

Religious dating apps aren't safer for women

by [Gillian Friedman Deseret News](#) in the [April 8, 2020](#) issue



(Unsplash/Kon Karampelas)

When Marla Perrin, now 25, first heard about Mutual, the dating app designed for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she was thrilled.

Perrin had tried dating apps like Tinder in the past but found the experience fruitless and frustrating: the men she matched with often didn't share her faith, and her guard was always up, worried that someone would harass or stalk her.

But Mutual seemed like a dating oasis to Perrin, who was living in Hawaii and looking to find a partner. She thought that the men on the app were all members of her church, which meant she could finally relax: they would have the same values and

expectations of dating that she had—such as no sex before marriage—and they would be respectful of her boundaries.

Or so she thought until she was matched with a returned missionary. After going on a first date with him and finding him arrogant and pushy, she told him she wasn't interested in seeing him again.

"Don't lie to me," he replied. His response made her immediately block his number. Later that night, she received calls from three random numbers—all of them him—and she blocked those too, hoping that was the end of it.

But days later, she received a message from an Instagram account from a guy claiming to live in her area. They exchanged a few messages, and he asked her out. As she was still feeling skittish after her last experience, she agreed to meet in front of the safest place she could think of: the Laie Hawaii Temple.

When he showed up, she felt a chill go down her spine: it was the same guy from before—she realized he had tricked her into meeting by using a fake profile. She told him firmly to leave her alone, and she returned home immediately. Then the messages started flooding in, from more fake phone numbers and fake Instagram accounts, some of them pretending to be a female friend of hers, telling her she was a liar, that she was "pathetic," and that she had "mental health issues."

"In retrospect, I had a false sense of security, because it was a dating app for members of my church," she said of the app, which has no affiliation with the LDS Church. "On Mutual, I thought I would find a husband, not a stalker."

Perrin isn't alone, and the problem isn't specific to Mutual. Harassment on dating apps is all too common, according to a recent study by Pew Research Center. Sixty percent of female dating app users under 35 say someone on a dating site or app continued to contact them after they said they were not interested, and 57 percent reported being sent a sexually explicit message or image they didn't ask for, the study found.

But to some, religious dating apps like Mutual, JSwipe, and Christian Mingle seem like not only a good way to meet a partner of the same faith but also a safer alternative to more mainstream dating apps. That feeling of safety may be a dangerous illusion, said Marina Adshade, a professor in the Vancouver School of Economics at the University of British Columbia who studies the economics of sex

and love.

“If women using religious dating apps have a false sense of security, those apps almost certainly will attract people who are willing to take advantage of that,” she said.

Religious dating apps can be the kind of place where one might expect to see high levels of sexual harassment because they provide an opportunity for members of a religious community with strong moral and social expectations to act out and deviate from the norms and expectations of their culture, said Adshade.

Despite the drawbacks, religious dating apps provide important and unique benefits as well, said Adshade.

“I’m relatively in favor of dating app technology just simply because it makes people’s markets so much bigger. And from a purely economic perspective, if you have a bigger market, you’re much more likely to come across somebody who has all of the qualities you’re looking for than if you’re in a smaller market,” she said.

That said, dating apps themselves should take responsibility for ensuring that their products are safe for users by taking an active role in screening the people using the app and by responding promptly to reports of sexual harassment, said Adshade.

Bob Carroll, the cofounder of Mutual, said the app has a robust process to allow users to report inappropriate behavior they experience on the app itself or on dates arranged through the app.

“We wanted Mutual to be about more than just being able to swipe up and down on LDS girls and LDS guys,” he said. “What we wanted the big difference to be was the tone, that people on the app adhere to the same core values that they would in their own physical community.”

It’s also important for users to take steps to protect themselves when using dating apps.

“The best way to protect yourself is to always meet people in public places, and always let somebody else know where you’re going,” said Adshade. “Do your research on your date before you go out without them, by looking through their Facebook and other social media. See what kind of activities they are involved with and how they treat other people online. I think that it’s a really good idea to get to

know them that way before you meet them in the real world.” —*Deseret News*