchers investigating digital platforms for intimacy. More specifically it describes the experiences as women researchers. The ethnographic methodological practices are analyzed looking at the emotional labor behind research on digital intimacy.
Response: Thank you for pointing out the contributions of the paper.

Comment: The authors claim "in this chapter." Is it a paper or a chapter?
Response: Thank you for pointing out this mistake. The text was initially submitted as a chapter for a manual. Since that publication did not go through, the text was then submitted to Open Research Europe as an essay article. **Location of changes:** p. 4, 6, 8

Comment: In the MDA paragraph I suggest mentioning at least a dating app for lesbian and queer people such as Wapa or Her.
Response: Thank you for this suggestion. We agree that it is important to mention these apps in the MDAs section. **Location of changes:** p. 10

Comment: You mention: "In 2021, Giulia created a research profile on 12 MDAs." Which are those apps? Which are the criteria informing this decision?
Response: Thank you for pointing out this gap. We added the names of the sample of apps and explained the criteria informing the sample selection. **Location of changes:** p. 16

Comment: The authors claimed: the dataset regarding the autoethnography is partially attached to this article as extended data. Do I have access to extended data?
Response: Thank you for pointing out this gap. We have published the auto-ethnographic fieldnotes in the public repository Zenodo.
Location of changes: Dataset available at 10.5281/zenodo.20444115

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.