

Couple Apps as Relationship Infrastructures

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A contemporary interdisciplinary approach to infrastructures should consider aspects beyond material structures and include among other things social media interactions in order to fully understand how media practices emerge from infrastructures. And how, maybe more importantly, infrastructures emerge within media practices. Transforming the approach to infrastructures crucially needs to take contemporary digital, smart, and connected devices seriously, as mediated human relationships and “connectivity has grown into a matter of infrastructure reminiscent of electricity, gas, water supply or heating.”¹ The specific genre of couple apps for example, when discussed within the framework of this collection’s main aspects, demonstrates how generativity, regularity, relationality and maintenance productively intertwine. These apps will be the focal point of this chapter, in which I will first explain the genre of couple apps in distinction to dating apps, before discussing their infrastructuring properties, and lastly examining their impact on the wider discourse on infrastructures. I will show how couple apps create the framework for their own upkeep by the users through media practice within the logic of relationship management. Discussing this necessarily includes different broader, cultural aspects, such as the underlying idea of continual self-optimization and different socio-political aspects of (hetero-)normativity and emphasizes the importance of alternative infrastructural concepts such as ‘infrastructures of intimacy’ that assume a cultural and media studies perspective.

‘Couple Apps’ are rooted in the idiom that ‘successful relationships need work’ and claim to be this work’s infrastructure, promising to make it easier on the users in that they are transparent in their infrastructural status and users consciously engage in both the upkeep of their relationship and maintaining the app as its infrastructure. Importantly, relationship apps can also create new relationship forms, which means as infrastructure they generate new social forms. Based on the idea

1 Susanna Paasonen, “Infrastructures of Intimacy,” in *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities*, eds. Rikke Andreassen et al. (New York: Routledge, 2017): 103–116, 103.

that any technologies, such as these apps, are not simply ‘channels’ for communication but affordances that curb human relations, this chapter emphasizes that apps, and especially couple apps, afford both emotional and social relational presence.² Understanding couple apps as infrastructure is hence insightful for a more general discussion, as they strongly enforce regular and daily use for the sake of stabilizing relationality and ensuring their continued usefulness.³

Infrastructures are generally understood as “the vast network that makes possible the movement of people, goods, and information over time and space.”⁴ Smartphone apps, in combination with underlying infrastructures such as the internet, ‘move’ information, data, images, and texts while also being essential in the creation of this information. Many of these apps have distinct infrastructural properties as they purposefully communicate their existence, demand users to interact with them, and thus raise “the user’s awareness about properties of an infrastructure.”⁵ Contrary to notions of the ‘underlying,’ ‘invisible’ properties of infrastructures, the apps’ language, aesthetic properties, push-messages, and nudges make infrastructural properties and processes distinctly visible and specify maintenance as part of their functionality. Marking the apps’ technological properties and programming with automated communication and facilitated social interaction and their general appearance is hence an important first step when analysing couple apps as relationship infrastructure.

Generally speaking, couple apps as infrastructures of relationships have not been discussed in depth even though some of the tech-journalistic discourse has called *Pair* (2012), *Avocado* (2012) or similar apps the ‘smallest possible social network.’⁶ The two nodes of such a network are the couple, two users and their phones, while the app (plus the necessary other technological conditions) is the infrastructure upon which this network unfolds. Researchers from different academic fields have explicitly written about the “infrastructure of intimacy,”⁷ which closely relates

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- 2 Larissa Hjorth and Sun Lim, “Mobile Intimacy in an Age of Affective Mobile Media,” *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no. 4 (December 2012): 477–484, 478.
 - 3 And in turn generate income, as many of the apps in question collect data or bill their users for specific services. As are all infrastructures, they are embedded within socio-capitalist contexts that intersectionally shape their designs, functionalities, and cultural contents and implications.
 - 4 Barney Warf, “Infrastructure,” in *Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, eds. Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2006): 259.
 - 5 Juan David Hincapie-Ramos, “Infrastructure Awareness,” in *Proceedings of the 12th ACM International Conference Adjunct Papers on Ubiquitous Computing: Ubicomp ’10* (Copenhagen: ACM Press, 2010): 1–4, 1.
 - 6 Randall Stross, “Social Networks, Small and Smaller,” *The New York Times* (14 April 2021); Sarah Kessler, “Pair, the Social Network for Two, Launches an Android App,” *Mashable* (8 May 2012).
 - 7 Ara Wilson, “The Infrastructure of Intimacy,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 2 (January 2016): 247–280; Paasonen, “Infrastructures of Intimacy.”

to debates around mobile and social media and ‘networked intimacy’ or ‘mobilized intimacy’⁸ and infrastructures of connectivity in the modern city-scape.⁹ Couple apps are structurally different from dating or “Hook Up” apps like *Tinder* (2012), *Badoo* (2006) or *Hinge* (2013), as they do not aim to facilitate a first encounter between somehow matched users, but they address people who are already in a somewhat committed relationship with each other. This relationship, according to the apps’ creators, needs a smartphone-based infrastructure to flourish. Most of the apps promise to create or increase intimacy, which is, as Berlant put it, a matter of “connections that *impact* on people, and on which they depend for living.”¹⁰ And this is where apps such as *Between* (2012), *Without* (2015), *Couply* (2020), or *Lasting* (2017) come in. They insert themselves between two users, or rather between two phones, and offer to hold open the socio-technical space for the couple to interact in with. In doing so they inherently shape the interaction and consequential human connection they facilitate. They also transport normative frameworks as most couple apps are geared toward heterosexual, monogamous relationships (children are not part of the picture) and implicitly exclude LGBTQIA+ users, as well as alternative types of relationships through wordings, and promotional images enforcing a specific kind of ‘successful relationship.’ Their target audience can be described as generally professional, digital natives who subscribe to a busy lifestyle that includes certain activities such as workouts, dinner dates etc. Couple apps are hence programmed to create an exclusive space for two smartphone users—their purpose is the stabilization of the existing relationship as well as the creation of new forms of relation.

They promise to help plan a couple’s everyday life, somehow enhance their dating or sex life, or organize menial tasks such as grocery shopping. In studying such apps as infrastructures, their surface design, functions, texts, and language have an influence on and are influenced by the respective relationship. Taking discursive sources into account (such as advertisements, product videos, homepage, or app store texts), as well as other artefacts collected from social media platforms or journalistic sources, allows for condensing the apps’ missions and branding. By adding

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- 8 Charlotte Launder, “Location: Tinder. Locative Social Media as a Dating Tool,” *Meco6936* (blog), (28 May 2015), <https://meco6936.wordpress.com/2015/05/28/location-tinder-locative-social-media-as-a-dating-tool/>; Nichi Hodgson, *The Curious History of Dating: From Jane Austen to Tinder* (London: Robinson, 2017); Martin Stempfhuber and Michael Liegl, “Intimacy Mobilized: Hook-Up Practices in the Location-Based Social Network Grindr,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 41, no. 1 (March 2016): 51–70.
 - 9 Steve Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (London: Routledge, 2001); Ash Amin, “Lively Infrastructure,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, no. 7–8 (December 2014): 137–161.
 - 10 Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 281–288, 284; orig. emph.

observations obtained from the ‘walkthrough method,’¹¹ I can extrapolate which demands these apps aim to fulfil for their coupled-up users and thus discuss couple apps as relationship infrastructures. These demands include closeness through time spent together, games, quizzes, or shared habits such as working out together. The app *Love Nudge* for example is described as a “habit-forming app that helps you intentionally express love in ways that are more meaningful to your partner.”¹² It is important to note that the habits mentioned here are all carried out within the apps itself: daily posts or questions, sending pictures every morning, etc. In doing so, the apps promise their users to help time-proof their relationships. By making themselves out to be critical infrastructures for the couple, *Raft* (2016) wants users to “spend more time together and have things to look forward to,” *Couply* asks them to “Futureproof your relationship,” and *Lasting* promises to help them “Build a relationship that lasts for a lifetime”—all while simply using an app, ideally multiple times every day. The apps demand that users’ behaviour be predictable, consistent, and stable. These traits are what the apps in turn make out to be the necessary foundation for a ‘successful’ or ‘healthy’ relationship—which shines a light on the fact that couple apps first and foremost facilitate a stable relationship between a user and their phone. Meanwhile, the marketing texts primarily stress the user-to-user connection they promise to be the interface and infrastructure for, i.e. “The purpose behind our app became *connection*.”¹³ The short advertorial text seems to emphasize how the relational interaction facilitated by couple apps is inherently multi-faceted. On a human-to-human level, the applications are aimed at “relationship making and maintenance.”¹⁴

Structured on broad strokes, it can be said that couple apps address different types of relationship settings: couples who live together or at least in the same place, couples who are spatially distant, and couples who are spatially distant and must deal with vastly different time zones. *Without*, for example, “displays your partner’s

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- 11 This means “to systematically and forensically step through the various stages of app registration and entry, everyday use, and discontinuation of use.” I specifically focused on the aspects of “vision,” “operating model,” and “governance” and documented my findings with screenshots and noted “mediator characteristics” such as copy and sound, interface arrangements, button designs, etc. (Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, “The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (March 2018): 881–900, 891f.).
- 12 Moody Publishers Limited, *Love Nudge*, Apple App Store, Version 5.1.7 (2023). <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/lovenudge/id495326842>. Date accessed: September 2022.
- 13 Franklin Innovations LLC, *Kindu for Couples*, Apple App Store, Version 3.9.6 (2022). <https://apps.apple.com/ie/app/kindu-for-couples/id346524753>. Date accessed: October 2022.
- 14 Rikke Andreassen, Michael Nebeling Petersen, Katherine Harrison, Tobias Raun, eds., *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities, and Proximities* (New York/London: Routledge, 2018).

neighbourhood and details like the weather.”¹⁵ Some couple apps ask their users to be online at the same time to parallelly stream a movie (i.e., *Kast* (2019) or *Tuned* (2021)) or answer sets of quiz questions about the relationship each day (*iPassion* (2015) or *Honi* (2017)).

Other apps fall under an app category that has been discussed in wider technological discourse as “teledildonics.”¹⁶ Their purpose is a corporeal connection, the simulation or triggering of touch and/or sexual pleasure through smartphone applications and additional ‘hardware’ in the form of “Hug Shirts,” buzzing bracelets or sex toys that can be triggered by a partner touching their phone screen. In their default settings, many of these apps are very heteronormative, typically linking a male-female set of devices to each other, while those which allow one user to control the other’s physical experience are less so. Especially with additional hardware, the couple apps as infrastructure are a prominent part of the relationship, and in this genre the implied relationship is less structured and tame than in the more management-oriented couple apps. Teledildonic couple apps are most obviously infrastructures for new forms of connection and social interaction. The mediated relationship created by and within the apps is typically somehow visualized or archived. This aspect is also essential for the apps’ important narrative function: one of their innate effects is to become storages or albums of the relationship and thereby being infrastructures of the mediated versions of a relationship.

Aside from the physical connection, couples can choose from a wide range of infrastructural apps that organize their day-to-day and that specifically address the ‘work’ aspect of the relationship they imply: shared grocery lists, to-do-lists, calendars, photo storage spaces, and other purposes are common functions that promise to elevate some of the menial tasks that mandate human-to-human connection. These apps synchronize and linearize the relation by synchronizing content and screens. Their promise is that users through the apps’ optimized time management will have more ‘quality time’ with each other once their everyday tasks are successfully completed. By using the app, these ‘successes’ can be tracked and are even rewarded. The gamification of relationship work and the workification of relationships are hence two central effects of the couple apps as relationship infrastructures. Naturally many couples use different means of communication, not least face-to-face. But within the realm of couple apps, there is no relationship

15 Pointless Technology LLC, *Without*, Apple App Store, Version 1.6.3 (2017). Appstore description available via: <https://appadvice.com/app/without-an-app-for-couples-who-like-each-other/868456885>. Date accessed: May 2023.

16 Mitchell Hobbs, Stephen Owen, and Livia Gerber, “Liquid Love? Dating Apps, Sex, Relationships and the Digital Transformation of Intimacy,” *Journal of Sociology* 53, no 2 (September 2016): 1–14; Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

outside of them; in fact, in the logic of the couple apps, there is no such relationship without them as infrastructure.

By taking a closer look at one of the genre's main players, I want to further explore and exemplify how couple apps “keep intimate relations together and bind them with more force while extending their spaces, shapes and rhythms.”¹⁷ *Between* was first released in 2011 by a South Korean Company (VCNC) and is available for all smartphone devices. Potential users are first addressed with the question “Are you currently in a relationship?,” which is followed by the app's promise to help them “to communicate more lovingly and for storing precious memories easily.”¹⁸ The most obvious way this is realized is through the fact that all functions of the app can only be used when coupled with another device and a specific user. As an article in *The New Yorker* describes it, “You can have only one contact on *Between*—your significant other. If Facebook is a high-school reunion and Twitter is a cocktail party, *Between* is staying home with a boxed set and ordering pizza.”¹⁹ By coupling the apps to each other, the messenger or chat function becomes a two-way-street, which is its only distinctive feature as it is otherwise pretty standard with text, images and emojis. The app rewards repetitive, at least daily use. Notably, *Between* emphasizes the importance of dates—in a twofold sense: it encourages users to remember significant milestones, such as their first kiss or vacation, by putting the dates into the archive and adding images or other digital memorabilia to them. It also urges them to plan ahead and add future date nights to their shared calendar. Two things then happen automatically: firstly, the app calculates the duration until the event takes place: i.e. “27 days until Sushi night.” And secondly, once the sushi night comes around, *Between* instantly turns the upcoming event into a memory. In the app's “story” tab all memories and past events are turned into a linear progression of memorable pictures and texts. The infrastructuring is thus ongoing, from planning and anticipation to storing and remembering. Additionally, the app actively creates a mediated version of the couple's history, thus in fact producing said relationship.

Any small thing becomes a milestone within the app's version of the relationship, including countdowns, push messages, congratulations etc. The app quite literally nestles itself *between* the users and creates a version of their relationship that

17 Paasonen, “Infrastructures of Intimacy,” 107.

18 thingsflow, Inc., *Between*, Apple App Store, Version 1.3.1 (2023). <https://apps.apple.com/de/app/between-the-app-couples-love/id458035189>. Date accessed: May 2023.

19 Lauren Collins, “The Love App: Romance in the World's Most Wired City,” *The New Yorker* (25 November 2013).

appears on the smartphones' screens. It is the infrastructure of user-device-app-relationships and users who want to be, and remain, coupled up through the app.

Couple Apps are therefore infrastructures through which a couple's relationship can be structured, reinforced, visualized, organized, remediated, archived, and shaped. Through these infrastructures respective devices and apps are related and synchronized, data is shared, and practices and habits are formed and repeated. Generally speaking, "infrastructures are largely responsible for the sense of stability of life in the developed world, the feeling that things work, and will go on working."²⁰ Couple apps promise and facilitate such stability – in fact, this is their main aim and user motivation. Through regular use, they keep both users in the relationship connected within the application, while being in turn kept relevant by their use. Generally, couple apps distinctly shape their users' behaviours towards their phones, the application, and each other. Users may transport their routines or specific needs into the app and shape it to fit their needs, but only within the limits of the apps' functionalities. As with all infrastructures, couple apps "exert a huge influence over economic and social activity and are hence distinctly political."²¹ They not only transport ideological or culturally tinted content regarding 'successful' or 'good' relationships, but they shape user behaviour, value perception, and social interactions—making them relevant sights for media and cultural studies and a rethinking of infrastructures as a theoretical framework.

20 Paul N. Edwards, "Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems," in *Modernity and Technology*, eds. Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey, and Andrew Feenberg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 185–225, 189.

21 Warf, "Infrastructure," 259.

