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Dating during the time of COVID-19: Risk perceptions and political ideology

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Abstract

This study examined predictors of single people's beliefs about COVID prevention behaviors, intentions to engage in COVID prevention behaviors while dating, and actual dating behavior during the pandemic. Results revealed that single participants engaged in "riskier" dating behaviors (i.e., in-person unmasked) more frequently than "safer" dating behaviors (i.e., remote, or in-person masked/distanced). Individuals who perceived greater (vs. lesser) risk associated with COVID more strongly endorsed beliefs about social distancing (self and other) and were more likely to personally (or request others) engage in COVID prevention behaviors while dating. However, perceived risk did not predict actual dating behaviors. Conservatives (vs. liberals) less strongly endorsed beliefs about social distancing (for others, but not the self) and were less likely to personally (or request others) engage in COVID prevention behaviors while dating. Conservatives also reported meeting potential romantic partners more frequently than liberals. However, political ideology did not predict actual dating behaviors. Results suggest there is a disconnect between college students' beliefs/intentions and their actual dating behavior. These results demonstrate the importance of developing public health interventions that take into account the disconnect

between college students' health-related intentions and actual behaviors, particularly in the context of dating.

KEYWORDS
college students, COVID-19, COVID prevention, dating behavior, political ideology, risk perceptions, social distancing

1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted both physical and mental health (Browning et al., 2021; Reyes-Portillo et al., 2022; Son et al., 2020) as well as economic stability (e.g., Congressional Research Service, 2022; Gangopadhyaya & Garrett, 2020). Physical distancing guidelines and mask mandates limited people's ability to interact in-person, which likely threatened belongingness needs (Baumeister, 2012). Only frequent in-person social connections resulted in lower depression and loneliness among U.S. adults (Rosenberg et al., 2021), suggesting remote social connections (e.g., dating apps) may not provide an effective substitute for actual social connections. Therefore, it is important to understand how single people navigated dating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is little research examining dating during the pandemic (e.g., Balzarini et al., 2022; Dattilo et al., 2022; Mowen & Heitkamp, 2022; Peterson et al., 2023). This work revealed that, while college students reported increases in sexting and masturbating during the pandemic, hookup behavior was the same as pre-pandemic (Mowen & Heitkamp, 2022). Moreover, Dattilo et al. (2022) found that COVID-19 exacerbated the link between dating anxiety and depression, and Peterson et al. (2023) report that people high in attachment anxiety perceived greater risk associated with COVID, but did not behave more cautiously when hooking up or masking in romantic contexts. People still sought out in-person social connections (e.g., hookups), despite the risks associated with such behaviors.

The goal of the current study was to assess the frequency of different remote and in-person dating behaviors during the pandemic and to examine individual differences variables as predictors of beliefs about preventative behavior in romantic contexts, intentions to engage in COVID prevention behaviors while dating, and self-reported dating behavior during the pandemic. Recent research suggests that people higher in political conservatism (Latkin et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021) and people who perceive less risk associated with COVID (Gupta et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2022) were less likely to follow protective guidelines in non-romantic contexts. We predicted that political conservatism and lower perceived risk would be related to more negative beliefs about COVID protective behaviors (e.g., limiting dating) and more risky dating behavior during the pandemic (i.e., unmasked dating behaviors). In addition, we controlled for important demographic variables and factors that predict relationship (e.g., self-esteem) and COVID prevention (e.g., empathy) behaviors.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants and procedure

Undergraduate college students (N = 299) were recruited from participant pools at two universities in the United States between April 1st and 7 May 2021 for an online study. People who failed to begin the survey or reported being in a relationship were excluded from analyses. The final sample included 242 single students (rural/Northeast and hybrid teaching n = 101; urban/Midwest and fully online teaching n = 141). While the COVID vaccine had become available during this time period, there was limited availability for college students. Most participants identified as white (64.3%) and female (70.7%) and ranged in age from 18 to 40 years (M = 19.23; SD = 1.71). After reporting demographic information, participants completed measures of self-esteem, loneliness, empathy, perceived

risk, beliefs about COVID prevention behaviors, intentions to engage in prevention behaviors while dating, and actual social/dating behaviors.

2.2 | Measures

2.2.1 | Demographic variables

Participants reported their gender, age, sexual preference, living situation (i.e., on campus or off campus), and political ideology ("How do you identify your political beliefs?"; 1 = *very liberal*, 7 = *very conservative*).

2.2.2 | Self-esteem

Participants completed the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale (e.g., "I feel that I have a number of good qualities") on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). After reverse coding, scores were averaged so that higher values represent higher self-esteem (α = 0.91).

2.2.3 | Loneliness

Participants completed the 20-item R-UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980; e.g., "I feel left out") on a 4-point scale (1 = *never*, 4 = *often*). After reverse scoring, scores were averaged so that higher values indicate greater loneliness (α = 0.91).

2.2.4 | Empathy

Participants completed a 3-item measure of empathy (Pfattheicher et al., 2020; e.g., "I am very concerned about those most vulnerable to coronavirus (COVID-19)") on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Scores were averaged so that higher values represent greater empathy (α = 0.93).

2.2.5 | Perceived risk

Five questions assessed perceived risk associated with COVID-19 (e.g., "How worried are you that you will get sick with COVID-19?") on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). Scores were averaged so that higher values represent greater perceived risk (α = 0.75).

2.2.6 | COVID prevention beliefs

Six questions assessed COVID prevention beliefs (adapted from Pfattheicher et al., 2020). Three items assessed beliefs about personally engaging in prevention behaviors (i.e., *self*-beliefs, e.g., "Because of coronavirus (COVID-19), I am massively limiting my dating") and three items assessed beliefs about others engaging in prevention behaviors (i.e., *other*-beliefs, e.g., "Because of coronavirus (COVID-19), it is very important that others massively limit their dating"). Participants responded on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Responses were averaged to form separate scores for prevention beliefs for self (α = 0.82) and others (α = 0.89).

2.2.7 | COVID prevention behavioral intentions

Five questions assessed intentions to engage in COVID prevention behaviors while dating ("If you were to meet face-to-face with a potential romantic partner for the first time, how likely is it that you would do each of the following?") on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). Three items tapped behavioral intentions for the self (e.g., "wear a mask") and two items tapped behavioral intentions for others (e.g., "request the other person wear a mask"). Responses were averaged to form separate scores for behavioral intentions for self (α = 0.71) and others (α = 0.75).

2.2.8 | Dating and social behaviors

Participants reported their recent dating behavior ("In the last six months, I have done the following with potential romantic partners [check all that apply]") by completing a 14-item checklist (e.g., "Online/Zoom dates", "Sexted"). The number of dating behaviors checked was summed as a measure of recent dating behavior.

Next, participants reported in-person meeting frequency (e.g., "In the last 6 months, how often have you met in person with potential romantic partners outside your pod or bubble for reasons other than hooking up?") and hookup frequency (e.g., "In the last 6 months, how often have you "hooked up" with potential romantic partners?") on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *once or twice total*, 3 = *once or twice a month*, 4 = *once or twice a week*, 5 = *nearly every day*).

Participants who indicated that they had hooked up in the past 6 months reported the percentage of hookups outside their bubble (e.g., "Of the people you have "hooked up" with in the last 6 months, what percentage of "hook ups" were with people outside your bubble/pod?") by selecting a value between 0 and 100.

All participants reported their number of social partners (e.g., "Not including those with whom you currently live, how many people do you socialize with in person?") by selecting a value between 0 and 100, and the number of people in their bubble (e.g., "With how many people have you bubbled or podded, not counting the people with whom you currently live?"), by selecting a value between 0 and 30.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | COVID-19 dating behaviors

Table 1 summarizes the different dating behaviors participants engaged in during the pandemic. The most common dating behaviors included in-person kissing, meeting inside unmasked, and hooking up unmasked. In contrast, remote socially distanced in-person meetings, Zoom/online dates with sexual activity, and hooking up masked were the least common responses (see OSF).

3.2 | Multiple regression analyses

We conducted a series of multiple regression analyses to examine demographic, individual difference, and relationship predictors of self and other COVID prevention beliefs and behavioral intentions (see Table 2). Results revealed that participants who perceived greater risk associated with COVID more strongly endorsed beliefs about social distancing (self and other) and reported greater intentions to personally (self) or request romantic partners (other) engage in COVID prevention behaviors while dating. In addition, conservative participants reported lower endorsement of COVID prevention beliefs for others and lesser intentions to personally (self) or request romantic partners (other) engage in COVID prevention behaviors while dating, compared to liberal participants. However, political ideology did not predict COVID prevention beliefs for the self.

TABLE 1 Frequency of dating behaviors single college students reported engaging in during the pandemic.

Dating behavior	Number who engaged in behavior	Percentage of sample
1. Kissed	109	49.10%
2. Met inside unmasked	103	46.40%
3. Hooked up unmasked	89	40.09%
4. Met outside unmasked	85	38.29%
5. Held hands	78	35.14%
6. Met outside masked	68	30.63%
7. Sexted	57	25.68%
8. Sent nude/sexually suggestive photos	55	24.77%
9. Met inside masked	53	23.87%
10. Sent sexy videos of self	35	15.77%
11. Online/Zoom dates (no sexual activity)	33	14.86%
12. Social distanced in-person meeting	30	13.51%
13. Online/Zoom dates (with sexual activity)	7	3.15%
14. Hooked up masked	5	2.25%

TABLE 2 Predicting COVID prevention beliefs and behavioral intentions from demographic, relationship, and individual difference variables.

	Self		Other	
	Beliefs	Intentions	Beliefs	Intentions
Gender	−0.09	0.01	0.02	0.07
Sexual preference	−0.02	0.04	−0.01	0.05
Age	0.04	−0.01	−0.08	0.06
Location	−0.04	0.27***	−0.16*	0.27**
Living situation	0.22**	−0.09	0.27***	−0.14
Political ideology	−0.14	−0.22**	−0.30***	−0.19**
Self-esteem	−0.12	−0.09	0.04	−0.02
Loneliness	−0.11	−0.08	0.03	−0.04
Perceived risk	0.37***	0.28***	0.27***	0.25***
Empathy	0.11	0.09	0.20**	0.10

Note: Sexual preference was coded 1 = heterosexual, 2 = LGBQ+. Gender was coded 1 = male, 2 = female or gender non-conforming. Higher political ideology scores indicate conservative (vs. liberal). Location (i.e., data collection site) was coded as 1 = northeastern/rural university, 2 = midwestern/urban university. Living situation was coded 1 = on campus, 2 = off campus.

Standardized beta weights *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Next, we conducted a series of multiple regression analyses to evaluate demographic, individual difference, and relationship predictors of actual dating/social behavior (see Table 3). Results revealed that perceived risk did not significantly predict dating behavior, frequency of in-person meetings or hookups, percentage of hookups outside one's bubble, number of social partners, nor number of people bubbled or podded with. Additionally, conservative participants reported a lower percentage of outside-bubble hookups, relative to liberal participants. However, political ideology did not significantly predict dating behavior, frequency of in-person meetings or hookups, number of social partners, nor number of people in one's bubble. Finally, we found that endorsing COVID prevention beliefs was

TABLE 3 Predicting actual social/dating behaviors from demographic, relationship, and individual difference variables.

	Dating behavior	Meet potential partners	Hookup	Hookups outside bubble (%)[a]	Number social	Number bubbled
Gender	−0.01	0.09	0.12	−0.12	0.03	0.07
Sexual preference	0.15*	−0.00	0.03	0.13	0.06	0.06
Age	−0.04	−0.02	−0.02	0.16	0.06	0.01
Location	−0.17	−0.08	−0.16	−0.24	−0.01	0.04
Living situation	−0.13	−0.11	−0.10	−0.03	−0.12	−0.03
Political ideology	−0.05	0.11	0.07	−0.31**	0.02	0.08
Self-esteem	−0.05	−0.06	0.01	−0.14	−0.05	−0.00
Loneliness	−0.24**	−0.26***	−0.13	0.11	−0.05	−0.07
Perceived risk	0.07	0.07	0.02	−0.10	−0.06	−0.11
Empathy	−0.03	0.02	0.00	0.10	0.02	0.03
Self beliefs	−0.14	−0.13	−0.13	−0.12	−0.15	0.03
Self Intentions	−0.10	−0.15	−0.06	−0.05	−0.15	−0.27**

Note: Sexual preference was coded 1 = heterosexual, 2 = LGBQ+. Gender was coded 1 = male, 2 = female or gender non-conforming. Higher political ideology scores indicate conservative (vs. liberal). Location (i.e., data collection site) was coded as 1 = northeastern/rural university, 2 = midwestern/urban university. Living situation was coded 1 = on campus, 2 = off campus.

[a]Only individuals who had hooked up with someone in the past 6 months responded to this question.

Standardized beta weights *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

unrelated to actual social/dating behavior. However, intentions to personally engage in COVID prevention behaviors while dating significantly predicted the number of people bubbled with, but was unrelated to any of the other social/dating behaviors.

4 | DISCUSSION

Although college students who perceived greater risk associated with COVID-19 more strongly endorsed beliefs about social distancing (self and other) and were more likely to personally (or request others) engage in prevention behaviors while dating, perceived risk did not predict actual dating behaviors. In contrast, conservatives (vs. liberals) less strongly endorsed beliefs about social distancing for others (but not the self) and were less likely to personally (or request others) engage in COVID prevention behaviors while dating. Although conservatives reported fewer hookups outside of their bubble than liberals, political ideology was not related to any other social/dating behaviors. In addition, prevention beliefs did not predict any social/dating behaviors and increased intentions was only related to the number of people bubbled with and was unrelated to any other social/dating behavior. To our knowledge, this research is some of the first to compare whether factors that predict COVID prevention beliefs and behavioral intentions also predict *actual* self-reported dating behaviors.

Previous research found that political ideology (Wang et al., 2021) and perceived risk (Gupta et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2022) influenced prevention behaviors. Our findings suggest that these are important predictors of single participants' prevention beliefs and behavioral intentions, but do not predict actual behavior - other than those who endorsed stronger behavioral intentions bubbled with fewer people. Thus, there is a disconnect between participants' beliefs/intentions and self-reported dating behavior. This is concerning, given the importance of behavior (e.g., physical distancing) to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Public health interventions often target peoples' values and

emotions to change their beliefs or intentions; and ultimately, their behavior. However, the current results suggest that these efforts may not inspire actual behavior change.

The current research has limitations. For example, we used several single-item and ad hoc measures (e.g., prevention intentions, dating and hook-up behavior) and we should be cautious about the reliability, validity, and generalizability of such measures (see Flake et al., 2017; Flake & Fried, 2020). Moreover, social desirability bias and bias in recall may have affected the accuracy of participants' self-reported behaviors (see Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). Future research should provide a definition of what constitutes a "hook-up" and ask participants to report the number of hook-ups outside their pod. Finally, the U.S. convenience sample lacks diversity in terms of racial and sexual identity. It is unclear whether the results would generalize to other cultures, countries, age groups, or more diverse samples.

Our results suggest that participants engaged in "riskier" dating behaviors (i.e., in-person) more frequently than "safer" dating behaviors (i.e., remote) during the pandemic. Remote social connections may not offer the same mental health benefits as in-person social connections (Rosenberg et al., 2021). Our findings reaffirm the need to develop interventions to improve mental health and social re-connection (Browning et al., 2021; Gibson, 2020; Mowen & Heitkamp, 2022). Understanding beliefs, intentions, and actual dating behavior during the pandemic may help future efforts to identify and curb behaviors that expose single people to greater health risks.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.