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Abstract | A significant proportion of users subjected to dating app facilitated sexual violence (DAFSV) make a report to the platform. However, the experiences of victim-survivors reporting to dating platforms has been underexamined in research.

Based on the analysis of a survey completed by 1,555 dating platform users in Australia who had reported DAFSV to the platform, this study found overall positive experiences reporting to platforms. However, victim-survivors' experiences differed depending on their gender and sexual identity; LGB+ women reported the lowest levels of satisfaction with platforms' responses, and heterosexual men the highest.

Further, respondents who were satisfied with how platforms responded to their reports of DAFSV were more likely to say that they would report again in the future. Respondents who said that the dating platform had provided them with information about other services were also more likely to report the incident to the police.

User experiences of reporting dating app facilitated sexual violence to dating platforms

Siobhan Lawler and Hayley Boxall

Harassment and abuse are frequently reported by users of online dating platforms (hereafter referred to as dating platforms; Wolbers et al. 2022). Increasing attention is focusing on the role and responsibility of dating platforms to protect the safety, rights and interests of users, including those who report experiences of dating app facilitated sexual violence (DAFSV). DAFSV is a form of technology-facilitated sexual violence where perpetrators use platforms to access victims and perpetrate sexual harm (Echevarria, Peterson & Woerner 2023; Henry & Powell 2018).

While there is a relatively large body of research examining victim-survivor experiences of reporting sexual violence to police (Henninger et al. 2020; Henry, Flynn & Powell 2018; Murphy & Barkworth 2014), understanding of reporting DAFSV to dating platforms is limited. This is an important gap, given that dating platforms are a primary mechanism through which people report DAFSV. Recent research we conducted found that one in five users in Australia had reported online DAFSV victimisation directly to the dating platform (19%); the only other source of help-seeking that was more common was the respondents' friends (25%). By contrast, much smaller proportions of users said they had reported DAFSV to the police (8%), their family members (11%), work colleagues (7%) or the eSafety Commission (5%; Lawler & Boxall 2023).

Celebrating
50 years

People subjected to DAFSV may be more likely to report to dating platforms than to use other forms of more traditional help-seeking for various reasons. Firstly, dating platforms are not limited in the nature of incidents that they can respond to, whereas the police can only investigate matters where there is evidence that a crime has been committed (Phan, Seigfried-Spellar & Choo 2021). Further, submitting reports to dating platforms is instantaneous from anywhere in the world. Victim-survivors may therefore be making more reports to dating platforms because there are fewer barriers to reporting.

High rates of reporting to dating platforms could also be due to victim-survivors choosing to engage with dating platforms as one of their first forms of help-seeking. Liang and colleagues (2005) suggest that victims of crimes like sexual violence and intimate partner violence engage in help-seeking through a series of stages. They typically begin with private forms of help-seeking, where the risk of the information becoming public is low. These early help-seeking experiences and the responses that they receive have important implications for victim-survivors. A number of studies have demonstrated that victim-survivors of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence who receive negative reactions from disclosure recipients—for example, victim blaming, minimisation, distancing—report more severe symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression than victim-survivors who receive positive or more supportive reactions (Campbell et al. 2001; Ullman & Peter-Hagene 2014; Woerner, Wyatt & Sullivan 2019).

One possible explanation for the relationship between positive reactions to disclosures and fewer PTSD and depression symptoms is that positive reactions are associated with more functional coping strategies, which can lead to better mental health outcomes. Ullman and Peter-Hagene (2014) analysed survey data collected from 11,863 sexual assault survivors and found that respondents who had received positive social reactions had higher levels of perceived control over their recovery, relating to having fewer PTSD symptoms.

Alternatively, some evidence shows that the response victim-survivors receive influences their future help-seeking behaviours. This includes their decision to engage with formal services, like the police or sexual assault services, who may be able to provide access to more intensive and ongoing supports (Zinzow et al. 2022). Liang and colleagues (2005) explain this by suggesting that reactions to disclosures, particularly during the early stages of help-seeking, influence victim-survivors' understanding and definition of their experiences.

Regardless of what mechanism explains the link between disclosure reactions and mental health outcomes, the research cited above demonstrates that there is a particular onus on dating platforms to respond appropriately to victim-survivors who report abuse. Those platforms may be one of the first means through which victim-survivors disclose their experiences; they may thus be the primary or only mechanism through which people may receive support. It is therefore important to examine the extent to which dating platforms respond to reports, investigate incidents and provide information about support services and resources.

Methods

The current study aimed to examine the following research questions:

- What is the nature of victim-survivors' experiences when they report DAFSV to dating platforms?
- How satisfied are victim-survivors when they report DAFSV to dating platforms?
- To what extent are victim-survivors' experiences reporting DAFSV to dating platforms associated with other reporting behaviours?

This research uses data collected as part of a larger study examining the prevalence and nature of online and in-person DAFSV and other criminal behaviours (eg child sexual exploitation) among a sample of users living in Australia (see Teunissen et al. 2022; Wolbers et al. 2022). The data were collected by Roy Morgan Research, who recruited participants via their Single Source research panels and panels managed by PureProfile and Dynata between June and August in 2021. Eligible participants were adults living in Australia who had used a dating app or website in the past five years. Participants were recruited through proportional quota sampling, using quotas based on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics regarding age, sex and residential location and representative of the general Australian adult population who use online dating platforms. A total of 9,987 people completed the survey, constituting a five percent completion rate (or a 76% completion rate among those who opened the invitation and read the consent form).

The survey asked respondents about their sociodemographic characteristics, their use of online dating platforms over the past five years, their experiences of online and in-person DAFSV and their reporting behaviours. Further information about the survey and the broader research project can be found elsewhere (Wolbers et al. 2022).

Measures

Dating app facilitated sexual violence

DAFSV victimisation was measured by asking respondents whether any of the behaviours listed in Table 2 had been perpetrated against them by someone they had met on a dating platform. Respondents were asked about their experiences in the past five years, to capture experiences relevant to the current context.

Experiences of reporting to a dating platform

Respondents who had been subjected to DAFSV online were asked whether they had reported the most recent incident to the dating platform. Those who had reported were asked a series of follow-up questions about their experience of reporting to the platform. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements (5-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree and strongly disagree):

- The platform took my report seriously.
- The platform made me feel like they were going to do something to protect me and other people from the perpetrator.
- The platform provided me with information about other services that could assist me (eg sexual assault services).

Respondents were also asked whether the platform investigated the incident and, if so, whether they were kept updated about the progress of the investigation and their satisfaction with the investigation outcome.

Intention to report again and other reporting

Two measures of other help-seeking behaviour were included in the current analysis: intention to report to the dating platform in the future if they were victimised again, and reporting the current incident to the police. Respondents who had reported to the dating platform were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement: 'I would report to the dating platform again' (5-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree and strongly disagree). Further, respondents were asked whether they had reported the most recent incident of online DAFSV to the police (yes or no).

Analysis

Because of disproportionate rates of DAFSV victimisation within LGB+ communities (Wolbers et al. 2022), we grouped respondents according to their reported gender and sexual identity. This approach was also taken in the analysis of victim-survivor experiences of reporting DAFSV to police (Lawler & Boxall 2023).

We categorised respondents as LGB+ if they identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual or as questioning their sexual identity at the time of the survey. Differences between heterosexual and LGB+ respondents were examined using chi square tests of association followed by post-hoc tests of residual differences with a Bonferroni correction.

Limitations

We only asked respondents about their most recent experience of reporting online DAFSV, so the results reported here do not reflect reporting experiences for all types of DAFSV that were potentially experienced and reported to the dating platform in the past five years. The observation period of five years prior to the survey includes the COVID-19 pandemic, during which there were lockdowns across all Australian jurisdictions at different times. Restrictions on the extent to which people could meet in person varied. Australians, like people internationally, spent increasing amounts of time online and on online dating platforms during the pandemic (Coombe et al. 2021). This research is unable to determine whether there were changes in reporting behaviours over time that related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, the length of the survey prevented us from collecting detailed contextual information about the nature of the DAFSV incident reported to the platform and which platform it was. Further, we did not collect detailed information about what the platform did in response to the report (beyond starting an investigation or providing advice about other support services), the mechanisms through which respondents made the report, or the level of ongoing engagement that the respondent had with the dating platform after lodging the report. The collection of these data and of information about what users actually want from dating platforms when they make a report is an area for future research.

Final sample

This study examines a subset of a larger sample of dating platform users. Further information about the full sample is in the full report (Wolbers et al. 2022). This analysis focused on respondents who said they had been subjected to DAFSV in the past five years and had reported the most recent incident to the dating platform. Table 1 outlines the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents who reported online DAFSV to dating platforms.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents who reported online DAFSV to dating platforms (n=1,555)

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender identity		
Male	680	43.7
Female	862	55.4
Non-binary	13	0.8
Sexuality^a		
Heterosexual	1,170	77.8
LGB+	333	22.2
Gender and sexuality^b		
Heterosexual male	517	33.3
Heterosexual female	651	41.9
LGB+ male	137	8.8
LGB+ female	186	12.0
Non-binary	13	0.8
Age		
18–24	306	19.7
25–34	564	36.3
35–44	407	26.2
45–54	177	11.4
55–64	76	4.9
65+	25	1.6
Usual place of residence^c		
Major city	1,206	77.6
Regional	315	20.3
Remote	29	1.9
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander^d	296	19.0
Temporary visa^e	99	6.4
Any disability	397	25.5

a: Denominator includes 52 respondents who did not provide this information

b: Denominator includes 52 respondents who did not provide this information

c: Denominator includes 5 respondents who did not provide this information

d: Denominator includes 18 respondents who did not provide this information

e: Denominator includes 5 respondents who did not provide this information

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Table 2 summarises the nature of DAFSV victimisation within the final sample. The most common form of online DAFSV reported by respondents was being sent an unwanted sexually explicit message (80%); being contacted again even after they told the person they were not interested in having a relationship with them (79%); and being insulted, called names or abused using language that made them feel uncomfortable (78%).

Table 2: Prevalence of online sexual harassment victimisation among respondents who reported to the platform, by type of online DAFSV and gender and sexuality (n=1,555) (%)

	Male		Female		Total
	Hetero-sexual	LGB+	Hetero-sexual	LGB+	
Continued to contact the respondent even after they told them they were not interested in having a relationship with them ^a	79.5	83.9	74.7	82.8	78.7
Sent the respondent an unwanted sexually explicit message ^b	71.4	76.6	85.1	89.3	80.1
Sent the respondent an unwanted sexually explicit photo or video of themselves ^c	65.2	75.9	76.8	79.0	73.0
Pressured the respondent to send them a sexually explicit message ^d	67.3	71.5	72.2	84.4	72.0
Pressured the respondent to send them a sexually explicit photo or video of themselves ^e	67.3	74.5	71.3	85.0	71.9
Pressured the respondent to meet them in person when they did not want to ^f	67.9	67.2	61.4	68.8	65.1
Insulted the respondent, called them names or used abusive language that made the respondent feel uncomfortable ^g	72.5	83.9	78.4	84.4	78.1
Posted offensive comments about the respondent online that other people could see (eg on their social media accounts) ^h	50.9	48.2	25.0	35.5	37.4
Threatened the respondent in any way ⁱ	53.2	56.2	40.9	51.6	47.9
Threatened to share a sexually explicit image or video of the respondent without their consent ^j	43.5	44.5	26.3	38.2	35.4
Took a non-consensual photo or video of the respondent which was sexually explicit in nature (eg via webcam) ^k	43.3	46.0	21.7	28.0	32.2
Shared a sexually explicit photo of the respondent with others without their consent ^l	41.2	42.3	21.2	26.9	30.8
Pressured the respondent to give them information about their location or their schedule ^m	59.8	59.1	46.9	60.8	54.2
Logged into one of the respondent's mobile dating app/website accounts without their permission ⁿ	42.0	38.0	18.4	21.0	28.7

a: 2 respondents did not provide this information: 1 heterosexual woman and 1 LGB+ woman

b: 3 respondents did not provide this information: 1 LGB+ man and 2 LGB+ women

c: 8 respondents did not provide this information: 5 heterosexual men and 3 heterosexual women

d: 10 respondents did not provide this information: 3 heterosexual men, 1 LGB+ man, 4 heterosexual women and 2 LGB+ women

e: 14 respondents did not provide this information: 4 heterosexual men, 2 LGB+ men, 6 heterosexual women and 2 LGB+ women

f: 10 respondents did not provide this information: 5 heterosexual men, 3 LGB+ men and 2 heterosexual women

g: 5 respondents did not provide this information: 4 heterosexual men and 1 LGB+ man

h: 8 respondents did not provide this information: 5 heterosexual men and 3 heterosexual women

i: 12 respondents did not provide this information: 5 heterosexual men, 2 LGB+ men, 4 heterosexual women and 1 LGB+ woman

j: 7 respondents did not provide this information: 4 heterosexual men and 3 heterosexual women

k: 11 respondents did not provide this information: 7 heterosexual men, 3 heterosexual women and 1 LGB+ woman

l: 11 respondents did not provide this information: 7 heterosexual men, 1 LGB+ man, 2 heterosexual women and 1 LGB+ woman

m: 12 respondents did not provide this information: 8 heterosexual men, 1 LGB+ man, 2 heterosexual women and 1 LGB+ woman

n: 7 respondents did not provide this information: 4 heterosexual men, 1 LGB+ man and 2 heterosexual women

Note: Non-binary respondents were excluded from the analysis due to small sample size

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Results

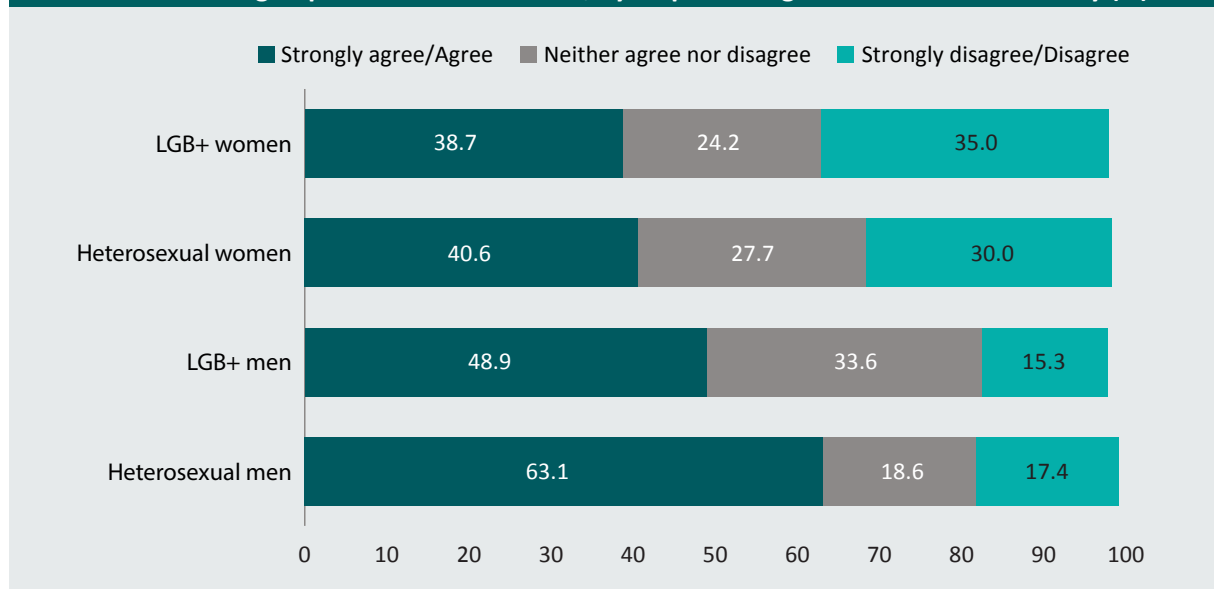
Experiences of victim-survivors reporting to the online dating platform

Perceptions that the platform would do something to protect them and others

Half of respondents who reported DAFSV strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: 'The platform made me feel like they were going to do something to protect me and others' (50%, $n=768$). Twenty-five percent ($n=377$) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, and 25 percent ($n=384$) strongly disagreed or disagreed.

Agreement with this statement differed according to a respondent's gender and sexual identity. The proportion of respondents who agreed was higher than expected for heterosexual men and lower than expected for heterosexual and LGB+ women ($\chi^2(6)=79.81$, $p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.14$). Further, the proportion of respondents who disagreed with this statement was lower than expected for men (heterosexual and LGB+) and higher than expected for women (heterosexual and LGB+).

Figure 1: Level of agreement with the statement 'The dating platform made me feel like they would do something to protect me and others', by respondent gender and sexual identity (%)



Note: 24 respondents did not provide this information: 5 heterosexual men, 3 LGB+ men, 12 heterosexual women and 4 LGB+ women. Percentage totals may not equal 100 due to rounding

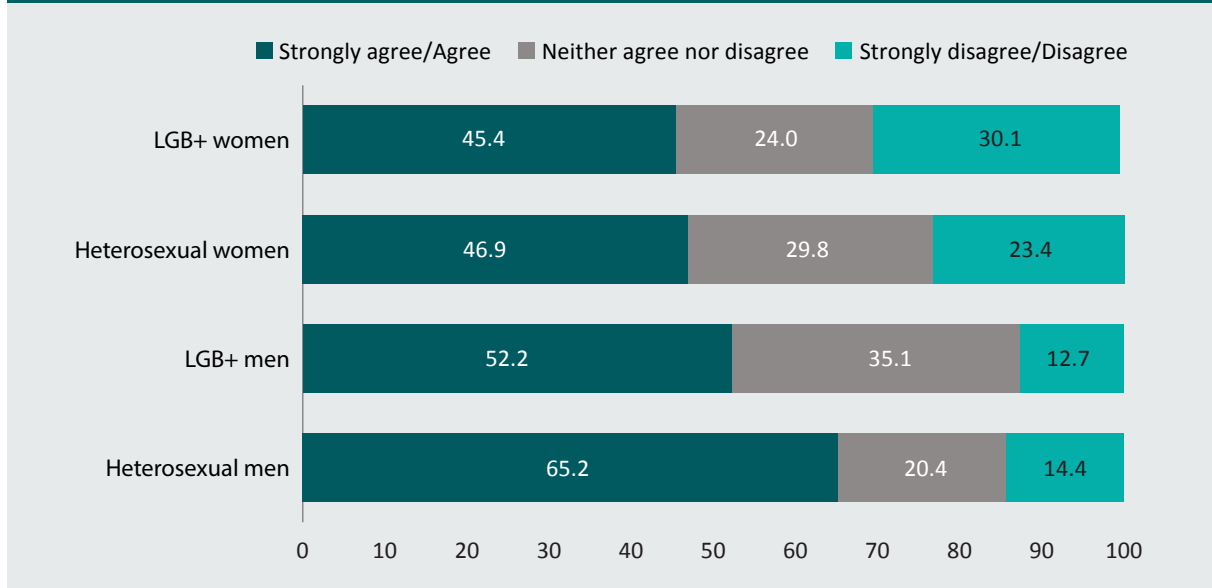
Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Perceptions that the dating platform took the report seriously

Four in five respondents agreed with the statement: 'The dating platform took my report seriously' (83%, $n=488$); 12 percent ($n=67$) neither agreed or disagreed with this statement; five percent ($n=30$) disagreed.

However, as with other measures of reporting experiences, agreement with this statement varied between groups. Analysis of the residual differences identified that a higher than expected proportion of heterosexual men and a lower than expected proportion of LGB+ women and heterosexual women agreed that their report was taken seriously ($\chi^2(6)=59.90$, $p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.14$).

Figure 2: Level of agreement with the statement 'The dating app or website took my report seriously', by respondent gender and sexual identity (%)



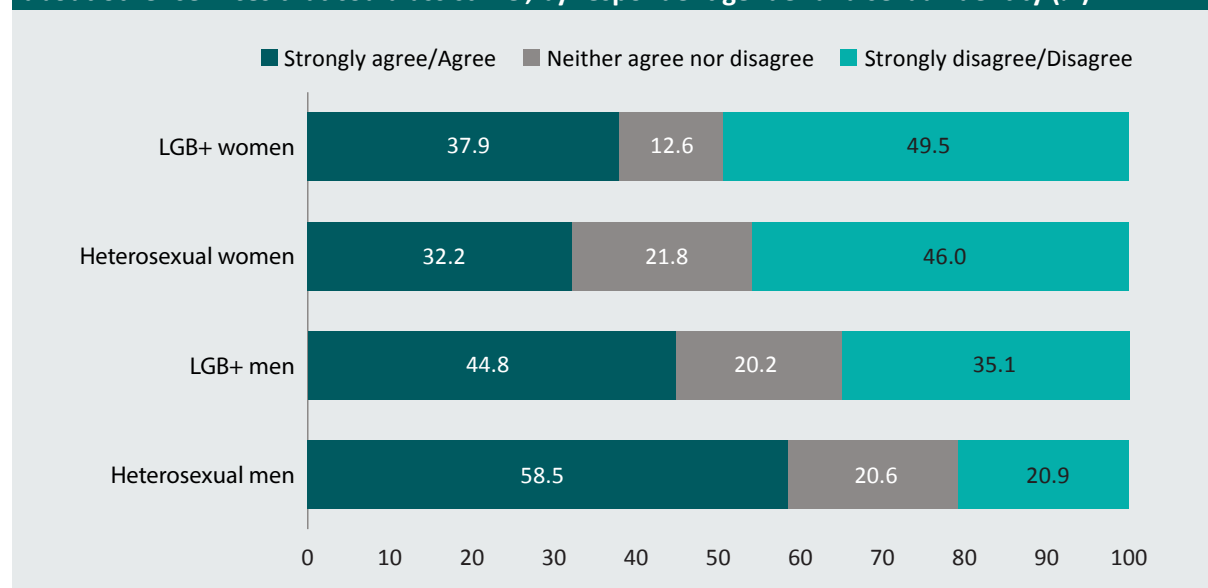
Note: 22 respondents did not provide this information: 3 heterosexual men, 3 LGB+ men, 13 heterosexual women, 3 LGB+ women. Percentage totals may not equal 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Information about support services

Less than half of respondents (44%, $n=671$) agreed that the dating platform provided them with information about support services. One in five respondents (20%, $n=301$) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 36 percent disagreed ($n=555$). There was a statistically significant relationship between the respondents' gender and sexual identity and whether they received information about support services from the dating platform after making a report ($\chi^2(6)=110.67$, $p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.19$). Analysis of the adjusted residuals showed that the proportion of heterosexual men who said that they were given information and support was higher than expected, and the proportion was lower than expected for LGB+ women and heterosexual women.

Figure 3: Level of agreement with the statement 'The platform provided me with information about other services that could assist me', by respondent gender and sexual identity (%)



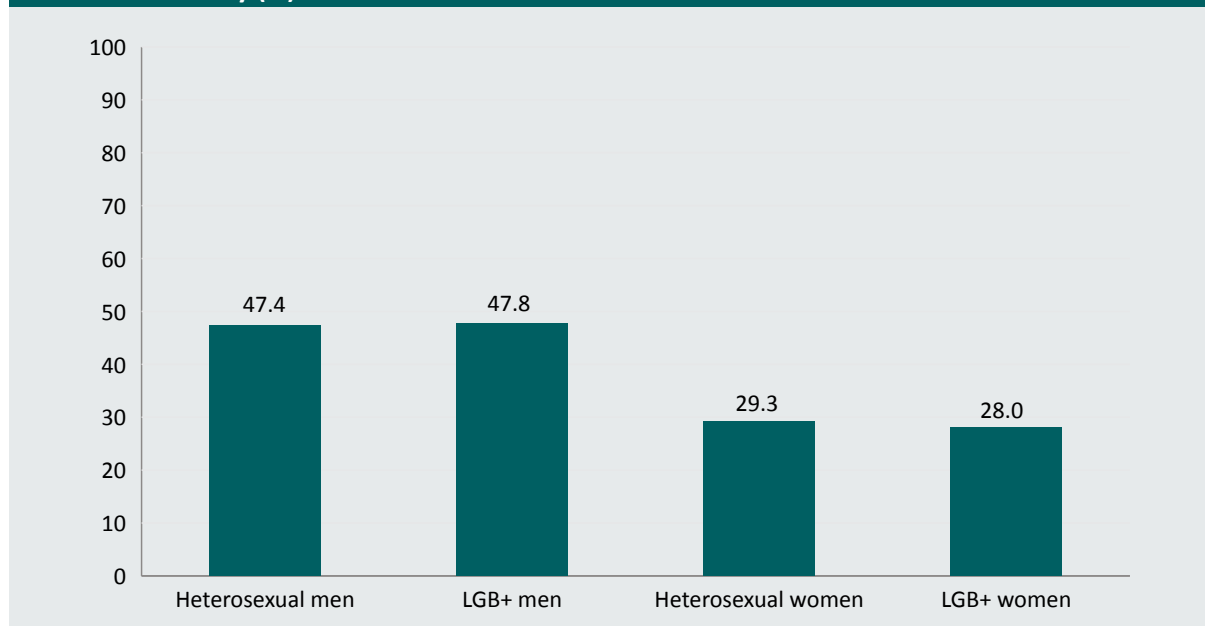
Note: 27 respondents did not provide this information: 6 heterosexual men, 3 LGB+ men, 14 heterosexual women and 4 LGB+ women. Percentage totals may not equal 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Reports resulting in an investigation

One-third of respondents said that the dating platform had started an investigation (37%, $n=542$). The likelihood that the platform investigated differed significantly by the gender and sexual identity of the respondent. Analysis of the residual differences found that investigations were more commonly reported by men (heterosexual and LGB+) and lower than expected for women (heterosexual and LGB+; $\chi^2(3)=52.44$, $p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.19$).

Figure 4: Report resulted in the dating platform starting an investigation, by respondent gender and sexual identity (%)



Note: 31 respondents did not provide this information: 8 heterosexual men, 3 LGB+ men, 16 heterosexual women and 4 LGB+ women

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Satisfaction with online dating platform investigation process and outcomes

Overall, respondents expressed high levels of satisfaction with investigation processes and outcomes after reporting to the dating platform. Table 3 shows that the majority of respondents agreed with the statement 'The dating platform kept me updated on the progress of the investigation' (78%, $n=457$) and the statement 'I was satisfied with the outcome of the investigation' (82%, $n=475$). There was no relationship between respondent gender and sexuality and agreement with these two indicators of satisfaction ($\chi^2(6)=3.04$, $p=0.804$ and $\chi^2(6)=8.70$, $p=0.191$ respectively).

Table 3: Level of satisfaction with dating platform investigation processes, by respondent gender and sexual identity (%) ($n=586$)

	Male		Female		Total
	LGB+	Hetero-sexual	LGB+	Hetero-sexual	
The platform kept me updated about the progress of the investigation					
Strongly agree/Agree	75.0	80.9	74.5	74.7	77.5
Neither agree nor disagree	10.9	8.3	11.8	11.8	10.2
Strongly disagree/Disagree	14.1	10.8	13.7	13.4	12.4
I was satisfied with outcome of the dating platform’s investigation ^a					
Strongly agree/Agree	76.6	85.1	84.0	77.8	81.5
Neither agree nor disagree	15.6	7.5	6.0	14.6	10.7
Strongly disagree/Disagree	7.8	7.5	10.0	7.6	7.8

a: 2 respondents did not provide this information: 1 heterosexual woman and 1 LGB+ woman

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Intentions to report again and other help-seeking

To analyse the associations between experiences reporting to dating platforms and other help-seeking behaviours, we estimated two logistic regression models. In Model 1, the dependent variable was intention to report to the dating platform again in the future. In Model 2, the dependent variable was reporting the most recent incident of DAFSV to the police. The independent variables that were included in the models were the same for Models 1 and 2 (sociodemographic characteristics of respondents—see Table 1—and experiences reporting to dating platforms).

Intention to report to the dating platform again

Two-thirds of respondents said they would report DAFSV to the dating platform again (66%, $n=1,013$). After controlling for a range of other factors, respondents who had a more positive experience reporting to dating platforms said they would report to them in the future if they were victimised again. Respondents who disagreed with the statement:

- ‘The dating platform took the incident seriously’ were less likely to report again than respondents who agreed ($OR=0.25$, $p<0.001$);
- ‘The platform made me feel like they would do something to protect me/others’ were less likely to report again than respondents who agreed with this statement ($OR=0.36$, $p<0.001$); and
- ‘The platform gave me information about other services’ were less likely to report again than respondents who agreed with this statement ($OR=0.60$, $p<0.001$).

Further, respondents who said their report was investigated had twice the odds of saying they would report again, compared with respondents whose report was not investigated ($OR=1.94$, $p<0.001$).

Reporting to the police

Overall, only one in seven respondents said they had also reported the most recent incident of DAFSV to the police (15%, $n=1,328$). The estimated model identified that only one aspect of a respondent’s experiences reporting to dating platforms influenced whether they reported to the police: the provision of information about other services that could assist them. Respondents who disagreed with the statement ‘The platform gave me information about other services that could assist me’ were less likely to report to the police than respondents who agreed with this statement ($OR=0.62$, $p<0.05$). However, the overall area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUROC) for Model 2 was only 0.69, which meant that it was not an overall good fit for the data. This suggests that other factors that were not included in the model probably accounted for variation in reporting online DAFSV to the police (eg the nature of violence).

Table 4: Logistic regression models predicting other help-seeking, OR (95% CI)

		Model 1: Intention to report to dating platform again ^a <i>n</i> =1,421	Model 2: Reporting current incident to police ^b <i>n</i> =1,427
Gender and sexuality (vs heterosexual men)	LGB+ men	1.43 (0.87, 2.36)	0.63 (0.35, 1.13)
	Heterosexual women	1.74** (1.27, 2.39)	0.75 (0.53, 1.07)
	LGB+ women	1.54 (0.99, 2.40)	0.56* (0.32, 0.97)
Health status (vs not living with a disability)	Living with a disability	0.56** (0.39, 0.81)	2.1*** (1.46, 3.08)
Indigenous status (vs non-Indigenous)	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	0.97 (0.62, 1.53)	1.2 (0.77, 1.81)
Age in years (vs 18–24)	25–34	1.10 (0.77, 1.57)	0.88 (0.57, 1.35)
	35–44	1.53* (1.02, 2.29)	0.68 (0.41, 1.10)
	45–54	1.23 (0.75, 2.01)	1.04 (0.59, 1.84)
	55–64	0.84 (0.44, 1.60)	0.39 (0.14, 1.07)
	65+	1.15 (0.38, 3.48)	0.62 (0.13, 2.85)
Residence (vs metropolitan areas)	Regional/remote	0.86 (0.62, 1.20)	0.78 (0.53, 1.15)
Citizenship status (Australian citizen/permanent resident)	Temporary visa	0.62 (0.37, 1.04)	0.69 (0.34, 1.39)
	Permanent visa	0.50 (0.23, 1.09)	0.92 (0.35, 2.46)
Reporting outcome (vs no investigation)	Investigation	1.94*** (1.34, 2.80)	1.39 (0.94, 2.07)
Dating platform treated my report seriously (vs strongly agree/agree)	Neither agree nor disagree	0.40*** (0.28, 0.58)	0.70 (0.41, 1.18)
	Disagree/strongly disagree	0.25*** (0.16, 0.40)	1.42 (0.78, 2.58)
Dating platform made me feel like they were going to do something to protect me/others (vs strongly agree/agree)	Neither agree nor disagree	0.42*** (0.29, 0.62)	0.93 (0.55, 1.57)
	Disagree/strongly disagree	0.36*** (0.23, 0.57)	0.96 (0.52, 1.79)
Dating platform provided me with information about other services (vs strongly agree/agree)	Neither agree nor disagree	0.48*** (0.33, 0.71)	0.69 (0.42, 1.18)
	Disagree/strongly disagree	0.60** (0.42, 0.88)	0.62* (0.38, 0.99)

***statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, **statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, *statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

a: Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.22$, Likelihood-ratio test $\chi^2(20) = -708.99$, $p < 0.001$, AUROC=0.81

b: Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.07$, Likelihood-ratio test $\chi^2(20) = -552.59$, $p < 0.001$, AUROC=0.69

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Discussion

Collectively, the majority of respondents reported positive experiences reporting DAFSV to dating platforms. However, users' experiences varied significantly, depending on their gender and sexual identity. LGB+ women, closely followed by heterosexual women, reported the lowest rates of satisfaction with the response they received. Approximately one-third (30%) of LGB+ women disagreed that their report was taken seriously or that the platform made them feel like they were going to protect them or others from the perpetrator (35%). Further, only half (50%) of LGB+ women agreed that they had been given information about other support services that could assist them. In comparison, heterosexual male respondents were the most likely to have positive experiences reporting to dating platforms.

These findings are consistent with our recent study examining the experiences of victim-survivors of DAFSV who reported to the police (Lawler & Boxall 2023). Interpreting these findings is difficult, because we did not collect detailed information about the nature of the incidents being reported by respondents or the types of actions taken by the dating platforms. However, we hypothesised previously that men may be reporting incidents related to image-based sexual abuse which may be treated more seriously by the police and other reporting entities, compared with harassment and abuse, which are typically experienced by LGB+ and heterosexual women (see Table 2). Indeed, in this sample of people who reported to a dating platform, a higher proportion of heterosexual men (41%) and LGB+ men (42%) said that a sexually explicit photo of them had been shared without their consent, compared with heterosexual women (21%) and LGB+ women (27%).

An alternative hypothesis could be that respondents had different expectations when they reported to dating platforms and potentially different justice needs. There are several key justice interests and needs that are important to victim-survivors of sexual harm. These include participation and decision-making power in justice processes, perpetrator accountability, validation, vindication, safety and relationships (Bolitho 2015; Daly 2017). Gender differences in justice needs have been identified where female victims of serious crime (including sexual violence) report more interest in participation, vindication and voice (eg the opportunity to tell their story) than male victims (Bolívar, Sánchez-Gómez & de Haan 2022). Further, people with previous victimisation experiences were more interested in vindication in the aftermath of sexual harm than those without these experiences (Bolívar, Sánchez-Gómez & de Haan 2022).

There is evidence that LGB+ people who have had negative experiences disclosing sexual harm in the past anticipate future mistreatment and experience cis-heteronormative responses from systems and authorities that are hurtful (Pinciotti et al. 2023). Groups who have been historically over-represented as victims of sexual harm (eg women; gender and sexually diverse people) may have higher expectations that systems will change as a result of their experiences. This could partly explain the findings here and in our previous study, where the group most likely to experience sexual harm (LGB+ women) was the most dissatisfied with the response to their report (Lawler & Boxall 2023). Because the justice needs literature has primarily focused on the experiences of cis-women as victims and cis-men as perpetrators (reflecting the gendered nature of rates of sexual violence victimisation generally), it is unclear how this extends to men as victims of sexual harm and to non-heteronormative identities. Future research should explore this.

Regardless of the reason for this finding, it demonstrates that, like police, online dating platforms need to do more to respond appropriately to women and people of diverse genders and sexualities, for whom experiences of DAFSV are especially common (Wolbers et al. 2022). Recent criticisms and a spotlight on the role of dating platforms in enabling sexual harm (Choi, Wong & Fong 2018; Gillett 2018) have partly led to renewed efforts from platforms to address user safety concerns. This has primarily involved the implementation of ‘safety’ features that include user verification, increased surveillance, partnerships with victim support services and information-sharing agreements with law enforcement (Gillett, Stardust & Burgess 2022; Stardust, Gillett & Albury 2022). Other changes include making it easier to block people before matching (eg a boss or an ex), enabling users to report harassment and abuse within a chat, implementing background checks, and allowing users to retain messaging history when someone has been blocked or unmatched (ie by a perpetrator; Wolbers et al. 2022). On a broader level, the voluntary industry code of practice recommended by the Australian Government in September 2023 aims to motivate platforms to further raise safety standards for users and create more systemic change across the online dating industry. There is a need to measure the impact of all these changes on the prevalence of DAFSV among users of dating platforms and users’ satisfaction with the responses platforms provide when they report abuse.

In conclusion, implementing appropriate responses to reports of DAFSV is important not only for supporting victim-survivors to recover from victimisation but also for ensuring that victim-survivors of these behaviours choose to report again if they are revictimised. Re-reporting is essential to support the efforts of dating platforms to identify and sanction individuals who are using their platforms to perpetrate harm. Considering that a large proportion of victim-survivors of DAFSV report to dating platforms, these sites are likely to have visibility of victim-survivors who may not report their experiences to other services. This provides an invaluable opportunity for platforms to engage with victim-survivors, validate their experiences and provide them with information about other support services that could assist them to recover and feel safe. Dating platforms should therefore develop their responses in consultation with sexual assault services and advocacy groups.

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