

Queered online pandemic relationships: Mobile expressions of intimacies, care, and emotion work

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Abstract

Drawing from the assumptions on queer and mobile intimacy, emotion work, and care, this paper explores the role of mobile communication platform access and use among Filipino gay couples who have been physically separated because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper looks at in-depth narratives of 24 gay men whose romances have been transferred to and transformed by messaging apps due to the pandemic. The accounts of these gay couples represent the realities of cosmopolitan gay men in negotiating digital romantic presence as they manage connection despite the distance. Mobile technologies have deepened the synchronous and asynchronous rituals of maneuvering romance as couples manage imagined emphatic romances. The participants' descriptions revealed queered technology-use in bridging and maintaining imagined intimacies while feeling trapped in the dependence on mediated means of enacting such intimacies.

Keywords: Mediated Intimacy, Queer Intimacy, Mobile Intimacy, Messaging Apps, COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

As of July 2021, there is still an upward surge of COVID-19 cases in the Philippines. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there are already almost 1.5 million confirmed COVID-19 cases, with 36.8 percent coming from the country's National Capital Region (NCR), and more than 25,000 deaths reported in the country. As a major part in preventing the virus, the country has already vaccinated more than nine million individuals, with 96.2 percent of Priority Group A1 (frontline health care workers) having received their first dose, while only 30.3 percent of Priority Group A2 (senior citizens) have been vaccinated. Despite these measures of the government to slow down the spread of the virus (Department of Health, 2020), Filipinos are still in lockdowns more than a year after the pandemic has reached the country. The earliest and strictest form of quarantine, aptly called the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) was imposed from March to May 2020 in the NCR and some high-risk areas in the Luzon islands of the Philippine archipelago (Austriaco, 2020). Modifications to the labels and names of the quarantine have followed. Now, on its sixteenth pandemic month this July 2021, the country is still managing the effects of this disaster. Filipinos are still asked to stay at home except for the medical, frontline, and essential workers. While limited public transportation has been allowed, travel across regions is still risky and monitored by local government units.

The COVID-19 pandemic therefore has had significant social, economic, and even psychological impact on the Filipino people. Various travel restrictions and lockdowns forced many Filipinos to stay and work in their homes or even to return to their provinces before the imposition of the ECQ last March 2020. These changes led to a “new normal” of social interaction among individuals that limits physical contact but makes use of online interactions through messaging apps and social media platforms. Economically, the pandemic has left some 4.9 million Filipinos unemployed (Lopez, 2020) and some 44,000 unenrolled college students (Magsambol, 2020). This is probably due to the 90,000 businesses that closed during the pandemic (Domingo, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic also affected the psychological well-being of the Filipinos since the start of lockdown measures. Filipinos were found to be more vulnerable during the pandemic and that the majority felt moderate to severe psychological impacts, experiencing depressive symptoms and anxiety signals (Tee et al., 2020). The risks are even higher for economically and socially vulnerable and marginalized individuals (see McKay et al., 2020).

One of the groups that has been affected by the lockdown, quarantine rules, and social distancing policies is the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender

Queer+ (LGBTQ+) community, particularly gay couples who have been forced to be physically apart. Of course, such a concern during the epidemic is not limited to the gay community, but data presented through sexual orientation and gender identity research have been minimal, leading to ongoing marginalization and alienation of members of the LGBTQ+ community (Cahill, 2020; Johnson, 2020). Unlike the United States where data on COVID-19's effects on the LGBTQ+ community has been documented (see Whittington et al., 2020), the Philippines has no report on the relationship of COVID-19 infections to the economic, social, and psychological impacts on the gay community.

To address the absence of data on the pandemic's impact on LGBTQ+ community, the present study sheds light on the various challenges and changes in the social interactions of gay couples during the pandemic. During the pandemic, gay men in romantic relationships have faced various challenges, such as finding and maintaining relationships in this "new normal" set-up. In the Philippines, where LGBTQ+ rights are not yet translated into laws, and gay relationships are culturally frowned upon by a predominantly religious society, there is a complex social attitude toward LGBTQ+ couples (UNDP, USAID 2014). Gay men have been forced to go back to their provinces and live with their families with whom they may or may not have healthy relationships. Many gay men have had to leave their partners and, in the process, had to reshape their relationship patterns from a previously combined off and online relationship set-up to a completely technology-mediated one.

With the developments in the use of social media, relationship sustenance and maintenance have become possible even without the "physicality" of the person which was not possible before as media was limited to newspapers and letters (Raiti, 2007). As technologies develop, globalization took its course in embedding itself in the lives of people. Globalization has created a borderless world in the presence of the internet and developing digital technologies (Block, 2004). It is interesting to look into how LGBTQ+ couples utilize the internet and various digital technologies to shape and develop their own romantic relationships, most especially during a pandemic where social distancing is mandated. As ways of establishing relationships change in this pandemic, it is also significant to investigate how LGBTQ+ individuals build mobile intimacies, as an alternative, that link and allow them to experience their intimate life in mediated environments in the absence of the physical presence of the people with whom they want to connect.

Research Problem and Aims

In this paper, we draw on the everyday experiences of twelve gay couples to build on the way mobile intimacy is mediated and transformed through messaging apps during the pandemic. We wanted to describe how technology-mediated intimacies are formed and normalized as couples enact online social presence and romantic relational work. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic where relationship dynamics have been altered, we also wanted to characterize gender-as-relational (see Umberson et al., 2015) by unpacking the entangled nature of emotion work, sexual interaction, and queering intimacy that embody gay romance.

The study contributed to expanding the discussion about the role of mediated environments in building and maintaining cosmopolitan romance (Lorenzana, 2019) and enacting modern love (Illouz, 2012). Moreover, this work deepened the discussion on how gay couples censor their sexual self (Atienza, 2018) and how technology became a challenging tool for gay relationship development (Mckie et al., 2017). Lastly, we would also like to mitigate the dearth of literature on how LGBTQ+ members manage their relationships during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Mediated and Mobile Intimacy

Intimacy involves “a seamless blending of the psychic convexities and concavities of two individuals” (Akhtar, 2019, p. 6). This is a result of successive communication and can particularly be mediated when communicated through a medium (Attwood et al., 2017). Modern communication offered something beyond a geographical consideration for space and time. With this, Sarah Cefai and Nick Couldry (2017) argued that modernity makes us dependent on our mediation in which we let these institutions foster social attachment for us. We let the media mediate our everyday as technology mediates our relationships, our appearances, our showing up (or refusal to show up), and our intimacies. The temporal factors of mediation (and mediated intimacy) abound where “media facilitate a speeding up of time and an increasing social expectation of immediacy” (Cefai & Couldry, 2017, p. 304). The rise of social media welcomed a rise in geospatial and temporal concerns, with mobile phones as the epitome of the public sphere inside a private handheld which “reflects particular gendered performativities and intimacies” (Hjorth & Lim, 2012, p. 482). In a public sphere, gendered performativities can pertain to actions and appearances restricted by gender norms (Butler, 2009) where expressions of intimacies can be inherently influenced and negotiated.

Understanding human mobilities enables researchers to come up with valuable and rich insights into the dynamics of people's flexibility and adaptability in shifting from one environment to another. Mobility could be a theoretical anchor that will help investigate and explain the contexts of people's geographical movement or migration, whether it is economically or socially driven. As people migrate across countries, communicating intimate relationships through digital technologies are becoming more common when individuals are geographically separated from their loved ones. Therefore, it is interesting to analyze intimacy while accompanying the idea of mobilities because it presents emerging human behavior, social practices, and technologies that establish and maintain relationships remotely.

Associating the two concepts of mobility and intimacy, the notion of mobile intimacy emerged as the positioning of mobile technologies to bridge intimacy—may either be public or private, between people to resolve issues in physical barriers brought by geographic, technological, psychological, and physical mobilities (Hjorth & Lim, 2012). In the study of Hjorth and Lim on mobile intimacy, they defined it based on women's use of media to facilitate issues on emotions, and their use of technologies to aid various emotional, psychological, and social needs. This is in parallel with the assumption that the use of mobile technologies facilitates intimacy among users online, even in offline settings (Cumiskey & Brewster, 2012). This process allows the formation and maintenance of a relationship in an online network while still enabling the prevalence of the usual offline social relations and practices (Arminen & Weilenmann, 2009). Employing the concept of mobile intimacy in investigating online engagement that forms, sustains, and maintains intimacies among people remains beneficial in bridging the gaps in the literature and in understanding human behavior. Through further understanding mobile intimacy, we can discern the dynamics of developing and emerging technologies which affect the practices of people online and offline.

It should also be noted that mobile intimacy is the product of technological advancements. Gerard Raiti (2007) traced the proliferation of mobile intimacy from the development of technologies and globalization. Technology and mobile intimacy are inseparable because intimacy only became mobile through developments in technologies and the start of globalization. Drawing from Anthony Giddens's "time-space distancing" (see Giddens, 1990), Raiti stated that mobile intimacy is rooted in the blurring of space, time, and place where the emerging media produces mediation that bridges different types of communication across time and space.

With the expansion of literature in mobile intimacy, studies have also discussed various social inequalities associated with it. As new digital technologies allowed intimacy to persist despite the distance through technologies of communication (Labor, 2021; Wilding, 2006), these opportunities have been a major factor in the decisions of people, specifically Filipinos, to work abroad (Madianou & Miller, 2013a). However, socioeconomic status still dictates access to and connectivity through digital technologies (Lim, 2016). Further, the asymmetry present in mobile intimacy is evident in how technological competency is necessary for individuals to navigate new media. On the other hand, affordability of, accessibility to, and knowledge of digital technologies are no longer as significant as they used to be in dictating how people communicate (Madianou & Miller, 2013b). The concept of polymedia, coined by Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, envisions digital technologies as providing opportunities for new communication methods based on the affordances that it offers to individuals. As a result, these affordances in how one accesses digital technology shape the dimensions and richness of the exhibited communication practices by individuals. Concurrently, mobile intimacy studies focus on the communication practices that emerge from its use. Jason Vincent Cabañes and Cecilia Uy-Tioco (2020) argued that relationships and social intimacies have been transformed due to the presence of mobile technologies. In their review, they mentioned how mobile technologies affect intimacies through the creation of: (a) mobile spaces where people can articulate shared perspectives and ideals on topics like, marriage, motherhood and filial piety; and (b) social dimensions of mediated intimacies where people can challenge the norms of relationships, from dating to familyhood. Also, this can be a result of individuals creating their own social scripts (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, in Cabañes & Uy-tioco, 2020) and increasingly weakening social ties among human relations (Bauman, 2003). Even with mobile technologies changing aspects of the dynamics of relationships, local environments still have a bearing on the intimacy of the relationships. For instance, mobile intimacy is moving in the direction of expanding the understanding of care work through digital technologies (Uy-Tioco & Cabalquinto, 2020). With the arrival of new digital technologies, different ways of expressing care have also emerged. Mobile media allows migrants to embody caregiving practices to their aging parents across different continents. Despite the expansion of globalization that mobile intimacy has allowed, the people that practice it are still rooted in their connection to their primary local environment from the behaviors and ideologies that they observe.

Queering Intimacy

With the expanding mobile technologies and evolving dynamics of human relations, intimacy, alongside inequality, is “queered” by same-sex couples as they challenge heteronormative norms in their relationship-building by diverging from the practices of heterosexual couples. With regards to their gender conformity, Umberson et al. (2015) posited that there is a hybrid of certain areas in which same-sex couples adhere to and oppose. Their findings showed that lesbian couples adhered to traditional feminine roles of emotion work but opposed the heteronormative views of partner discordance in building intimacy, whereas, gay couples adhered to traditional masculine roles of boundaries (e.g., independence and emotional autonomy) but contested heteronormative expectations on emotional support. Differentiating from heterosexual couples, the study found the same-sex relationships reflect a more balanced view on intimacy, boundaries and emotion work as ways to achieve intimacy among partners. These types of findings queer the understanding in the construct of intimacy systems where same-sex relationships reconstruct the way we view intimacy and relationship longevity.

As we queer our notion of intimacy, it is also interesting to look into how evolving concepts on intimacy, i.e., mobile intimacy, influence the relational dynamics of same-sex couples. In the context of the pandemic with constant local and national lockdowns, geographical distance is also worry among same-sex couples where they turn to digital technologies to sustain their own intimacies. It should be noted that studies that looked into such long-distance intimacies involved focus on social presence. John Short et al. (1976, cited in Kreijns et al., 2014) mentioned that social presence can be associated by two separated, but related, constructs: social presence (the degree to which the communication partner is “real”) and social space (the degree to which interpersonal communication networks were noticed). In a study on social presence, Patrick Lowenthal (2009) found that some media, such as videos, is considered to have a high degree of social presence; the higher the degree, the more it is perceived as sociable, warm and personal. This finding can also be associated with how digital technologies that allow video chats permit the construction and maintenance of mobile intimacies.

With digital technologies influencing the dynamics of intimacy, one assumption discussed is how screens set us apart more than physically, “rendering us ‘elsewhere’ in relation to others” (Cefai & Couldry, 2017, p. 299). Auditory and visual aspects on the screen have both changed what “home” can be: an office, a car, a living room and a sense of being with company. This, in part, fits with Lowenthal’s (2009) literature review saying that tasks low in interpersonal communication can be aided by audiovisuals

instead. Drawing from Miguel's (2016) study on visual media as expression of intimacy via social media interactions, publishing intimacy online is tied with an exposition of vulnerability. There is a certain level to which individuals accept having intimate photos published online, such as being tagged by other people, but do not go their own way to actually post. These unintended published posts by the person comes with a concern especially for LGBTQ+ individuals. These photos that reflect one's relationship status, even just of hugging, may reach unintended audiences, most especially family members who are not aware of the person's sexual orientation (i.e. homosexuality, bisexuality, etc.). As a result, photos that were deemed sexy or that were considered to show relationship status in photos were patrolled.

Beyond the audiovisual, intimacy is enacted upon by individuals, and this act is, to an extent, a kind of work. Sally Hines (2007) collated different works of text that tackle care, intimacy, and citizenship. In her findings, feminist perspectives found that care (as emotion work) among women was analyzed to be exploitative ("labor of love"), appending some studies saying that women get a sense of fulfillment through caring roles, which might also become a space for them to belong and be socially accepted. In parallel, Umberson et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative analysis on the workings of intimacy and emotion work across relational contexts of same- and different-sex relationships employing the gender-as-relational perspective. Findings proved that gender is dynamic and situational, varying within men and women. Traditionally, men and women are viewed as dichotomous, shaping norms such as men as proactive and less emotional, whereas women as reactive and more emotional. Diverging from these heteronormative norms, the study found how gendered-relational contexts of same-sex couples create unique and queer intimacy systems. The authors even cited Oswald et al. (2005) that stated how same-sex couples offer "creative spaces... where new constructions get crafted and old ones are remade" (Umberson et al., 2015, p. 148). In this case, a queer construction of what intimacy could be. This shows that queer relationships have long been "practitioners of the 'pure relationship'" (Hines, 2007, p. 40), but still bounded by imbalance and power relations.

Studying queer intimacy in a mediated environment, we focused on men who have sex with men (MSM) and their relationships with their partners. Local studies take note that MSM behaviors operate behind hegemonic ideologies of heteronormativity (Acaba, 2018), neoliberalism (Ong, 2017), and even as a space for queer dialectical processes (Solis, 2020). In the analysis of Rowell de Guia (2013) of anonymous narratives of male-to-male sexual encounters, the presence of hegemonic heteronormativity favoring the masculine image surfaced. MSM narrators were more likely

to distance themselves from the stereotypes of their sexuality in the gay sphere. These constructions of their identities reinforce hegemonic notions of masculinity. In another study of MSM in Iloilo City, Moniq Muyargas and Cristabel Parcon (2012) were able to identify sexual characteristics and behaviors that were seen to be diverse and type-determined, distinguishing upon typical MSM categories: sex roles, where they cruise, how they interact, and who they interact with. These findings are similar to McKie et al. (2016) study that found that most men (regardless of sexual partner) seek sexual sensation through technology-mediated communications. In Ong's (2017) study on queer cosmopolitanism of Tacloban City in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, results showed how LGBTQ+ individuals use technology-mediated communications, like dating platforms, to initiate new connections as a way to heal from the traumas of an experienced life-threatening disaster. With physical and digital spheres allowing liberatory, risky, and temporary intimacy, these dating platforms have become hook-up apps that only reinforce masculine stereotypes over free expression of identity.

As argued by these local studies, how gay men navigate cyberspace is not discounted from having digital infrastructure that perpetuate hegemonic ideas of heteronormativity. Brandon Andrew Hautefeuille (2016) discussed that, in queer dating apps, gay men individualized themselves to still adhere to the dominant muscular fetish and Western male praise. Coinciding with de Guia's (2013) and Ong's (2017) findings, this shows how one cannot truly present themselves in digital platforms inevitably because of the limitations that design brings. This confines already marginalized gay men in a space where they are marginalized again. Hautefeuille (2016) adds that, "Pressure to conform to hegemonic discourses around masculinity is permeated on queer cyberspace, affecting users' identity by producing a performance of themselves on the application" (p. 30), but there begs an inquiry if these would be applicable with regards to computer-mediated romantic relationships in which this study attempted to figure out.

Drawing from the assumptions on queer intimacy and how it is mediated through digital technologies, the present study wanted to investigate how these technologies serve as an alternative medium in expressing intimacy in the time of a pandemic, where quarantine protocols affect, and possibly separate (in distance or otherwise) same-sex couples. This research provides weight to the earlier findings about the forms of intimate queer relationship happen during the pandemic (Labor & Latosa, 2021). In studying the lived experiences of gay couples during the COVID-19 pandemic, we wanted to know how they are able to maintain and sustain the intimacy in their own relationships, and how they have utilized computer-mediated

communication (CMC) in response to the absence of physical contact. Moreover, this inquiry contributes to the discussion on the consequences of emotion work in relational contexts, across genders (Umberson et al., 2015).

Method

This study is an exploratory work on the nature of mediated romantic intimacy among gay couples during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study utilized the case study design, a qualitative approach that uses musings and experiences of chosen cases who narrate about real-life contextualization (Yin, 2018) of a time-and-space-bound phenomenon (Alpi & Evans, 2019). From July 1 to December 1, 2020, twelve gay couples responded to participate in the study through online recruitment. Purposive sampling was used to look for the same-sex couples. The researchers sent out online call for participations based on a set of inclusion criteria. The call was announced through social networking sites of the researchers. The criteria are as follows: (1) self-identified as gay male; (2) in a relationship, (3) physically separated from a gay male partner, and (4) uses technology to communicate with the romantic partner. Participants who wanted to be part of the study e-mailed the researchers to set up the online interviews.

For ethical considerations and prior to the interviews, participants were emailed about the data gathering procedure and the research problem of the study. The participants were asked to email accomplished informed consent forms to ensure willingness and agreement in participating in the study. They were also reminded that they should be able to know how to use digital technologies in communicating with their partners during the lockdown. Because of the strict quarantine protocols, online interviews were conducted at the most convenient time for each individual. The couples were interviewed separately to elicit individual insights and narratives.

To ensure an ethical data gathering, the participants were also briefed about the nature of the participation, the duration of the interviews, the risks, and the discomfort, as well as the benefits of the study. The participants were told that they may discontinue with their participation to the study if they are not comfortable with the questions. The researchers also mentioned that the gathered data will be used as evidences for derivative works such as conference paper presentations and journal articles.

Participants were asked to talk about their: relationship dynamics and boundaries; expressions of intimacy, sex, and care; and narratives of conflicts, and stress during the quarantine. Collected data has been anonymized and narratives were treated with utmost confidentiality. For the data analysis, inductive thematic analysis was used in order to arrive at categories of

responses. The researchers took the position of a “teller of tales” (Kearns, 1997, p. 269) so that they could identify recurring themes in the responses of the participants. The researchers did individual semi-structured coding of the transcripts. Conscious of the concepts under investigation, each researcher was able to systematically categorize the insights into patterns and themes. To ensure the validity of the individual analysis, multiple individuals looked at the transcripts and coded important notes/actual statements in a matrix. External validators are two communication researchers that are not part of the study.

Results

Demographics

In total, 12 couples (24 participants) were interviewed in this study. The participants’ age ranges from 20 to 40 years old. Most of them are already working while some of them are still studying in universities. The length of the participants’ relationships ranged from 1 year to almost 10 years. Couples 1, 3, 4, 7, 9, and 11 met online, through mobile dating platforms, while couples 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, and 12 met offline through friends, student organizations, and schools. In order to maintain anonymity, the informants were assigned nicknames. All of the participants were born in the Philippines. Most of them live in the Philippines while four participants live and work abroad (Australia, Qatar, USA).

Technology, through Facebook chats, messaging apps, video calls, and texts, bridges the lack of physical romantic relationships among these couples. Couples have been using these technologies in creating, maintaining, and rebuilding romantic relationships. On the one hand, couples that met through dating apps and social networking sites (SNS) used these platforms in getting to know their would-be partners and utilized these means to augment the lack of physical contact during their dating process. On the other hand, couples who met offline through common friends, organizations, and other interest groups used SNS to deepen their intimate relationships in the absence of face-to-face (F-t-F) interaction. Technology-use was essential in getting-to-know each other and in ensuring that couples develop intimacy. Because the majority of the couples met before the COVID-19 pandemic, the couples were used to offline interactions to enact their romance. In this context, the study explored how this shift to technology-mediated intimacies have evolved the participants’ relational practices and relationship dynamics during the pandemic.

Table 1. Locations of the couples during the pandemic

Couples	Profile	Current Location
1	Art, 20, undergraduate student	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
	CJ, 25, graduate student	Batangas, Region IV-A, PH
2	Chris, 38, teacher	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
	Joel, 30, teacher/ PhD student	Australia
3	Gio, 40, undergraduate student	Batangas, Region IV-A, PH
	Josh, 39, IT practitioner	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
4	Juls, 27, Manager	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
	Panch, 26, real-estate broker	Qatar
5	Ryan, 25, writer	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
	Tosh, 24, writer	Cagayan, Region 2, PH
6	Allan, 25, marketing specialist	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
	Jay, 39, manager	USA
7	Ricel, 24, Information systems associate	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
	Jeremy, 24, Social media analyst	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
8	Melo, 26, Human Resource Manager	USA
	Jose, 30, Hotel Assistant Manager	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
9	Nath, 27, Assistant Professor	Laguna, Region IV-A, PH
	Dan, 28, Accountant	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
10	Dave, 32, Associate Professor	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
	Harold, 35, Media Practitioner	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
11	Alex, 30, Communication specialist	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
	Ino, 32, Hotel manager	Palawan, Region IV-B, PH
12	Mike, 25, BPO Employee	Manila, National Capital Region, PH
	Arron, 27, HEI Instructor	Laguna, Region IV-A, PH

Online relational dynamics and emotion work

At present, technology has been used in initiating, maintaining, and augmenting relationships through the presence of text messaging, video calling, and the like. Half of the couples in this study met through a dating app and developed their romance in it. They are part of a generation of Filipino gay men who have been exposed to online and mobile dating.

Art (20), a college student, said that he and his partner are already used to using messaging apps as venues for emotional expression and support. In a separate interview, this was seconded by his partner, CJ (25), a graduate student from the same university. “We met as alter [alternative] account users in Twitter and moved on to a dating app and finally settled as chatmates in a messaging app so we are comfortable in using online spaces as means for us to develop our relationship,” CJ shared. A lot of these couples found it easy to use and manipulate technology for their relationships to work, especially during the pandemic where lockdowns limit physical contacts.

There are also couples who meet each other in offline gatherings. Interestingly, these couples eventually moved to messaging apps because it is easier to connect and build connections in online spaces. Jay (39), a manager, said that, “We can talk for hours in the app so I do not need to physically go to my partner’s house or go to a mall so we could bond.” The role of technology in building and maintaining relationships does not end in the dating process, especially during the pandemic. Gay couples maximize messaging apps’ functions, such as video calls and sharing of photos. During the lockdown, technology enables synchronous romantic rituals that include conversations upon waking up, updates on the activities within the day, and reports on the daily grind. Joel (30), a PhD student and a teacher, expressed the need for these rituals in this pandemic, “There is a need to make the other feel secured by providing anecdotal information on one’s whereabouts, level of health and wellness, and well-being.” This is usually done through SNS (e.g., Facebook, Telegram, Instagram). Technology also has asynchronous features that helped maintain these relationship rituals. These rituals include quick updates on health status, daily activities, and current personal problems. It is also a typical way to open up and resolve existing conflicts with their partners. Tosh (24), a writer, explained this, “In a way, technology forces us to update each other to be more articulate in our feelings and thoughts so we could remain committed to the relationship.” Gio (40), an education student, shared that he opened the video function of his messaging app so that he could see Josh, his partner, prepare dishes, take a bath, and say goodbye before going to work. Josh (39), an information technology officer, mentioned that, “the least we could do as a couple is to maintain the intimacy by simulating what we usually do as a couple during the times when we were allowed to be as physically present lovers before the pandemic.”

Across the set of interviewed gay men, there is a disclosure and a tendency for one of the partners to claim that, in a relationship, there will always be someone who would be more expressive of emotions than the other. Chris (38), a teacher and writer, pointed this reality out when he said,

“In a relationship, someone has the tendency to initiate conversations about feelings. I tend to do that because of my age.” His partner, Joel, acknowledged this by saying that his partner, Chris, has always been expressive of his feelings to the point that he has become clingy to him. This is also shared by Ryan (25), a writer, who stated how his partner is more emotional due to overthinking. He said that, “My partner is the one who shares more emotion.... He usually overthinks a lot of things so he also discloses the things that bother him.”

Through these expressions and articulations of emotion, same-sex relationships develop emotion work and emotional intimacies. Emotion work is considered prominent in (although not confined to) intimate relationships (Umberson et al., 2015). For these couples, emotion work through technology-mediated intimacy means verbalizing emotions and support more openly. Josh mentioned how their chats have become their avenue to express their own emotions. He shared, “I could be expressive via chats. We have been used to communicating our emotions using chats that we know already the tone and mood of each other when it comes to the way we use chats.” Moreover, the emotional work of these couples has become a way to resolve conflicts in the relationship. CJ shared that, “We are both sharing our emotions to manage the relationship. We do not sleep until we fix our issues.” It should also be noted how gay (as opposed to lesbian) couples separate sex from emotional intimacy, resulting in leniency toward sexual non-exclusivity. Ryan explained how he allowed this sexual non-exclusivity with his partner as long as they asked consent from each other. “We are also open to flirt with others during this pandemic as long as we know who the two of us are flirting with,” he shared. But it is notable in this study that most participants had not had casual sex outside of their relationships in years.

Concurrently, same-sex relationships are likely to foster equality in their domestic life, employment, and childcare (Hines, 2007). Drawing from this assumption, there is potential in making new patterns of intimacy for these same-sex couples enacting intimacy in various ways (Umberson et al., 2015). One good example is how same-sex couples provide a safe space to express personal conflicts with each other. Joel mentioned how the pandemic changed his view on intimacy. He shared that, “This pandemic has enabled us to express our affective triggers. Everyone is anxious so there is an opportunity to deal with one another’s negativity in very intimate manners.” Similarly, intimacy can also be expressed through forming honest and open communication among couples. Josh shared that, “Intimacy during these times is being transparent and open in communicating one’s feelings for the

partner.” By extension, there is a queering of emotional boundaries, creating networkers with agency to its equity and care (Hines 2007).

Mobile expressions of intimacies and care

Prior to the pandemic, gay couples have always been physically intimate (Deenen et al., 1994). Panch (26), a real-estate broker who works abroad, stated that physical touch has always been part of his love language. “My partner and I have always been expressive in terms of touch, cuddles, and, at times, sex,” he shared. His partner, Juls (27), an airport manager, agreed with him. “Physical intimacy could be kissing and hugging and, at times, sex and this is normal for Panch and I since we do not usually see each other physically,” he explained. Intimacy has always included physical touches, acts of service, and affirmations of love. Because of Panch’s assignment to work abroad and with the current pandemic, the couples were able to explore technology-enabled means of bridging these sexual needs. These included text messages where the couples could shower each other with affectionate messages. People whose main “love language” is physical touch were conscious of the fact that they had to cope and find ways in the SNS and the apps to enact their romantic rituals. With intimacy being mediated by technology, couples are finding more ways to enable the enactment of intimacy through the limits of technology. Couples have become conscious of what they would say to each other, how to frame their messages, and how to react to their partner’s disclosures. Intimacy is now equated with length of time spent in the SNS, with couples consciously or subconsciously aware of the value of togetherness. Time-spent becomes an indicator of tenderness. Technological presence affirms the romantic promise. Does technology, however, deepen the relationship? For some couples, it does not as it lacks the emphatic cues that are found in face-to-face encounters. Tosh best articulated this when he said, “I feel that the online set up is really artificial. I cannot read the body language of my partner. I cannot experience his stories. My partner is not someone who likes to video call, too.”

On the other hand, sex, as a form of intimacy, is not part of the romantic expressions of the couples. Almost all couples mentioned that having sex is a need, but they do not do it online because they do not have the space to do it. Art stated how hard it is to find the space and time for online sex with his partner, CJ. Art explained, “I live with my parents and we do not have the luxury of space so I do know how I will be able to do an on-camera sex with CJ. It is just not possible so I told him that he could watch porn and satisfy himself first while the pandemic is ongoing,” Art also shared that they have agreed to just settle with online pornographic materials whenever one feels horny.

What they lack in physical intimacy, the couples compensate in through online care. Care is the enactment of affective behaviors through mediation of technology. Allan (25), a marketing specialist, shared that there is a need to be a good partner during this pandemic. “I, for one, need to be more expressive and understanding during this time. I felt that I was more in tune with my own and my partner’s emotions during the lockdown because I want to make this relationship work,” he stressed. Online care is performative as one needs to enact the rituals of romantic relationships to have a semblance of normalcy in these trying times. For instance, updates on their daily activities mirror a sense of FtF interaction as Tosh stated, “There is a tendency to report our daily activities as this provides a semblance of ordinariness during this pandemic.” Similarly, online care can also be expressed through fostering a more open and honest communication with each other. Josh mentioned, “Caring is being honest about a lot of things. I need to really be straightforward in what I think about his lapses in taking good care of himself. I know that I can no longer change him but I would still give him choices in what he does in life.” In other cases, showing care is as simple as letting the person know one’s social presence online. As Joel stated, “Care is an expression of being there. It is the establishment of an affective connection despite the constraints.” With these excerpts, there is an expectation from both individuals to continue the romantic rituals that bind couples together before pandemic so that they could be helped in managing their personal lives.

Discussion

The research discussed the nature and role of messaging technologies in enabling mediated and imagined queer intimacies, particularly during the pandemic. Gay men’s relational dynamics, notions of intimacy and care, and boundary rituals were interrogated to establish the potentialities of technology as space for intimate emotion work and the enactment of desires. The critical role of online presence has been discussed as a necessary ingredient for relationships to blossom and to continue especially because couples have facilitated a sense of commitment in the use of the technology and on its value to untangle the current status of their romantic relationship. In effect, relation work, in the context of gay couples, is relational and situational.

The use of synchronous and asynchronous means of maneuvering romance is part of the management of imagined presence where one exercises intimacies to make sense of the romance, despite physical absence (Attwood et al., 2017; Labor & Latosa, 2021). Technology makes couples feel that they are in the same space-time zones even if there is physical

distance. Being together in technology is being “at home.” In the creation of the couple’s mediated and imagined home, they subject themselves to a dwelling place where romantic rituals are enacted such as in the case of the couples’ ritualistic synchronous and asynchronous activities.

Results of the study revealed that online spaces have become non-physical spaces that were used as alternatives to the offline and face-to-face family homes of the gay couples. Prior to the pandemic, these gay couples have shared common living spaces as most of them have lived together or frequently physically visited one another. Through mediatization, “home” is transformed as a construct that may mean either one’s literal dwelling or places beyond the house, from inside the car to the workplace which they consider as such (Cefai & Couldry, 2017). Seemingly, and perhaps unconsciously, there is the presence of unmarked heteronormativity in mediated intimacy. The aspect of time, being associated with media, is apparent in the online practices of the participants where imagined and simulated notions of “home” and “work” are reflected (p. 313). Unmarked heteronormativity “as both the institutionalization and effect of mediated intimacy” (p. 292) is seen in the proliferation of gendering rooms or spaces (wherever they consider as “home”) and the representation of “work” that comes with it.

Results also showed how sharing of one’s emotions becomes a part of the boundaries that gay couples manage (Skinner & Goodfriend, 2009). There are minimal boundaries among the gay couples perhaps because there is a need for both individuals to have someone understand what they are going through, while, at the same time, to assure the partner that there is someone who is willing to listen. Among the interviews, there is still a tendency among gays couples to follow a heteronormative view on relationships, especially in tackling and expressing emotions. This might be due to the overexposure of these gay couples to patriarchal ways of raising Filipino families where masculine males are expected to have strong emotional boundaries compared to females. In the pandemic, this may have positive and negative effects to the maintenance and management of relationships. On the one hand, a heteronormatively queer relationship reinforces offline care dynamics where a partner plays a more emotional role in the relationship. During the pandemic, this partner would most likely be the one who would exhibit emotive and romantic care in the mediated space. The other partner, perceived as the less emotional individual, would provide care in terms of organizing the couple’s daily activities and managing family and social issues that the couple face. On the other hand, reinforced heteronormativity in a gay couple’s online relationship during the pandemic may lead to a lot of performative expectations that may be

hard to be enacted and decoded in the virtual space. Emotive and romantic care, for instance, without the aid of physical touch, need to be reinforced by a lot of virtual messages such as time spent with one another, the use of language and emoticons, and other performative reinforcements that were not present before the pandemic. The online platform, which used to be the add-on space in enabling love and intimacy, now is the main channel in showing and showcasing romantic intimacies and emotive care.

An interesting finding of the study is how emotional intimacy is being expressed by the gay couples. Literature has shown that women carry this emotional workload more than men; whereas, men (regardless of partner) were more likely to value boundaries between partners. But Sandra Šević et al. (2015) found empirically that, at least in Croatia, gay and bisexual (compared to straight) men reported higher levels of emotional intimacy. Similarly, the study found that gay couples are more expressive with their emotions through technology-mediated communications, like messaging apps. This can be a result of the couples compensating from the absence of physical intimacies because of the pandemic. With regards to boundaries between partners (e.g., autonomy, independence), men with men (as opposed to men with women) are still more likely to reinforce certain aspects of intimacy, both physically and emotionally.

Because of the lockdowns, most of the gay couples had no choice but to separate from each other and live with their biological families. Experiences by the participants showed that they cannot really be sexually intimate with their partners because they share the same bedrooms with their family members. They also had limited internet resources and suffered from intermittent internet connection in their homes. Most participants also said that they had to compensate by masturbating or by watching porn videos whenever they long for sex (see Giano, 2021; Labor & Latosa, 2021). As compensation for the lack of physical intimacy, same-sex couples enact online care through performative rituals that resembles normalcy of what their relationships had been before the pandemic. Based on the results, online care can be shown through mirroring pre-pandemic interactional practices and fostering a more open communication within the couple. As technology provides the promise of anytime-anywhere, romantic relationships are expected to develop and deepen. Caring becomes ambivalent. There is an intrinsic demand between romantic couples to be nurtured and to be nurturing, in mediated means, in order to make romance work. Therefore, care is supposed to be enacted as a normative process (Skinner & Goodfriend, 2009).

Conclusion

In this research, we expounded on the role of messaging technologies on the enactment of mediated imagined intimacies among gay couples. We shed light on the role that technologies play in the way romantic relationships are reconfigured during the pandemic. Drawing on the insights of the 12 couples who were separated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we showed that the way gay men enact romantic intimacies are defined by their relational dynamics, notions of intimacy and care, and boundary rituals. Online presence is perceived as a necessary ingredient for relationships to continue but continuity in relation work by maximizing the potentials of technology is a needed element for couples to facilitate a sense of commitment. Relation work, in the context of gay couples, is relational and not predetermined. This means that both individuals in the relationship must be in tune for conflict reduction, self-esteem boosting, and even the suppression of negative feelings during online interactions. Queering intimacy such as expressions of desire and affection are needed by both individuals in the relationship, too.

Evidently, mediated intimacies experienced by gay couples in the Philippines make the role of technology vivid in enabling relationships. This is because mediated spaces, like messaging apps, strengthen the intimate and caring presence of its users. Technology, then, provides connection despite distance as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impose distance despite connection.

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