

Episode 1: The risks and harms of online dating

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KSENIA BAKINA: Welcome to the Cyber Armor, a podcast which champions the voices and safety of women and girls in the digital world. This podcast is brought to you by the Center for Protecting Women Online and the Open University.

I'm Ksenia Bakina and today, we have the launch of our podcast and our first episode. And today's guest is Dr. Emma Turley, who is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Psychology at the Central Queensland University in Australia and a chartered psychologist with the British Psychological Society. Emma is also a visiting fellow at the Center for Protecting Women Online. Welcome, Emma. It's a pleasure to have you on our first podcast.

EMMA TURLEY: Thank you so much for having me.

KSENIA BAKINA: Now in today's podcast, we will be discussing the online dating scene. If you have ever dated online and experienced abuse, harassment, or any other upsetting behavior from your potential matches, then this podcast is for you.

In our first episode, we are going to discuss the harms that can arise from various dating apps, as well as how to safeguard yourself whilst using them. All of these issues were explored by Dr. Emma Turley in her work on the Inform, Prevent, Support Project, which focused on helping Queensland women to safely navigate dating apps.

So, to begin this discussion, I really want to ask you, how did this project come about in the first place and what inspired you to pursue this research?

EMMA TURLEY: There were a couple of things that converged around a similar time. So I had just finished up some research looking at consent apps. So these are apps you can download to essentially collect somebody's consent to have different aspects of sexual activity. And luckily, most of these have since been taken down from the App Store and the Google Play store.

And then along with that, there was a report from the Australian Institute of Criminology in 2023. And that report showed that 72% of dating app users that they had surveyed had experienced some kind of sexual harassment, sexual aggression, or sexual violence from somebody that they had connected with via the dating app.

And they surveyed around 100,000 people. So that's a huge number. Nearly 3/4, isn't it? So we were interested in understanding the issues around violence and harassment on dating apps specifically related to women and how they navigate their own safety when they were using these apps.

We found there was advice out there for women, but it was presented in quite a static way, quite a dull way, and it was mainly aimed towards younger women. So we decided to create a set of video resources that provided information in a more creative and essentially a more interesting way.

So we ended up producing three short films, and each focused on a different aspect of safety and risk when using dating apps. And we were lucky enough to get some funding for the project from the Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney General through their Office for Women and Violence Prevention.

KSENIA BAKINA: And I know that the project focused specifically on older women. Why did you choose to focus on them and target them predominantly?

EMMA TURLEY: Yeah. We saw that much of what was out there already assumed that it was younger women who needed safety advice. And we thought, actually, there are probably many women who maybe have been in long-term relationships, maybe long-term marriages. They've got divorced. They've broken up. Perhaps, they've been widowed.

And they're not familiar with this kind of new realm of dating apps and that way of connecting with people. So we thought these apps are likely to be totally unfamiliar for a lot of these women. And now dating apps have become so common, they're a normal way of meeting people.

I think back in the day, there was a bit of a stigma around meeting partners online. And we were concerned that these women are going to be inexperienced at using dating apps, and perhaps wouldn't necessarily have a clear idea of the risks and the safety issues that come with using them.

So we wanted to create some useful resources that would let women know about some of the things to watch out for. So perhaps certain types of behavior from other users on the apps.

We wanted to give them some ideas about staying safe while online dating.

And the other thing was we were interested in understanding their own perceptions. What they thought about the risks and the safety concerns of dating apps as well. Australia's got an aging population, so it's likely that dating app use in the over 55 cohort will continue to increase.

And I think it's important to understand what they think about these apps and how this cohort will use these apps. And research has already shown that the over 60s are the fastest growing cohort of dating app users, which may come as a surprise to some people.

But to me, it was surprising that there wasn't more research about this cohort and how they use dating apps and what they think of them and what their experiences are. And it's even more surprising that there's a lack of relevant safety information and general information, I think, that caters for this group.

KSENIA BAKINA: So you've said that around 72% of women have experienced some sort of unwanted behavior through these apps. What do you think that actually drives the popularity of dating apps as opposed to other ways of dating, whether it's speed dating or social media? What is it about them that makes them so popular?

EMMA TURLEY: Yeah, it's an interesting question, isn't it? Given apps have become the default way of meeting people for romantic connections or even casual sexual connections over the last 15 years or so. Like you said, why not other methods? These apps have really changed the dating landscape.

And the research tells us that online dating, including the use of dating apps, has become the most common method to meet romantic and sexual partners. And I also think that smartphone ownership has made a big difference as well. It's made dating apps more accessible, easy. And it's quite fun to use a dating app.

And the apps have understandably become really popular as well because they cater to a broad range of preferences and relationship types. As I said, casual hookups to maybe long-term marriages even.

The thing is, these apps are not a utopia for women, although they have some really positive aspects and some really good sides. There are risks of harm, abuse, and violence that can be perpetrated via dating apps. The range of harm, I think, is very broad and very diverse, and I think it's difficult to communicate that and it's difficult to capture that as well.

KSENIA BAKINA: I just want to add that I've used dating apps myself for years and years.

And I completely understand that the popularity and the ease of connecting with matches that you wouldn't meet in ordinary life just by going to work or interacting with your friends or going to a pub after work, it just gives you so many more options.

It gives you so many more opportunities to meet different kinds of potential matches. And it really it's in your pocket as well. It's always there. So I've used dating apps for years and I have met my husband through one dating app as well. So I do have a success story.

But because I've used them for so long, I have experienced some of the dangers that you've just mentioned. And I just thought maybe we could talk a little bit more about, what are the risks and what are the harms that tend to come from the use of these dating apps to women?

EMMA TURLEY: Yeah, absolutely. And it's great to hear a positive story. And there are lots and lots of positive stories. People have a good time. People meet long-term partners. And that's brilliant. But I think some of the potential harmful interactions apply to all women who use dating apps.

So things like getting sent unsolicited images-- we also call them dick pics. Unwanted requests for sex, really common. Also abuse based on somebody's gender presentation and their sexuality. And also there's a risk of sexual assault when meeting your match in-person. So harassment and violence against women perpetrated via dating apps isn't rare. And in Australia, sadly, 1 in 10 women have reported an unwanted sexual experience with somebody that they've met online.

And I think the geolocation capacity of dating apps presents a risk as well, because it does allow perpetrators to locate women to abuse. So it adds an extra element of risk even when there are no face-to-face meetings planned.

There's also the risk of things like catfishing and blackmail. And then you've got the financial and the romance scams as well. And all of these can be perpetrated or at least started via dating apps.

KSENIA BAKINA: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's amazing how many risks these apps actually carry. And they don't just carry the risks of physical harm coming to you because you don't really know the person who you go on a first date with.

You may have exchanged some messages beforehand, but you can never be 100% sure. But also, like you said, scams, fraud, as well as even some sort of psychological harm because I remember when I was dating through the apps and the amount of times that conversation that was very happy, very kind of relaxing and kind of nice and chatty would just go turn sour and completely toxic within seconds.

And I've often found that I felt psychologically drained even from these kind of discussions or from these chats that we've matches who I've never even met in my life. They affected me in my day-to-day being because somebody would hurl abuse within seconds of connecting for no reason whatsoever. And do you think the platforms and the apps themselves, do they do enough in actually safeguarding women from these risks?

EMMA TURLEY: I think they vary. So I think there's so many apps out there now. Some are definitely better than others. So some have features where you can block your match or somebody who might be harassing you.

Some have reporting features where you can report the match to the app. But the problem tends to be, what happens as a result of that reporting? Often, not much happens because there's nothing to stop.

If a person is removed from the app for being abusive, unwanted behaviors, et cetera, there's nothing to stop that person setting up a different profile or just moving to a different app. So I think there's definitely more the apps or the platforms themselves can do.

At the moment, it feels as though there is gaps in what they offer in terms of protection and each app is different. So it means coming to terms with the different terms and conditions of the apps. Looking at the different safety features.

So as you said, even that kind of thing is a lot of emotional labor. It's a lot of psychological effort before you then even get into the process of speaking to somebody before you meet them. And the fact that interactions can become abusive really quickly is also a concern because you've got your smartphone with you. It's always in your pocket, you can't escape from that.

So if somebody is sending you unwanted messages or dick pics, for example, it's not as easy as just not going to meet them again because you've got them in your pocket, essentially. So it's tricky.

KSENIA BAKINA: Absolutely. And I think as a result of these experiences and towards the end, I did become quite ruthless with my matches and I felt I needed to be that person that will unmatch or block a person for any sign of potential red flag, which may or may not materialize, just as a way of safeguarding myself from receiving unwanted dick pics or just abuse or just general comments that I might find unwelcoming.

So, Emma, we spoke about how you started to look into this issue of women's experiences of online dating apps. And so what did you actually do for this research project? How did you undertake this research? Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

EMMA TURLEY: Sure. So we created three short films. So they run between three minutes and five minutes each. And they were primarily aimed at older women who are likely to be unfamiliar with dating app technology and safety around using dating apps.

The information in the videos, I think, is useful for all women, though, not just older women. The storylines in the videos are based on real cases provided by the North Queensland Women's Legal Service.

And the first video, we called Red Flags. And this gave information about staying safe more generally when using dating apps. So including things like check-in, safety features, being careful about privacy, being careful about the type of information you share, but also being cautious about the messages you're receiving from other users.

Are they asking you for lots of personal information upfront? That kind of thing. So essentially, the video gave an account of what to be aware of. What are those red flags that you may think I'm not quite sure about this?

KSENIA BAKINA: So why did you choose to move away from more traditional text, written academic research and actually published the videos? Which, by the way, I've watched and I

thought were great. But I want to hear it from you, why did you take a different approach to publishing your research?

EMMA TURLEY: Yeah, absolutely. We wanted to get it out to the right audience. So we wanted women to be able to watch these who were using dating apps or who were thinking about using these apps. We didn't want it just to sit in a dusty journal on a shelf. Journal articles do have their place and we will be publishing some articles from the study.

But the primary aim of the study was to help women and to make useful and accessible resources. And what we noticed was there was lots of information online, but it was mainly text-based. So kind of big chunks of text, perhaps peppered with some images or some photographs.

And although the content and the detail may have been good in that, it just wasn't very interesting for the reader. We wanted to create an alternative, really, to those traditional text-based information sources to help women remember and absorb the information.

The research shows that short videos are really helpful in engaging an audience and helping them to remember the content. So that's the starting point that we went from. We wanted women to stay engaged. We wanted them to take in the information. So we decided how to produce them and not include scare tactics, which are often used in these contexts as well. So we wanted to be careful to create dynamic characters with relatable storylines. We wanted to make sure we added an element of humor. This subject matter is pretty dark at times. So we thought it was important to include some humor to try and help people remember the messages on the videos, but also to deliver a serious message, but with somewhat more of a lighter tone.

KSENIA BAKINA: I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the content of the videos itself. What key tips did these videos contain for women to ensure that they use the apps safely?

EMMA TURLEY: We couldn't cover everything we wanted to in the videos, unfortunately, or each one would be like an episode of EastEnders. The main tips we included were things around protecting your privacy.

So avoid sharing personal information too quickly. So avoid sharing things like your home address, your current location, work details or details around travel plans, and things like that. And we thought it was important to communicate about setting clear boundaries about what you're comfortable with sharing, and stick to them, even when you might be under some pressure to try and reveal more information.

We also thought it was important to showcase the safety features of apps. So like I mentioned, some are better than others in terms of safety features. So things like limiting who can see your profile, reporting or blocking suspicious users or users who have sent you unwanted communication.

Many dating apps do have features to protect your information and your safety, but they do vary depending on what app you're using. So we recommend that women learn the safety features for the particular apps that they might be using and then use them.

The other important message is to trust your instincts. So if something feels off, it probably is. Don't ignore red flags, such as things like overly personal questions too soon, or any behavior really that makes you feel uncomfortable.

It's important to keep conversations on the app, at least to begin with, until you feel comfortable. This helps the app themselves to protect users. And if somebody is asking you to move off the app quite quickly, perhaps, and communicate over social media or via text or via WhatsApp, that's a bit of a red flag. Stay communicating via the apps until you feel more confident and more comfortable.

Then we moved on to meeting in public. So always make sure you meet first in a public place. And it's helpful to let a friend or a family member know where you'll be, what time you're likely to be back.

It's important to avoid meeting at your home or their home until you're sure you're safe. And then we wanted to talk a bit about your content. So be cautious with sexting and sharing intimate photos, because once you've shared them, you can't control where they end up. And really importantly, if somebody sends you an unwanted or an explicit photo, don't you share it or repost it because you could end up breaking the law yourself. And finally, learn how to report abuse. So learn how to report harassment and inappropriate behavior on the app and take action if you do feel unsafe.

KSENIA BAKINA: Thank you for that. That was a really detailed list of some of the safety tips that's contained in your videos. And I must admit that after having watched them, despite the

fact that I've dated on the apps for years and years, I actually realized that there was some things I was doing wrong.

For instance, I was always using my first name-- my real first name on the apps. And then I think I've used the same photo that I've had in my social media, and I'd never connected how my matches from the dating app would then find me on Facebook or find me on through my Instagram account.

And I was always baffled, like, how do they do this? And as your videos highlighted, it's probably because I shared too much. I used the same photos. And yeah, so I wish I'd known that then. But it was very kind of illuminating, even for someone who I thought I knew it all, and I knew all the tips and tricks about how to keep myself safe.

But there were some things that I missed. And I also really enjoyed the humor, as you said in the videos. I think there was one video which involved a mother and a daughter having a conversation, and it involved a daughter telling her mom to not sleep with the guys on the first date, which I thought was hilarious.

So yes, I do recommend that our listeners watch those videos in their own time because they are great fun and they're also very, very informative. You've also mentioned that the stories that you've used to make these videos were actually true stories and are based on true experiences of women. Were there any particular stories that you felt that were surprising to you or that you found were quite, wow, I didn't think this could happen, but actually it did?

EMMA TURLEY: Yeah, I've been working in the online violence space for a while now, so nothing really surprises me, unfortunately. One thing that interests me is the speed that an interaction can go wrong and can turn abusive. That's always disconcerting.

So things perhaps if you refuse to send somebody an intimate picture of yourself, that can lead to a barrage of abusive messages and unwanted dick pics being sent to you. But hearing the real life cases about women who had gone through these situations made the risks feel more immediate and more important to try and help with.

It was surprising how many of the victims talked about not realizing the red flags or not recognizing what the red flags might have been until after the fact, which really emphasized that we need a really clear way of communicating about these red flags and staying aware of them and setting boundaries early on.

Another thing that stood out to me was how often privacy was overlooked, which goes back to what you were talking about earlier. You didn't realize how somebody could trace you, perhaps from your photograph and your first name on a dating app, but then they could easily find your various social media profiles and then go from there.

So in the cases that we got from the North Queensland women's Legal Service, the women didn't fully understand the risks of oversharing personal details using the same photograph for, perhaps, their Facebook profile and their dating app profile.

So perpetrators can do a reverse image search and find all of your profiles that use that same photograph. So it's difficult to change habits like that. We want to use the best picture of ourselves on our social media and probably on our dating app picture. But we really need to be careful about privacy. How much personal information is too much, and how can that be used against you and lead to things like cyberstalking and so on and so forth?

KSENIA BAKINA: Absolutely. And I can completely relate also to what you've said about the speed of how a normal conversation can turn abusive. And it can be completely unprovoked. I remember I was always completely baffled that even if you might have a conversation and then you might go and make a cup of tea, because there's a break in the chat for 20 minutes or whatever.

And that person on the other side is already calling you all the names under the sun. And that's what I felt was so psychologically draining that even if physically I was safe, I didn't give out much of my detail, but that psychological impact was still quite raw and quite harsh.

EMMA TURLEY: Absolutely. And I think it's that immediacy that we get with dating apps that we probably don't get if we do things like speed dating or we meet somebody for a drink somewhere, you've got distance. Whereas with the messaging capabilities on dating apps, there is an expectation from some users that people need to respond quickly.

And if they don't respond quickly because they've got their own life and they might want a cup of tea, that it's some kind of slight against them. So then they respond abusively. So yeah, I can absolutely see how that happens. And I think it is to do with that need and the urgency to receive validation from somebody really, really quickly.

KSENIA BAKINA: What do you hope that your research project will change in the online dating scene?

EMMA TURLEY: I hope it will change how women feel about using dating apps, in the sense of I want them to feel more confident and more in control, specifically, women who are not necessarily familiar with this kind of dating app technology.

I want women to be able to understand how to protect themselves, knowing how to walk away if something doesn't feel right, knowing it is OK to trust your gut, to trust your instincts. If you have come across something that raises red flags for you, it's fine to end that interaction.

I also hope it sparks a bigger conversation about the safety of women online, particularly for those who are new to dating or who haven't necessarily thought about the risks before. I want women to feel more prepared, essentially. And I want them to share that knowledge with other people.

We're lucky enough that the North Queensland Women's Legal Service have posted the videos on their website, but also on the websites of their partners. So these videos should be able to be found on many, many different websites across Queensland. And it's on YouTube too. So hopefully, they've got national reach, if not international reach.

KSENIA BAKINA: Throughout this episode, we talked a lot about the safety tips that these videos promote and that they are really valuable resource. But is there anything you feel that the platforms or the state should be doing to make the dating scene more safer place for women to be in?

EMMA TURLEY: Absolutely. I think a few things need to change. So I think talking about the apps themselves, they could do more to prioritize safety. They could make it easier to report people who act inappropriately and have quicker response times, because that's something we have heard. They report a profile and it takes a long time for the app to get back to you about the reported profile.

Having more visible safety features, like reminders, pop-ups, to check privacy settings, or maybe built-in tips for spotting red flags, things like that would also help. One suggestion, and I'm not quite sure about this, is to allow users to privately rate or give feedback on matches, so it wouldn't be available for the other person to see.

So it could create a kind of safety recommendation and help users avoid people who've been flagged for problematic behavior. I think the issue is that a lot of the apps don't want to invest the money to incorporate that into their apps.

KSENIA BAKINA: We talked a lot about that women should watch out for red flags or press the report button. But also, should it really be up to women to keep them safe?

Or should we not turn to perpetrators, the platforms who are potentially making a lot of money from the dating business or the government themselves as well in terms of having better policy, having more effective policies that are enforced by the police, by the judiciary and in a way to ensure that women can feel safe whilst using these apps? What do you think about that?

EMMA TURLEY: Yeah, I totally agree. One thing the research team were really wary about when doing the project was adding more to the burden that women already have in terms of trying to keep themselves safe.

Women are constantly being told what they need to do to be safe-- a whole laundry list of things. But really, women shouldn't need to be taking all of these precautions to protect themselves from men's violence.

In the future, I hope violence prevention strategies aimed at men and boys will significantly reduce perpetration and will reduce the need for women to have to protect themselves in this way. But we're not there yet.

And I think until we're at that stage, women do, unfortunately, need to have safety strategies, they need to have resources and interventions available to them to be able to maintain their personal safety and reduce the chances for violence. And that applies both offline and online.

KSENIA BAKINA: I wanted just to touch upon, despite the fact that we have the safety tips and we might know how to genuinely keep ourselves safe whilst using dating apps, one thing we cannot keep ourselves safe from are deepfakes.

Because unless you have cats in all of your pictures and your dating profile, you cannot prevent, despite of how careful you might be and all of the privacy features that might be switched on, you cannot prevent somebody taking a screenshot of your profile picture and then using AI to generate an image of you that might be sexual or derogatory.

And that's something that's completely outside of women's control. So have you done any research in regarding AI generated images through the dating apps?

EMMA TURLEY: Yes, we're currently doing some work around deepfakes. So this is where an innocuous photo can be taken from anywhere, so a social media profile picture, for example, and be used to make a deepfake image or even a deepfake video. That's very worrying because there's very little someone can do to protect themselves against that. So while I've been doing my visiting fellowship at the Center for Protecting Women Online, we've been developing some projects exploring women's experiences of deepfake image-based abuse, sometimes known as non-consensual pornography. And this is essentially a fabricated image or a video of a real person engaging in sexual or explicit activities. We're interested in women's experiences of that, but we're also interested in the producers of deepfakes. What is their motivation? Why do they do this? And we've got lots to work on. And we anticipate that with the rapid improvements to AI capabilities, it's going to become a growing problem.

KSENIA BAKINA: Absolutely. And so I think your research will be very important and much, much needed. So I hope that we'll have you back on another episode discussing research in relation to deepfakes and AI.

So Emma, thank you so much for being here and for sharing your work on dating apps with me. I also want to say a huge thanks to everyone who's been listening to this podcast. Today, we talked about online dating scene and the harms that it poses to women. We also highlighted some tips that can help to make use of dating apps safer and more enjoyable experience.

In the next episode of the Cyber Armor Podcast, I will be speaking with Dr. Ann Olivarius who is an international feminist lawyer and who's been working on online and offline sexual abuse and harassment for over 40 years. So I hope you stay tuned for the next episode.

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