

## SLIDING INTO YOUR DMS IN 1, 2, 3: INSTAGRAM-DATING PRACTICES OF FILIPINO PROFESSIONALS IN A RELATIONSHIP AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*\*Julius Cesar Rosales Pascual*

University of the East, 2219 C.M. Recto Avenue, Brgy. 404,  
Zone 41, Sampaloc, Manila, the Philippines  
E-mail: [juliuscesar.pascual@ue.edu.ph](mailto:juliuscesar.pascual@ue.edu.ph)

*\*\*Veronico Nogales Tarrayo*

University of Santo Tomas, España Boulevard, Sampaloc,  
Manila, the Philippines  
E-mail: [vntarrayo@ust.edu.ph](mailto:vntarrayo@ust.edu.ph)

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores self-reported narratives of Filipino professionals in a relationship (FPR) in terms of their online-dating practices. It examines how romantic alternatives are experienced and expressed through Instagram (IG) My Stories during the quarantine period brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the present study aims to investigate the reasons and dynamics of IG-dating practices as well as how social media usage impacts romantic alternatives. The study hopes to fill the knowledge gap on the role IG dating plays in the various stages of online-dating practices during the quarantine period. The researchers analysed responses from two semi-structured interviews, six narratives or written responses, and follow-up email interviews with all eight FPR involved in this study. Findings indicate that compared to previous findings, the FPR did not regard being in IG as an important marker of their romantic and emotional relationships as it is merely their coping and surviving mechanism against boredom at the time of quarantining and their way of escaping and diverting their worries about the*

*pandemic; hence, ending a relationship can take place at any stage in the form of “ghosting”. Furthermore, IG’s main activities such as posting, reacting, replying/commenting, and chatting can initiate and maintain these romantic alternatives, and the primary motivation of the FPR to engage in IG dating concerns face-/self-presentation and negotiation. Finally, the term “quaranfling” is proposed to describe a phenomenon pertaining to a no-strings-attached flirting during quarantine, which is basically a casual romantic relationship. The current study may be a precursor to further investigations on quaranfling and whether online platforms (e.g., social media and dating apps) can be attributed to the growing number of relationship dilemmas (e.g., cheating and breakups) among modern-day couples not only in the Philippines but also in Asia Pacific.*

**Keywords:** Filipino professionals in a relationship (FPR), ghosting, Instagram-dating practices, romantic alternatives, quaranfling

## INTRODUCTION

Relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic have been changing, especially in terms of communication channels. For instance, because staying at home has become the practice to protect one’s health and life from the virus, some couples may have been forced to use social networking apps to process and carry on with their relationships. Because of relatively limited opportunities to meet each other face-to-face as a result of lockdowns and quarantines, some romantic partners have kept their relationships healthy by staying connected through virtual communication networks (e.g., Facebook and Instagram [IG]), which may have paved the way for a new and unique relationship resulting from a new social-media practice. Within this context, social media has profoundly changed the way interpersonal relationships are approached, explored, and experienced (Labor and Latosa 2022; van Ouytsel et al. 2016; Portolan and McAlister 2022).

Most social media users have incorporated two or more social media sites or applications in their daily routine (Davenport et al. 2014; Lenhart 2015). Of these applications, Facebook has remained the most popular platform among adolescents and adults for communicating with others interpersonally and personally (Dumrongsiri 2017; Lenhart 2015), followed by IG (Fejes-Vékássy et al. 2022; Perez 2014). The common motivations for using these apps include checking and monitoring other people’s activities, keeping in touch with family and friends, and approaching interpersonal romance (Portolan and McAlister 2022; Utz et al. 2015). Nevertheless, the main

motivation for utilising social media is to maintain interpersonal romantic relationships (Craig and Wright 2012; Labor and Latosa 2022). What this global pandemic has taught everyone is that distant love affairs have become the new normal. This study hopes to shed light on how modern-day couples have dealt with dating in the time of pandemic as the crisis has brought about new challenges for millennial and Gen Z couples (Labor and Latosa 2022; Portolan and McAlister 2022; Rodriguez 2020).

The internet provides several platforms and opportunities to link users with known and unknown online connections that may lead to a romantic affair (Abbasi 2018, 2019). Currently, one of the most ubiquitous computer-mediated platforms in social media for online relationships is IG as its patterns of activities are strongly influenced by romantic-relationship statuses (Fejes-Vékássy et al. 2022). Communicating with more visual elements (e.g., pictures, short videos, short-form contents, live feeds, and GIFs) than any other social media apps, IG is a mobile location-based social networking application that offers its users a way to take pictures, apply different manipulation tools (e.g., filters) to transform the appearance of an image, and share it instantly with friends on the application itself or through other social networking sites and apps (Fejes-Vékássy et al. 2022; Hochman and Schwartz 2012). IG is currently the most popular photo-sharing app with a total of 1.22 billion global active users (Kangur 2021). Referencing Pertierra et al. (2002), this study assumes that IG has brought about changes to the inner world of its users, particularly Filipinos, which have significant social and cultural consequences for IG encourages a more privatised orientation in dating practices, a notion that is in keeping with Leaver et al. (2020), in that IG is a visual social media that mirrors culture.

IG is the fourth widely used social media platform in the Philippines as of July 2022, with Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter in the first, second, and third ranks, respectively (StatCounter 2022). Data published in Meta's advertising resources indicate that IG had 18.65 million users in the Philippines in early 2022; with 64.2% female users and 35.8% male users (Kemp 2022). Although Facebook is expected to maintain its spot, IG is assumed to grow in the succeeding years as some ease off from the commotion in other social media platforms (Estares 2019) (e.g., overwhelming expressions of disapproval and dissent, and toxic comments on Facebook). Filipino IG users prefer using photos and short-video contents to describe the real world because they find them more convenient than writing detailed descriptions (de Rivera Medina 2017).

IG is increasingly gaining popularity among Filipino users because of its My Story feature that allows users to share photos and videos via their My Story tab, which is visible to the followers of a user's account. This feature becomes more appealing to IG users as daily updates through post, story, live, and reels are fed to users on the top list of their IG home page; thus, it has become a way of mythmaking, that is, presenting a mythologised version of the self (Chua 2019). This likewise allows IG users to know more about the ones they simply follow or consider as romantic prospects. Once logged in to an IG account, users can be catapulted to virtual spaces and realities crammed with an inordinate number of known and unknown followers. The popularity of IG in the Philippines is rooted in its online features that allow users to share mostly filtered photos, videos, and short-form contents; articulate their interests; ponder on their opinions; update their followers on their whereabouts for a day; and even reveal intimate thoughts and expressions. IG likewise links various virtual individuals and stories together to form a web of interlocking narratives. Thus, relationships and communities are initiated and formed from users of similar interests and values. The technological medium where IG is situated enables visual storytelling to reach a wide audience (Sawit 2014). Furthermore, this social networking app is available for mobile devices that allow users to access it on-the-go; hence, the allure of being connected to virtual followers from the convenience of a mobile device can lead to compulsive use (Andreassen 2015). Apparently, this phenomenon can be observed on peoples, particularly Filipinos, on their social media usage for romance, dating, and relationships. In the Philippines, IG is a social space where representation is more important than any lived experience. The most mundane private-life activities are presented as a spectacle. For instance, updates on IG may contain contradictions, which can be seen in the caption-photo/My Story relationship of a post (Rosales 2018).

Based on the above background, this study explores self-reported narratives of Filipino professionals in a relationship (FPR) in terms of their participation in the assumed new-normal interpersonal relationship, that is, IG dating. Likewise, this research examines how romantic alternatives are experienced and expressed through IG My Story during the quarantine period brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the study seeks to address the following questions:

1. Why do FPR engage in IG-dating practices?
2. What are the dynamics of IG-dating practices as expressed and communicated by these FPR?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section presents the review of related literature. It contains a substantive review of references, findings, methods, and theories related to the current study.

According to Duguay et al. (2020), IG has a constant and ever-evolving algorithm recommendation system coupled with content moderation mechanisms that make it more enticing for its target audience, i.e., teens and adults. During a lockdown, boredom is in the air. Life in general is uncertain, and there is no pressure to meet up with a virtual intimate partner because of existing quarantine guidelines, hence, the new normal IG-dating practices.

IG offers its users several options to keep in touch and interact with each other through the My Story and direct message (DM) functions, status updates, liking, commenting, tagging, and posting on each other's profile pages. IG is not only an intimate channel of communication, but it also plays a key role in relational information-seeking, forming, maintaining, and developing processes. During the early stages of IG dating, personal information can be shared by potential partners during the My Story reacting and messaging features that can lead to a more private DM. Previous studies have shown that users have a particular interest in photos of their love interests (van Ouytsel et al. 2016). Hence, reacting and messaging on IG posts can pave the way for the action of "sliding into your DM" that can bring multiple sources of self-generated narratives.

Apparently, social media represents an integral platform that can be used to initiate, maintain, and end connections between or among individuals, including romantic-alternative partners. Ouwerkerk and Johnson (2016) argue that one of the defining characteristics of social media is the users' ability to choose who they want to connect with, referred to as "friending" (on Facebook), "connecting" (on LinkedIn), and "following" (on IG, Twitter, and TikTok). The present study explores the experiences of FPR in maintaining existing relationships as well as seeking new, romantic alternatives in the hope to shed light on the dynamics of the IG-dating phenomenon.

Previous research undertakings have indicated that social media, particularly IG, has a profound impact on cultures and how their users experience alternative relationships in visual social media platforms/apps (Leaver et al. 2020; van Ouytsel et al. 2016). This study likewise responds to Fejes-Vékássy et al. (2022) calling for separate studies to gain a deeper insight into the impact of each romantic-relationship status on IG-dating activities.

Moreover, this study hopes to explore related literature and studies on peoples', particularly Filipinos, use of online and digital/social media for romance, dating, and other relationships. First, Cabañes and Collantes (2020) ponder on the experiences of Filipino women in their use of mobile technologies in exploring relationships with foreign men, specifically how these women use mobile apps to enact a distinct and temporary resolution to challenges in their relationships. The proponents' coinage of the term "digital flyover" (Cabañes and Collantes 2020: 97) is what the researchers imagine in the presence of IG dating as Filipino couples have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and have had to be creative so that they could process and proceed with their relationship/romantic alternatives. The digital flyover or digital infrastructure as asserted by Cabañes and Collantes (2020) is borne out of apps and other mobile media that allow app users to bypass the conventional romantic connection and stages. Meanwhile, Ellwood-Clayton's (2006) study on mobile phone and/or relationships explore the intricate connection between different types of love and mobile-phone use among Filipino users to unearth their digital and mobile culture, along with stories and practices of different types of love. Pertierra's (2005) piece of discursive intimacy deals with the sociocultural effects of mobile phones in the Philippine society in terms of how mobile phones affect notions of identity in the romantic practices of its users. In other words, the development of these modern technologies is closely intertwined with human practices and social innovations. The present study hopes to answer Pertierra's (2005) call for a constant investigation on human-technology interaction. Furthermore, Atienza's (2018) ethnographic study among gay Filipino men, and Labor and Latosa's (2022) interview study among gay Filipino couples using mobile-dating apps help the researchers acknowledge several sources of moral anxieties and ethical considerations that influence how to construct and apply research instruments when intimacies are the focus.

Albury et al. (2021) likewise draw on a qualitative research of men who used dating apps to meet women both before and during the lockdown. They argue that the affect-response of shame-humiliation could be turned to a productive, self-reflexive opportunity for improving gendered experiences of social media platform/app use. In a related vein, Portolan and McAlister (2022) examine how people interact with their romantic partners and how it has affected their search for love on dating apps during the global pandemic. Consistent with the present study, the proponents explored how romance affected the way Filipinos approached dating and relationship in apps, and how this was complicated by the pandemic.

In terms of online behaviour, De La Cruz (2017) points out that Filipinos are part of a visual and collectivistic culture that values social, close-knit family ties, and interpersonal relationships, which fits IG as it catapulted the Philippines to be named as one of the most selfie countries on IG. The strongest underlying reason why social ties in social media have greater essence among Filipinos than they do elsewhere has to do with the country's economic instability (De La Cruz 2017; Estares 2019; Shtern et al. 2019). In a country known for political upheavals and internal corruption, Filipinos have come to rely on each other, rather than the government, for support (De La Cruz 2017). According to the 2019 global report overview of Hootsuite and We Are Social (Kemp 2019), the Philippines was the country spending the most time on the internet. The same study reported that social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and IG belonged to the top 10 most visited websites among Filipinos, which would mean that a lot of Filipinos also contribute to the active involvement in social networking sites.

Because of quarantine and social-distancing regulations, Filipino couples used to seeing each other regularly are suddenly thrust in what felt like a long-distance relationship (Rodriguez 2020). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipino romantic partners are forced to develop new routines under increasingly stressful circumstances.

Given the unique nature of professionals' romantic relationships, exploring their insights in terms of reasons for, experiences in, and dynamics of IG-dating practices has become imperative. The present study aims to focus on the role IG plays in the different stages of online-dating practices from initiating, maintaining, to terminating romantic alternatives. The researchers explore, among others, how FPR signal romantic interest(s) to IG following and followers, and how they initiate an intimate DM thread, express romantic interest(s), and maintain private conversations, and the role of IG dating during the quarantine period. The current research hopes to add to the body of literature pertaining to the impact of social media use on alternative-relationship outcomes. Thus, this study is designed as a first step to ascertain IG-dating practices among FPR and how such romantic dynamics are expressed and communicated.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

In recent studies, semi-structured interviews and narratives as methods have elicited rich data on peoples' use of social media within their alternative relationships (Acedera and Yeoh 2018; Cabañes and Collantes 2020; Uy-Tioco and Cabalquinto 2020). Hence, semi-structured interviews and narratives, which are generally used in place of an interview, have been deemed most appropriate to address the research questions from a qualitative perspective. On the one hand, the semi-structured interviews provide the participants with the opportunity to fully explain the experience of the phenomenon of interest, that is IG-dating practices, following six distinct phases: 1) introducing, 2) personalising, 3) reminiscing, 4) contextualising, 5) closing, and 6) reciprocating. Meanwhile, the use of narratives has allowed the participants to think about what they wish to share, including a recounting of events that took place using IG features such as post, story, reel, and live, and the resulting dating practices.

### **Participants**

The study utilised purposive-convenience sampling through which the participants within the researchers' network were recruited. A total of eight FPR participated in the study and were chosen based upon two specific criteria. First, a participant must be a Filipino professional aged 22 to 35 years who was involved in IG-dating practices. Based on the 2020 report of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the largest number of employed Filipinos belonged to the said age group. Second, a participant must have engaged in an IG-dating encounter that started during quarantine and ended even before the quarantine was over. Furthermore, the participant must be an active IG user for at least five years as the researchers assumed that this was a sufficient period for an individual to be familiar with the features and the latest trends in IG, and to establish a deeper understanding of IG's algorithm and dynamics.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

To determine the viability of the present study, the researchers conducted a preliminary, informal interview with three FPR. Also, prior to data collection,



the research protocol was approved by the University of the East research ethics committee and ethical agreements were established with the participants (i.e., consent, right to withdraw, and anonymity).

Given the present pandemic situation in the Philippines, calls for participants as well as the semi-structured interviews had to be facilitated online. A set of interview guide questions was used to guarantee a similar format across all interview sessions. Meanwhile, narratives were drawn from the interview questions, which allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences. The questioning route for both the interviews and the narratives was structured following the recommendations of Krueger and Casey (2009). The questions were created by the researchers based on previous studies on the use of social media within romantic relationships (Albury et al. 2021; Cabañes and Collantes 2020; Duguay et al. 2020; Leaver et al. 2020; Maddox and Malson 2020; Myles et al. 2021; Portolan and McAlister 2022). Meanwhile, no strict deadline was implemented to give the participants sufficient time to work on their narratives.

Upon reaching data saturation, a total of two semi-structured interviews were conducted, and six narratives were collected, both of which focused on self-reported IG-dating practices of FPR from a qualitative perspective. The researchers came to this point where no new information was discovered in the data analysis, and an apparent redundancy was observed, which prompted that the data collection may ease. Hence, the researchers assumed that further data collection would yield similar results and serve to confirm enough data to achieve the research purpose. Furthermore, an attempt to generate a snowball, nonprobability sampling (i.e., a qualified participant recommends more people) did not materialise seemingly because of the nature of the study and the established selection criteria for the participants. In the transcripts, the moderator was coded with the letter M. Because of the context-sensitive nature of the data and her familiarity with the language, terms, and topic at hand, a communication professional was asked to transcribe all interviews verbatim. The names of the participants were removed from the transcripts and replaced by a code (e.g., P1I as Participant 1, semi-structured interview, P2I as Participant 2, semi-structured interview) to preserve anonymity and privacy.

Meanwhile, informants who signed up for the call for participants but had special requests (e.g., simply answer the guide questions at their personal pace) or needs (e.g., internet bandwidth and Wi-Fi connections) were accommodated for narratives and were asked to submit their responses without observing a strict deadline. Streubert-Speziale and Carpenter (2003)

opine that narratives are an effective alternative to and are generally used in place of semi-structured interviews. Given the nature of the present study, the use of narratives allowed the participants to think about what they would wish to share. The turnaround time for the collection of narratives was four weeks. Likewise, the names of the participants were removed from the transcripts and replaced by a code (e.g., P3N as Participant 3, narrative; P4N as Participant 4, narrative; P5N as Participant 5, narrative, etc.) to guarantee confidentiality. To supplement the data from the semi-structured interviews and narratives, follow-up email interviews with all FPR were conducted. Because of the COVID-19 lockdown, email communication, which was more accessible to all FPR, was conducted to clarify a few details.

Moreover, in the data analysis, the researchers considered the participants' societal positioning, for it would shape the participants' approach and experience towards IG-dating practices. Hence, the participants' profiles were likewise examined in terms of: 1) socio-economic class where four were from the middle middle-income class and four from the upper-middle income class, 2) professional jobs where two were business process outsourcing (BPO) call-centre agents, one business owner, one government employee, one marketing communications staff, one medical doctor, one event organiser, and one scriptwriter, 3) residence where six were from Metro Manila and two were from Central Luzon, 4) household setup where four were living with their parents while another four were living alone, and 5) quarantine classifications during the online fieldwork where two were during the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ, March to May 2020), two during the Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ, 16 to 31 May 2020), and four during the General Community Quarantine (GCQ, 1 to 31 May 2020).

Data were analysed manually, and using an open-coding procedure, the researchers identified every response provided by the participants and assigned each with a code. Then the researchers synthesised the codes identified based on their thematic patterns and trends (van Ouytsel et al. 2016). Through discussions, they found common and dominant themes that emerged from the data. Codes found to be overlapping were merged so that only one overarching code remained. Afterwards, the codes were structured according to several thematic categories that could provide answers to the research questions.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In this section, the research questions are addressed under the light of the findings that set out to explore the self-reported narratives of FPR involved in IG-dating practices.

### **Why FPR Engage in IG-dating Practices**

The analysis of interviews and narratives revealed five specific perspectives of FPR on why they engaged in IG-dating practices: 1) to cope with boredom at a time of quarantining, 2) to assuage their worries about the pandemic, 3) to seek affection and feel appreciated and cared for, 4) to explore and experience romantic and emotional excitement, and 5) to use such practices as a substitute for exclusive dating.

#### **To cope with boredom at a time of quarantining**

IG has become a platform where FPR can connect instantly with little effort that can fit the quarantine setup in terms of passing time. Especially during the intense lockdown period, the FPR expressed a different kind of vibe in this platform because it could be a diversion from boredom as indicated in these extracts:

*Kadalasan po talaga bored lang.* [most of the time, it's mere boredom]  
[P1I]

*... dahil doon sa pagka-bored nila, yung mga crush nila minessage nila.* [...because of their boredom, they send random messages to their crushes] [P2I]

In the same vein, Dunne et al. (2010) posit that two of the social media uses and gratifications are escapism and alleviation of boredom. Hence, it can be assumed that practicing IG dating was a boredom-buster for most of the FPR. Given the pandemic and the quarantine protocols that resulted in the work-from-home (WFH) setup among the FPR, social media had been a good pastime. Some FPR opined that the algorithm of IG made it a good alternative to a relatively busy and monotonous environment in Facebook Messenger. Because IG dating would require a certain amount of privacy and intimacy [P3N, P6N], IG offered a more relaxing, peaceful [P7N], and user-friendly chat room [P5N] that was not prone to hacking [P2I], thus,

an inviting platform for IG-dating practices. Likewise, one of the aforesaid themes corroborates that of van Ouytsel et al. (2016), which underscores that in social media, it is easier to initiate conversations with crushes and romantic partners as compared to starting a face-to-face conversation. This reflects the online disinhibition effect, which explains why internet users usually feel less restrained to express their emotions in an online context (van Ouytsel et al. 2016) as people desperately seek the certainty offered by the romance master plot (i.e., a familiar story which can intrinsically shape the way people think about life) provided by the app (Portolan and McAlister 2022).

### **To escape and divert their worries about the pandemic**

People utilise IG in a way that best fulfils their individual needs at a specific moment (Fejes-Vèkássy et al. 2022) as social media apps offer the feeling of security through romance in a time of global uncertainty (Portolan and McAlister 2022), in this case approaching the relationship and surviving the pandemic all at the same time. In dealing with the stressful and uncertain situation during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the FPR utilised social media, particularly IG, to cope with the serious situation where the lives and safety of all were strangely on a limbo against this invisible enemy as two participants shared that:

... breath of fresh air *ko na ang IG, kasi at least dun kililig ka. Pipili ka lang kung gusto mo ma-stress sa paligid mo or kiligin...* [...IG is my breath of fresh air for at least there is a romantic exhilaration or elation. You only get to choose between being stressed given the situation or being thrilled...] [P3N]

We engage in Instagram “quaranfling” as a form of escape to this cruel world. Of all generations, we are the ones having the unfortunate story of telling people that we have been there, lockdown and all. [P6N]

Based on the above extracts, it can be inferred that notwithstanding the need to survive the pandemic with one’s mental health intact, the participants demonstrated their way to alleviate their worries about this life-and-death phenomenon by engaging in IG dating. Through viewing the good vibes of IG My Stories of people, the FPR somehow managed to divert their attention in a much lighter mood that enabled them to enjoy the moment rather than to be depressed during the pandemic.

The pandemic, which caused the sudden shift to online work and acquaintances, offered an opportunity for the FPR to see the brighter side of the unfortunate situation. It should be noted that these trying times likewise brought out the best among the FPR in terms of their coping mechanisms as the new normal kicked in. With ample time to explore and experience IG, it appeared that IG dating was a good outlet to assuage their uncertainties and anxieties about the pandemic, thus, a way to keep them sane. Curiously, all the FPR overlooked to tackle the issue of relationship commitment considering that it may be an important factor in determining whether a couple and the ongoing relationship will survive or not (Rusbult et al. 2011).

### **To seek affection and feel appreciated and cared for**

Considering the motivation it brought to the FPR, one probable reason for engaging in IG dating reported by the FPR was seeking affection and wanting to feel appreciated and cared for, a similar finding revealed in Bradley's (2015) study. The following interview and narrative extracts reveal this insight:

We want affection from people and it is quite exciting to get it from some random strangers, and even friends actually. [P6N]

Some of them are really in need of affection, those who are trying to get over past relationships or flings...they grab the opportunity to get noticed easily. [P7N]

Although the dating happened online, the FPR may not deny and take for granted the concurring emotions they gained from IG dating at a depressing time caused by the global pandemic. These desirable feelings could manifest that the FPR would openly engage in such a relationship if no toxic or bad vibes and pervert intentions were attached as they moved on with their respective IG-dating practices. However, all these emotions apparently can be sugar-coated with flirtation. van Ouytsel et al. (2016) opine that online chats among love interests enable people to flirt and communicate with their online-dating romantic partner(s). Furthermore, the availability of online romantic alternatives disguised as "friends" provides a ripe environment that can facilitate an emotional and/or even sexual affair (Abbasi 2019; Abbasi and Alghamdi 2017). Online communications can quickly become aggressive as uninhibited users tend to exchange intimate details and are prone to developing an emotional intimacy with their online fling partners (Abbasi 2018).

### To explore and experience romantic and emotional excitement

According to Caldwell (2013), attachment styles, which bring excitement, are not only observed in verbal and behavioural communications but also in romantic behaviours exhibited on social networking sites. The FPR disclosed that IG dating allowed them to explore and experience romantic and emotional excitement. In this online setup, the interest and excitement of having a significant other/s are tantamount to one of the main reasons for IG use—coolness (Fejes-Vekássy et al. 2022). The following extracts would support these claims:

*...Parang dun yung excitement...mas nakaka-excite siya in a way na parang pag IG kasi, di ganon kadami ang gumagamit...yung excitement din nandun kasi kilala mo na isa lang naman kausap mo dun...nae-excite akong makilala siya. [...it is like there is excitement... it is more exciting in a way like if it is IG, there are fewer users...there is excitement too there because you already know the sender you only get to chat with...I get excited to know him] [P1I]*

*...everytime na may makakausap ako through Instagram, nae-excite ako kasi once na mag appear na yung notification ng IG sa home screen ng phone ko, parang kinikilig na agad ako...[everytime I have someone to talk with through Instagram, I get excited because once it appeared on my IG notification at the home screen of my phone, it is like I feel thrilled already...] [P3N]*

Interestingly, the FPR would be inclined to see the potential of an online partnership to go to the next level as the value and quality of excitement between partners would dictate the development of this romantic and emotional connection. However, the disclosure of extremely personal information is an imperative part of romantic relationships and closeness (Greene et al. 2006). Commitment is also a consequence of increasing dependence such that when partners are emotionally engaged with their virtual connections, their dependence on their significant other weakens, thus, resulting in low commitment (Abbasi and Alghamdi 2018).

The above case implies that the FPR would likewise expect IG dating to change and grow into something more interesting and cooler. Although this may seem counterintuitive, this period represents the transition between casual interaction and romantic potential once the lockdown and the pandemic are over to test the viability of online romance. Thus, this may represent a

time when uncertainty has temporarily decreased as the romantic intent of both partners has become apparent (Fox and Anderegg 2014).

### **To use IG-dating practices as a substitute for exclusive dating**

In IG dating, maintaining the romantic and emotional excitement appears to be parallel with the perspective of the FPR that IG dating could be a new normal substitute for the absence of traditional, personal dating, as reflected in the following statements:

...try to fling with people to see if they will catch any feelings toward each other. [P7N]

...dating on Instagram at this quarantine makes it more convenient for people... [P8N]

Essentially, relationships persist based on these conditions: 1) the outcomes are beneficial to the partners, 2) barriers that inhibit quitting the relationship exert a stronger influence on the partners, and 3) when romantic alternatives to the primary relationship are absent (Abbasi 2018). Seemingly, there is hope that IG dating may be a good interpersonal meeting room for users to process and proceed with their relationships amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The FPR seemed to consider this online interaction as the new and next normal dating, which is parallel with the findings in Cabañes and Collantes's (2020) study where netizens use the digital flyover to speed up the romantic-relationship process using online apps as a platform or meeting place. In this view, the setup can be exclusive, and a bit committed, for it involves investment of time, emotion, and romance. On the one hand, the participants would consider such as a mere waste of time. Meanwhile, this could also be an alternative to exclusive dating in the hope of settling down emotionally and romantically with the chosen partner. Hence, satisfaction from romantic relationships (i.e., individual differences) can be taken as a significant factor that is expected to impact an individuals' interpersonal needs and specific IG-dating motives (Yadav and Choudhary 2019).

### **Dynamics of IG-dating Practices as Expressed and Communicated by FPR**

IG is a platform that fits well the romantic needs of professionals. As previous studies have shown, the core functions of IG use include identity presentation

and display of the actual relationship (Fejes-Vékássy et al. 2022; Leaver et al. 2020). In addition, we underscore that IG dating involves a three-step approach that lumps the interpersonal romantic relationships of the FPR. The analysis of interviews and narratives revealed three specific aspects as regards the dynamics of IG dating: 1) initiating, 2) maintaining, and (3) ending.

### Initiating IG dating

Based on the responses, it was found that the FPR already used IG before the start of romantic alternatives as a source of information about a potential partner and as a way to attract other persons' interest, a similar finding reported in the study of van Ouytsel et al. (2016). The FPR disclosed that one may initiate an IG date by posting My Stories. Apparently, this is an additional innovation of IG to hook its users further by having the control (and power) to create a short content and giving one's followers a monitoring mechanism for surveillance on their typical activities, and vice-versa. The following interview extracts reveal these insights:

...IG Story *po para makita nila. Mas gusto ko kung they will like po yun. Tapos kung may comments or messages sila, dun na po mag-start at hahaba ang convo namin.* [IG Story so they will see. It will be better if they will like it. Then, if there are comments and messages from them, it will be the start of a long convo] [P11]

...share stories from time to time, comment on theirs, too. In that way, you provide an avenue to communicate with potential fling partners. I get their attention with my pretty and sexy posts and stories. [P6N]

Abbasi (2019) and Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017) concur that this virtual setup offers a popular way of initiating relationships, including illicit affairs; whereas van Ouytsel et al. (2016) state that users have a particular interest in visual presentations of their love interests, hence, the formation of IG dates. My Stories is a seemingly powerful attention- and reaction/comment-grabber algorithm of IG that provokes more “stories” to unfold and unravel. All the FPR found IG stories to be extra interesting and inviting compared with the usual IG posts as it would seem to encapsulate a slice of life in seconds of a potential fling partner/s. Coupled with very flexible and creative IG features such as filters and any other powerful content-enhancing add-ons that can even collaborate and crossover platforms and applications, this story time-like environment is an instant and quick update from a user in their most



aesthetically-pleasing self, that is, posting and sharing for self-presentation (Utz and Beukeboom 2011).

Furthermore, the FPR reported that story replies could be another way to initiate an IG date, which may convey positive reactions and compliments sent as direct messages as reflected in the following extracts:

The story reply is the most useful thing in this. The reaction button is a very powerful button, once you're in, there's no turning back. [P7N]

...by reacting to your stories not just an emoji sometimes with a message. [P8N]

As the adage goes, “it takes two to tango”; hence, the next step falls into the hands of the other party by reacting and commenting in the effort of getting noticed by an IG storyteller. All the participants indicated that they would send DMs, too. This finding supports van Ouytsel et al. (2016) as the FPR noted that the lack of face-to-face contact with the prospect or partner made it easier to initiate a conversation and to express one's emotional and romantic feelings. Parallel with this finding, Dumrong Siri (2017) underscores that activities such as initiating chat, greeting, clicking like, and making comments are interactions to maintain alternative relationships. Thus, the FPR described that initiating a conversation then eventually fling through IG was less intimidating than starting a real-life conversation and made them feel more at ease. Finally, most FPR suggested that consistent reactions, preferably heart reactions as well as witty, funny, and flattering comments, could be certain stimuli that catch the attention and interest of a potential fling partner/s.

### **Maintaining IG dating**

Seemingly, the primary motivation to use IG is to maintain relationships and obtain information about other people (Fejes-Vékássy et al. 2022). This motivation to maintain IG romantic relationships involves a stage where IG users announce their relationship status to followers through hashtag filtering, which reflects a dimension of techno-cultures in social-media romantic affairs (Duguay et al. 2020). IG offers an alternative to formally announcing (i.e., #relationshipreveal) people's relationship status. FPR were found to signal their romantic alternatives through a more casual and, at times, cryptic My Story uploads and posts. This suggests that FPR view the visual representations of their interpersonal relationships as an important marker of their vibe and bond (van Ouytsel et al. 2016). Because of its pervasiveness and

unique affordances, IG plays a distinct and interesting role in the development of new-normal romantic and emotional relationships. Referencing Labor and Latosa (2022), affective and nonphysical intimacies are necessary to establish commitment and mutuality that include posting daily updates about daily routines and using words of affirmation through chats and uploads. During the lockdown, maintaining and prolonging an IG-dating relationship has become more challenging and complicated for both parties. Based on the interview and the narrative responses, maintaining IG dating would seem to follow a cycle: post, react, reply/comment, conversation, repeat, as reflected in the following statements:

...consistent conversation, never ever *dapat mauubusan ng* topics...  
*Kailangan din* updated *ka sa* new stories *n'ya na pwede mong react-*  
*an...dapat parehas din kayong marunong magdala ng* conversation...  
 [consistent conversation, never ever run out of topics...You need to  
 be updated likewise in his/her new stories so you can react... it is also  
 a must that both of you are good conversationalists...] [P3N]

...viewing my IG stories and would react every time. Aside from  
 reacting, they would also send a message reaction to my IG stories/  
 posts and would try to keep the conversation going...[P5N]

However, this finding does not support Ouwerkerk and Johnson's (2016) and Fox and Anderegg's (2014) notion that social networking sites make these connections possible, but the motives for maintaining such connections are less clear and uncertain that may emerge at any point during the relationship. On the other hand, consistent with van Ouytsel et al. (2016), the most common way to be noticed is to actively post, react to, and reply to or comment on pictures and any other updates of a prospective partner. Abbasi (2018), Abbasi and Alghamdi (2018), and Utz and Beukeboom (2011) claim that the primary reason for using social media is to maintain relationships. Through these main IG activities, users are given the ability to broadcast (and sell) every detail of their lives to a vast audience. Liking and commenting on pictures or status updates of someone can cause others to wonder who this person is, thus, the forming of interest (Dumrongsiri 2017). This flow of information allows users to accomplish significant information-seeking and uncertainty reduction about potential or current partners, often without their knowledge. All participants did so through "likes" on IG. Several participants indicated that a particular sign of romantic and emotional interest for a prospective partner consisted of going through one's IG posts and stories and "liking"

them consistently. Apparently, this should signal that they went through the effort of knowing a prospective partner through the entire IG platform. Also, this was a testament to their particular interest in that person's life, which may lead to having intimate and deep conversations, and maintaining IG dating.

Finally, the aforesaid attention-seeking moves would require establishing common interests and consistent efforts to reach out and raise interesting personal, intimate questions to carry on with deep conversations as shared by most FPR.

### Ending IG dating

The final theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews/narratives is the role of IG in alternative relationships' dissolution. After the end of their IG dating, the participants generally would react by halting all forms of IG interaction such as liking or commenting on each other's My Story uploads and posts. Subsequently, some FPR indicated that they would unfollow or block their supposed partners in their IG account. In the same light with the study of Fejes-Vékássy et al. (2022), this paper underscores that IG likewise has an important but unfavourable role in online romantic and emotional relationships. A final theme that emerged from the interviews and narratives is the usual way(s) of ending IG dating, that is, "ghosting". Most FPR argued that "ghosting" may be associated with the "seen-zoning" phenomenon (i.e., an abrupt no-reply that will lead to no conversation at all, thus, "ghosted" or back-to-total-strangers status). These assumptions can be culled from these responses:

... ghosting... *Yung bigla na lang silang di mag-rereply sayo, or mag-stop na silang mag react sa posts or stories mo.* [... ghosting...that is sudden no reply, or has stopped reacting on your posts or stories]  
[P3N]

... start ignoring messages and [would] stop reacting/liking their posts.  
So, I guess "ghosting"... [P5N]

Interestingly, such a decision to "ghost" the estranged fling partner is a silent and cold treatment closure to end romantic alternatives by halting all usual ways of initiating and maintaining IG dating as previously discussed in this section. Consistent with this finding is that of van Ouytsel et al. (2016); they reported that after the end of a romantic relationship, users generally would

react by halting all forms of online interaction such as liking or commenting on each other's posts.

This new normal breakup comes with an interesting way to put a halt in this alternative romance—replying with end-conversation lines. The FPR pondered that these linguistically interesting cold utterances/expressions include “*Sige*” [okay], “Hahahahaha” (which is closely associated with laugh out loud [LOL]), and a laughing emoji. Furthermore, using IG's mute, ignore, restrict, unfollow, private, and block features could close the IG dating. The FPR shared their secret recipe for closing a thread or conversation for either temporary or for good:

*...cold replies po tapos hindi na lang talaga rereplyan...Pag ayaw ko na po na kausap siya, hindi ko nalang po siya kakausapin talaga... Unti unti po parang magsisimula sa mag-rereply ng ano nila “hahaha” ganun lang...emoji na tawa tapos “sige”. [cold replies then no reply at all...If I do not want to talk, I just do not talk at all...Little changes like it will start with a reply such as “hahaha” only... laughing emoji then “okay”. [P2I]*

I just reply in a manner just to end the convo. [P6N]

Ending IG dating may not be the end of the road, yet as a breakup, it literally means more time to spend with several activities resulting in increased engagement in social media as well, thus, more alternative relationships. It is interesting to note that social media sites can maintain the information flow even after the end of a relationship (Fejes-Vékássy et al. 2022), which is parallel to how some of the FPR in this study imply. In a nutshell, online platforms or applications such as IG have a defining and dynamic role in every stage such as initiating, maintaining, and ending an IG dating nowadays, especially among the FPR.

## CONCLUSION

This study examines the self-reported narratives of FPR as regards their practices in IG dating and/or romantic alternatives amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings provide new insights into the mindset of the FPR and perspectives of the role of IG dating within their romantic and emotional experiences. Although there have been similar findings among previous works on online users in alternative relationships, the present study has found some differences. Most notably, compared to previous findings, the FPR do

not regard being in IG as an important marker of their romantic and emotional relationships as it is merely their coping mechanism against boredom at a time of quarantining, and their way of escaping from and diverting their worries about the pandemic; hence, ending a relationship can take place at any stage. Furthermore, the present study concurs with previous studies' notion that social networking sites' main activities such as posting, reacting, and commenting initiate and maintain IG dating, and the primary motivation of the FPR to engage in IG dating concerns face-/self-presentation and negotiation. The present investigation may enable practitioners and educators to identify the unique role of IG vis-a-vis the pandemic and quarantine phenomena within the romantic and emotional experiences of the FPR, which could guide the development of prevention and intervention efforts in an endeavour to advocate for healthy relationships on online platforms or otherwise.

Based on these findings, specific implications and considerations concerning IG-dating practices can be drawn. Albeit important, reasons for engaging and the dynamics (i.e., initiating, maintaining, and ending) surrounding this IG phenomenon have to be placed under the lens of linguistics and psychology, too. Doing so may increase the understanding of behaviour at the very core of computer-mediated communication. With alternative relationships such as IG dating continuing and some problems surfacing, further work is needed. Because the study is limited to only two interviews and six narratives, it is suggested that to gain a deeper understanding of online alternative relationships, future research can add more in-depth data by interviewing diverse participants with online dating encounters across social media platforms and applications. Future studies may likewise consider a multiple-case study and involve participants from different countries with diverse online behaviour and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the term “quaranfling” is proposed to describe a phenomenon pertaining to a no-strings-attached flirting during quarantine, which is basically a casual romantic relationship. The current study may be a precursor to further investigations on quaranfling and whether IG, TikTok, or any other social networking sites and even online-game platforms can be attributed to the growing number of divorce cases, emotional and physical cheating, and breakups among teen and adult lovers. The study's results, which hold notable information about the implications of social media and/or relationships, can be utilised by counsellors and couple therapists in therapeutic work. Likewise, the findings can be incorporated in intervention programmes and campaigns on conscious social media use to reduce the negative effects of online activities. Although there are other inquiries worth exploring, the study appears to be significant

more on personal relationships and the role of social media apps within peoples' digital presence and romantic experiences.

Because it can be assumed that Filipino IG-dating practices are personal matters, such experiences may intervene in their work/professional life. This study may enable workplace managers in the Philippines, as well as in the Asia-Pacific, to identify the unique role of social media within professionals' relationship experiences, which could guide the development and interventions efforts for policy-making initiatives on social media literacy in the workplace.

Finally, the researchers argue that there is a need for tech companies to take more systematic approaches/algorithm changes that comprehensively consider the role of social media and apps in shaping and sustaining hegemonic techno-cultures of dating practices.

## **COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS**

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the College of Arts and Sciences Research Committee, University of the East. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

## **NOTES**

\* Julius Cesar Rosales Pascual is an associate professor and coordinator at the Department of Languages and Communication Arts, College of Arts and Sciences of the University of the East (UE) Manila, the Philippines. He is also the research coordinator of the Broadcasting and Journalism courses at the UE Communication Arts Cluster. He graduated from the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman with a PhD in Communication and an Outstanding Dissertation Award. In addition to academic teaching, he has engaged in scholarly research and peer review in Philippine journals such as the *Philippines Communication Society (PCS)*, *Plaridel Journal*, and the *University of the East Research Bulletin (UERB)*. His research interests include communication and social development, social media and relationships, political economy, media and popular culture, gender and development, and sociolinguistics.

\*\* Veronico N. Tarrayo is an associate professor at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Letters of the University of Santo Tomas (UST), Manila, the Philippines. He is also an academic researcher at the UST Research Centre for Social Sciences and Education. He has recently published research articles in ESCI- and Scopus-indexed Q1 and Q2 journals such as *Language and Education*, *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, and *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*. He currently serves in the international advisory board of the *Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, the official research journal of the UST Department of English. At present, he is a member of the editorial board of the *International Journal*

of *TESOL Studies* and *Professional and Academic English*, the journal of the IATEFL English for Specific Purposes Special Interest Group. Among his research interests are stylistics, English language teaching (ELT), gender perspective in ELT, discourse analysis, and teacher beliefs/ideologies.

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