It's a MATCH!

Investigating User Experience and Algorithmic Trust in Dating Platforms

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It’s a Match:

Investigating User Experience and Algorithmic Trust in Dating Platforms

Toward Inclusive and Transparent Design in Digital Dating Apps

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Preface

Generative AI tools (including ChatGPT by OpenAI) were used to assist in the formulation of research questions, revision of literature review structure, language refinement, and APA-style referencing. All content has been reviewed and adapted by the author to ensure academic integrity.

Abstract

This thesis explores how user experience (UX) design and technical features influence user trust, decision-making, and satisfaction on dating applications. As online dating becomes increasingly mediated by artificial intelligence (AI), concerns about data privacy, transparency, and inclusivity have grown. The study addresses the research question: How do UX and design choices in dating apps affect users' trust and overall experience, and how can design promote more ethical and inclusive interactions? A mixed methods approach was applied, combining a survey (n=130) targeting Millennial and Gen Z users with five semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data, supplemented by descriptive statistics for quantitative insights. Findings highlight a gap between users' expectations and the app experience, particularly around algorithmic opacity, limited control over matching logic, and identity representation. Participants expressed a desire for clearer communication of platform intentions, better onboarding, and more inclusive profile customisation. The thesis proposes design recommendations to enhance trust, transparency, and respectful interactions, including an onboarding quiz and educational content. Although the research was limited by sample size and regional bias, it offers valuable implications for designing dating apps that better align with user needs and ethical design standards. Future research could examine algorithmic logic or implement usability testing to validate proposed design interventions.

Keywords: dating apps, user experience, data privacy, algorithmic transparency, AI matchmaking, inclusive design

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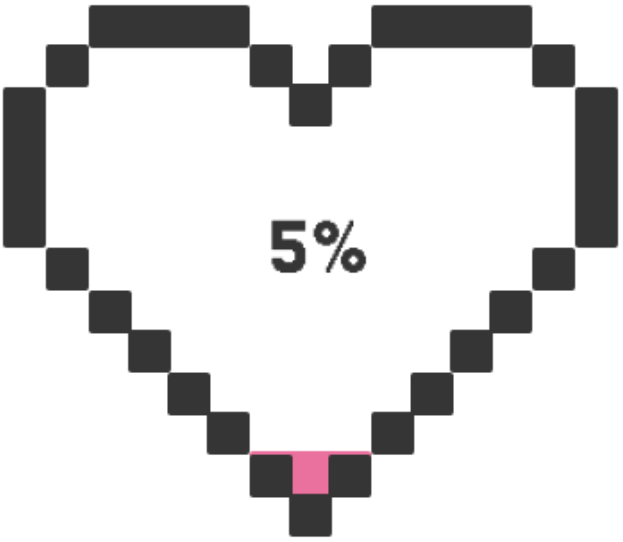
Introduction



1 Introduction

As human relationships increasingly shift into digital spaces, dating apps have emerged as dominant facilitators of romantic and social interactions. With the rise of AI-driven (Artificial Intelligence) matchmaking and data-driven personalisation, these platforms raise critical challenges regarding user experience (UX), data privacy, and transparency.

According to Stylight.com, digital dating service goes back to 1965 "*[...] when two young, enterprising Harvard students used an IBM 1401 computer to create the very first computer-based matchmaking service in the United States.*" (Stylight, n.d.). The concept was based on a 75-question survey for applicants to fill out - the candidates would send their questionnaires and receive a list of computer-generated matches back; the idea gained popularity from 90.000 people. Alongside the progression of technology, in 1995, the very first matchmaking website was launched - Match.com. The platform not only facilitated the convenience of meeting potential partners online, but it also contributed to the spike in interracial marriages in the United States (Stylight, n.d.).

Stanford's study by Rosenfeld et. al. (2019) conducted on American adults confirms that since the end of World War II, there has been a significant shift in ways of meeting significant others. As figure 1 depicts, from 1980, there has been an ongoing peak of meeting online. The researchers (2019) have discovered in their study that "*[...] 2013 as the approximate year when meeting online surpassed meeting through friends for heterosexual couples in the United States.*"

Figure 1

How Heterosexual Couples Met (1940–2017)

Reproduced from Rosenfeld et al. (2019).

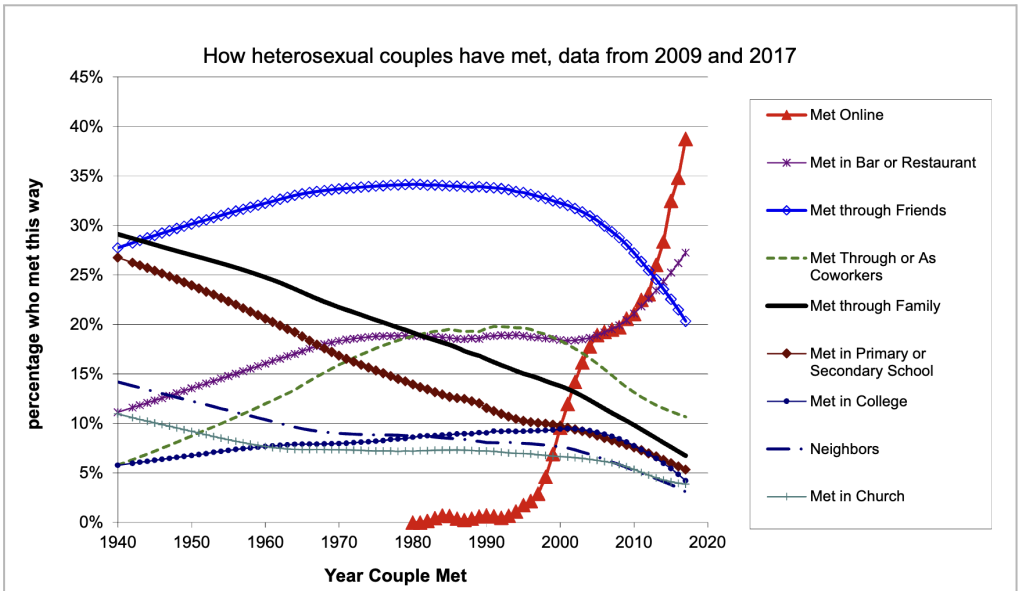


Fig. 1. Source: HCMST 2009 and HCMST 2017 waves. Consistent with Rosenfeld and Thomas (3), all trends are from unweighted Lowess regression with bandwidth 0.8 (39), except for meeting online, which is a 5-y moving average because meeting online takes place in the more recent and data-rich part of the data (N = 2,473 for HCMST 2009 and N = 2,997 for HCMST 2017). Friends, family, and coworkers can belong to either respondent or partner. Percentages do not add to 100% because the categories are not mutually exclusive; more than one category can apply.

Moreover, Rosenfeld et al. (2019) also identify two key technological drivers behind the rise of online dating: the advent of graphical web browsers in the mid-1990s and the proliferation of smartphones after 2007.

According to the study conducted on 5,000 people from the millennial generation (people born between 1981 and 1996), 18-30-year-olds spend 10 hours a week on dating apps (Independent.uk, 2018). As the article claims, the busiest day for dating apps is Sunday, around 7 pm.

1.1 Challenges Faced by Users in the Current Dating App Landscape

While dating applications have transformed how people initiate and sustain romantic relationships, they also introduce a wide range of user-centred challenges. Among the most frequently reported issues are decision fatigue, superficial interactions, and algorithmic opacity (David & Cambre, 2016; Ward, 2016; Wu & Kelly, 2020). The widespread adoption of swipe-based interfaces, often designed to mimic gamified behaviour, has contributed to a growing sense of user dissatisfaction, particularly due to the repetitive and commodified nature of app interactions (David & Cambre, 2016; Wu & Kelly, 2020).

Users often report feeling overwhelmed by choice or unsure why specific matches are suggested - issues that relate directly to the lack of transparency in AI-driven recommendation systems (Zytko et al., 2018; Wu & Kelly, 2020).

Data privacy is another significant concern. Many dating apps require the collection of sensitive personal information, including geolocation data, photos, demographic profiles, and behavioural insights. However, users are often unaware of how this information is stored, processed, or shared with third-party systems, leading to growing distrust and apprehension about long-term data security (Farnden et al., 2015).

Additionally, issues of bias in algorithmic matchmaking have emerged. Some studies highlight how AI systems may inadvertently reinforce racial, gender, or cultural biases in match suggestions, raising questions about fairness and inclusivity in app design (Chen, 2024). Finally, the user experience itself - particularly onboarding flows and communication features - often lacks personalisation, making it harder for individuals to feel a sense of trust, safety, and agency in their digital interactions.

Together, these challenges underscore a pressing need to examine how UX design and AI integration in dating platforms impact user trust, inclusivity, and decision-making, setting the foundation for the problem statement that follows.

1.2 Problem Statement

This study explores how the user experience (UX) design of dating applications influences users' perceptions of trust, agency, and inclusivity. As digital platforms increasingly shape how people initiate romantic connections, design decisions - particularly those related to onboarding, profile creation, and matching flows - play a critical role in how users navigate and interpret the dating experience.

The central problem this thesis addresses is that many dating apps do not provide clear or inclusive design patterns that support respectful interaction, informed decision-making, and user control.

How do UX and design choices in dating apps influence users' trust, decision-making, and overall experience? And how can design be used to create more inclusive, respectful, and transparent interactions on these platforms?

This thesis investigates how users perceive these design choices and how UX design can better support ethical, inclusive, and trustworthy dating experiences. To guide the investigation, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: *How do design and technical features in dating apps influence user interaction, personalisation, and visibility?*

RQ2: How do users experience and evaluate the UX of dating apps, particularly in relation to trust, control, and alignment with their dating goals?

RQ3: How can UX design interventions, such as onboarding, ethical nudges, or transparency features, support inclusive and respectful user experiences in dating apps?

The main concepts connected to the research area are explained in the next subchapter.

1.3 Main concepts and delimitations

1.3.1 Data Privacy

Data privacy in the context of dating apps refers to the protection of personal and sensitive information that users share during their interactions on these platforms. As dating apps collect vast amounts of personal data - including location, preferences, and conversations - there is an increasing concern over how this data is stored, used, and potentially exploited. Users often share deeply personal information, expecting it to be safeguarded against unauthorised access or misuse. Privacy breaches, such as the unauthorised sharing of data with third parties or poor encryption practices, can significantly undermine user trust and deter engagement. Thus, how dating apps design their privacy policies and ensure compliance with data protection regulations like the GDPR is crucial for maintaining user confidence and promoting ethical engagement (Binns, 2018, as cited in Kevin & Jude, 2025). Ensuring that privacy by design is embedded in the app's architecture can directly influence user experience by promoting transparency and empowering users with control over their personal data.

1.3.2 AI (Artificial Intelligence) Elements

Artificial Intelligence (AI) in dating apps is typically used to enhance matchmaking algorithms by analysing user profiles, behaviours, and preferences to recommend potential partners. These AI-driven algorithms personalise the user experience by suggesting profiles that align with the user's interests and past behaviours, which can increase the likelihood of successful matches. However, AI elements in dating apps also raise concerns related to algorithmic transparency and bias. Opaque algorithms may lead to perceptions of unfairness, where users are not fully informed of how matches are made or how their data is being processed. Furthermore, AI systems in dating apps may unintentionally perpetuate biases based on race, gender, or sexual orientation, potentially leading to discriminatory practices. Understanding how algorithmic design affects user behaviour and trust is essential for ensuring that AI in dating apps is not only effective but also ethical and transparent (Noble, 2018). Fairness and accountability in AI design are central to ensuring that users feel confident in the decisions made by these systems.

1.3.3 UX (User Experience)

User Experience (UX) in dating apps focuses on how users interact with the app's interface and the overall ease of use, accessibility, and satisfaction derived from those interactions. As Don Norman (2013) emphasises, intuitive and visible design helps users navigate interfaces effectively, reducing friction and enhancing trust. A well-designed UX can therefore lead to higher user engagement,

satisfaction, and long-term retention, while poor design choices often result in frustration, abandonment, and distrust.

In the context of dating apps, UX plays a pivotal role in onboarding, where first impressions and the ease of setting up a profile are critical to user retention (Garrett, 2011). Beyond usability, UX also encompasses emotional design - how an interface supports or disrupts users' feelings and expectations. Hassenzahl (2010) argues that meaningful user experiences require not only functional utility but also emotional resonance, particularly important in dating platforms where users frequently experience vulnerability, anxiety, or excitement.

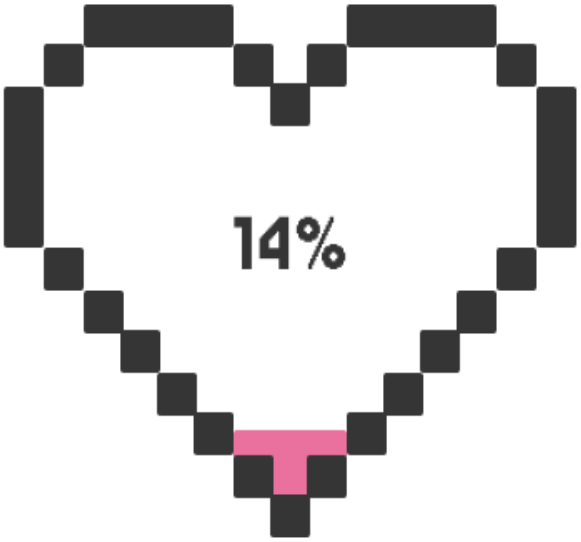
Effective UX design also shapes decision-making processes by offering intuitive interaction patterns and visual hierarchy, helping users move seamlessly through actions such as browsing profiles, sending messages, or making matches (Cooper et al., 2014). Moreover, inclusive and user-centred design, such as safety features for marginalised groups or customisation options, further contributes to a sense of accessibility and emotional safety, reinforcing user trust and ethical engagement.

1.4 Delimitations

This research does not aim to develop a standalone dating application, but rather proposes design interventions suitable for integration into existing platforms. The focus is on identifying key UX challenges and offering recommendations grounded in both existing literature and empirical findings. While collaboration with a specific app could have provided deeper contextual insights, this study adopts a broader perspective by examining widely used services, such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge, to uncover common patterns and industry trends. Due to the sensitivity of user data and the potential for proprietary content, the final report may be subject to confidentiality agreements to ensure ethical and responsible handling of information.

Chapter 2

Background

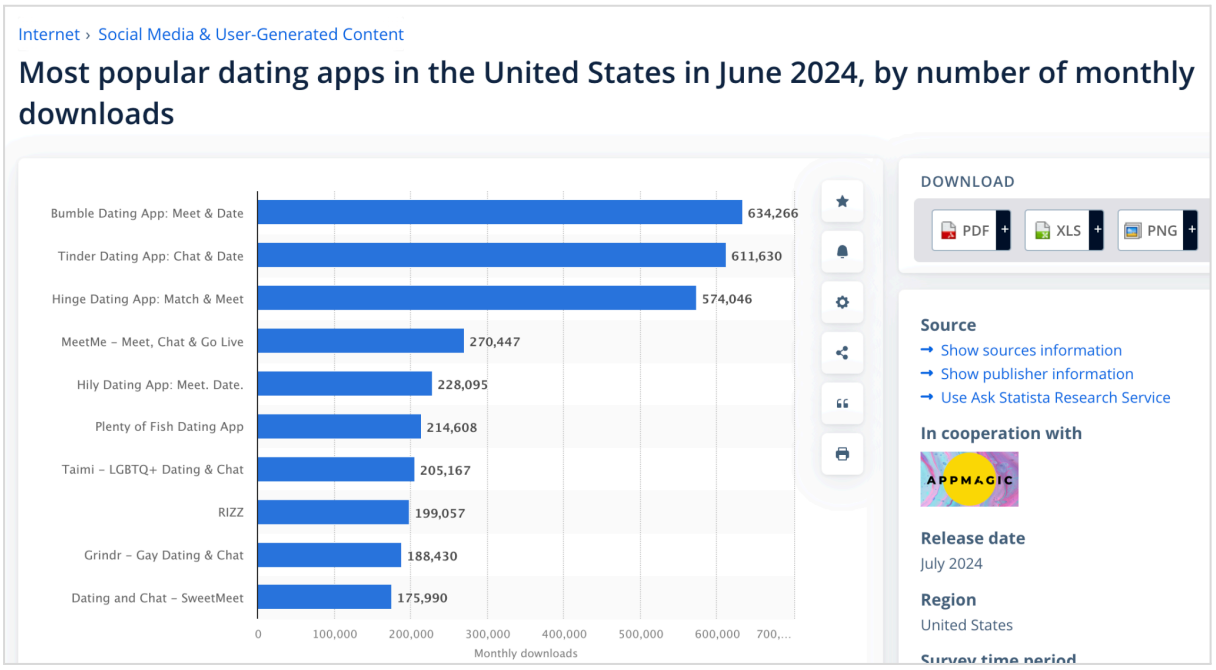


2 Existing Dating Platforms

According to similarweb.com, the most popular dating apps (depicted by the number of users in the United States in 2025) are Tinder, Hinge, Bumble, Badoo and Feeld (Similarweb, 2025). However, based on the results from statista.com, the most downloaded apps are the following: Bumble, Tinder, Hinge, MeetMe, Hily Dating App.

Figure 2.1

Dating App Downloads in the U.S. (June 2024), (Statista, 2025)

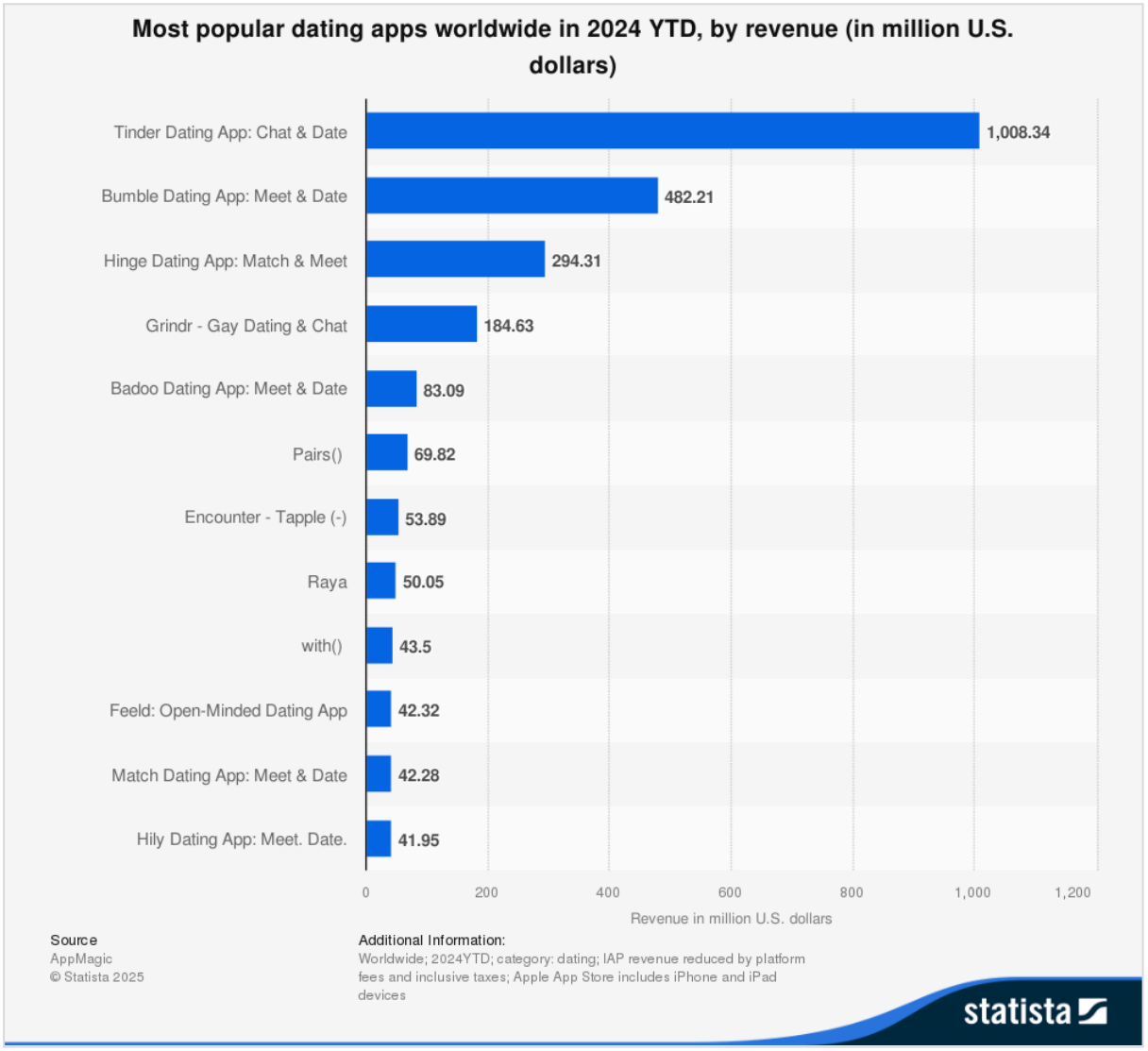


Moreover, another statistic proves that these top three dating apps (Tinder, Bumble and Hinge) bring the most revenue (see figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2

Most Popular Dating Apps by Revenue – 2024 (Statista, 2025)

https://www.statista.com/statistics/1200234/most-popular-dating-apps-worldwide-by-number-of-downloads/)



2.1 Relationship Types and User Intentions

Users join dating platforms with a wide range of intentions, including casual encounters, short-term dating, long-term relationships, friendships, or even professional networking. These goals often overlap or evolve over time, which presents a design challenge for platforms seeking to support clarity and trust.

Research identifies several common relationship motivations in digital dating: love, sex, entertainment, self-validation, and companionship (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017). While users may not always state their intentions explicitly, offering features that help communicate and filter for these preferences can improve match quality and reduce misunderstandings (Hobbs et al., 2017).

Dating apps support these relationship types to varying degrees. Hinge targets users interested in long-term connections, encouraging detailed profiles and personal prompts. Tinder caters to a broader audience but is often associated with casual dating due to its fast, swipe-based interface. Bumble takes a flexible approach by offering separate modes for dating (Bumble Date), friendship (BFF), and networking (Bizz).

This diversity in platform design reflects an ongoing UX challenge: enabling users to define their relationship goals while allowing room for spontaneity and exploration.

2.2 Comparing Tinder, Bumble, Hinge

In order to narrow the scope of the analysis, this study will concentrate on the three most popular dating platforms - Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. Each app represents a different approach to matchmaking, user interaction, and experience design, making them suitable for exploring how design decisions and features impact user trust, data privacy, and emotional engagement. The analysis aims to compare the three platforms based on key functional categories such as profile setup, onboarding flow, matching logic, communication features, user control over personal data, and subscription models. By identifying similarities and differences in these areas, the study seeks to highlight how distinct UX and AI design strategies may shape user behaviour and perceptions. These comparisons are synthesised in Table 1 and further elaborated in the sections that follow. For detailed user flows supported by screenshots examples, please refer to Appendix A (pp. 3-9).

Table 1:

Platform Feature Overview: Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge

	Feature	tinder	Bumble	Hinge
1.	**Onboarding & Login Options**	Users can sign up using Apple, Google, Facebook, or a phone number. Account verification is done via SMS or email code.	Sign-up is possible through Apple, Google, Facebook, or phone number. Verification typically occurs during setup.	Initially required Facebook login, but now supports independent sign-up using a phone number or email.
2.	**Profile Setup & Prompts**	Users provide basic details such as name, date of birth, gender, orientation, and interests. They upload 2–6 photos and can write a short bio.	Users provide similar personal information. Email is collected during setup. A minimum of 4 photos is required.	Users upload 6 photos and answer 3 written prompts (e.g., "I'm looking for…"), designed to spark conversation.
3.	**Matchmaking Interaction**	Users view profiles one at a time and swipe right to like or left to pass. A match is created when both users swipe right.	Similar to Tinder's swiping model. However, in matches between men and women, only the woman can send the first message.	Instead of swiping, users interact by liking or commenting on a specific part of another user's profile to initiate a connection.
4.	**AI/Algorithm Transparency**	The app uses behavioral data (such as swipe patterns and activity) to recommend matches but provides little information about how this works.	There is limited transparency on how match suggestions are generated. The app emphasizes user preferences and mode selection instead.	The "Most Compatible" feature uses a structured algorithm (Gale–Shapley) and includes follow-up feedback after dates to improve future matches.
5.	**Gender & Orientation Options**	Offers binary gender options and allows users to select up to 3 orientations. Some privacy controls are available to manage visibility.	Users can choose whether or not to display their gender on their profile. The app markets itself as inclusive and supportive of diverse identities.	Offers a wide range of inclusive gender and orientation options, with flexibility in profile display.
6.	**Safety & Verification**	Includes a photo verification feature, privacy center with settings, and	Promotes safety through reminders of community guidelines, profile photo	Uses "Your Turn" notifications to reduce ghosting[1] and promotes

		location-sharing permissions.	encouragement, and brand messaging around respectful behavior.	authenticity by encouraging users to complete detailed prompts.
7.	**Personalization / Profile Customization**	Offers optional lifestyle details, love language, and habit tags for additional personalization.	Allows users to choose between different use modes (e.g., for dating, friendship, or networking). Encourages uploading casual, everyday photos.	Focuses on self-expression by requiring answers to personal prompts. The prompts aim to make profiles more detailed and conversation-ready.
8.	**Communication Design**	Messaging is only available once both users have matched. Premium features (e.g., Super Likes) enhance visibility and message priority.	In male-female matches, only women can initiate the first message. If no message is sent within 24 hours, the match expires.	Once a mutual like or comment occurs, users can begin chatting. The app encourages ongoing conversation through subtle reminders.
9.	**Brand Positioning / Value Proposition**	Markets itself as a fast-paced, gamified platform for casual engagement. The design encourages continuous swiping.	Promotes itself as empowering and community-oriented, especially with its "women message first" approach and diverse use cases (dating, friends, business).	Presents itself as a relationship-oriented platform with the tagline "Designed to be deleted," emphasizing long-term connections over app retention.

To further elaborate and explain the functionalities of different dating apps, selected parts of the user journey are described below; each paragraph begins with a general description of the user experience, then transitions into differences between Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge.

2.2.1 Profile Setup and Prompts

When users first sign up on a dating app, the onboarding process begins with creating a personal profile. This step typically involves uploading photos, selecting basic demographic details, and optionally sharing more about one's personality or interests. The goal is to build a profile that helps others decide whether to initiate contact.

On Tinder, the setup process asks for basic details such as name, date of birth, gender, and sexual orientation (up to three options). Users can upload between two and six photos, and may optionally add lifestyle-related information such as communication style or hobbies.

Bumble follows a similar flow but requires at least four photos and encourages users to choose one of three modes for using the app: Date (for romantic connections), BFF (for friendships),

or Bizz (for networking). Gender can be left undisclosed, and verification by email appears midway through setup. Bumble positions itself as a more feminist and inclusive platform, aiming to empower women and create safer online interactions by giving them more control from the outset.

Hinge takes a more structured approach: users must upload six photos and respond to three writing prompts (e.g., *"A shower thought I recently had..."*). These prompts are designed to help initiate conversation and reflect more personal aspects of the user, supporting self-expression from the beginning.

In summary, while Tinder and Bumble prioritise visual content and flexibility, Hinge uses a prompt-based structure to guide users toward more meaningful self-presentation.

2.2.2 Matchmaking Interaction and Algorithmic Design

After setting up a profile, users enter the matchmaking flow, where they browse and interact with potential matches. Each app offers a different approach to how users view others and initiate a connection.

Tinder presents one profile at a time with swipe gestures: swiping right indicates interest, and a match occurs only if both users swipe right. The process is fast-paced and visually driven. While the app is believed to use behavioural data such as swipe patterns and user activity to inform profile suggestions, the specific logic behind match recommendations is not publicly disclosed.

Bumble also uses swiping to browse profiles, but in heterosexual matches, only the woman can send the first message once a match is made. This rule is intended to promote safer interactions. Bumble allows users to choose between different modes (dating, friendship, networking), but like Tinder, it offers limited insight into how match suggestions are generated.

Hinge differs by avoiding swipes entirely: users can "like" or comment on a specific photo or text prompt in someone's profile, creating more targeted engagement. It also features a "Most Compatible" suggestion, based on the Gale-Shapley algorithm, and gathers post-date feedback ("We Met") to improve future recommendations.

While all three apps use algorithms, Hinge places greater emphasis on transparency and thoughtful interaction, whereas Tinder and Bumble focus more on speed and user volume.

2.2.3 Communication Features and Safety Mechanisms

Once a match is formed, the next stage in the user journey is communication. Each platform has rules around who can message whom and includes built-in safety features to guide respectful interaction.

On Tinder, messaging is unlocked only after a mutual match. The interface is minimal, resembling standard text messaging, though premium users can access features like "Super Likes" and

profile boosts. Safety mechanisms include profile reporting, blocking, and photo verification to reduce fake accounts.

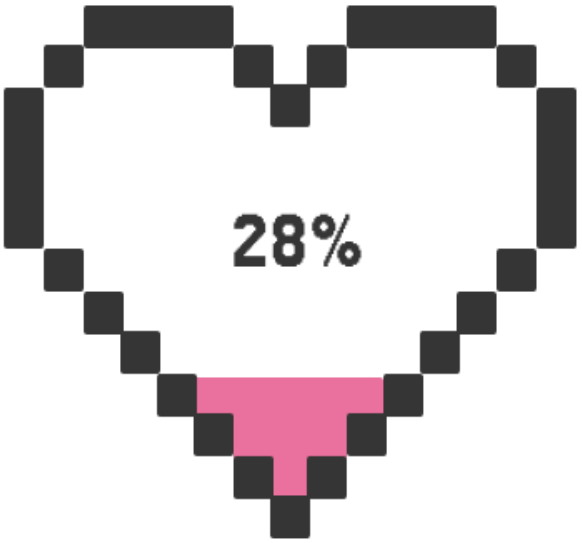
Bumble uses a similar system but introduces a key difference in opposite-gender matches: only women can initiate the first message, and they must do so within 24 hours, or the match expires. This design aims to give women more control and reduce unwanted messages. Bumble also offers "Opening Moves," a feature where women can choose preset conversation starters, and it highlights community values during onboarding.

Hinge allows users to message after someone has liked or commented on their profile. Its design encourages personalised first messages rather than generic greetings. Features like "Your Turn" reminders help prevent ghosting, and "We Met" allows users to give feedback after a meeting, supporting safer, more informed interactions.

While Tinder focuses on simplicity, Bumble and Hinge integrate communication rules and reminders that promote respectful behaviour and reduce friction in early conversations.

Chapter 3

Literature Review



3 Literature Review

This literature review explores academic research on the user experience (UX) of dating applications, with a focus on how artificial intelligence (AI) affects user behaviour, decision-making, trust, and privacy. As AI-driven matchmaking shapes user interactions, it is essential to examine how UX design influences perceptions of transparency, inclusivity, and ethics.

The review synthesises key studies in human-computer interaction (HCI), behavioural decision-making, and UX/UI design to build a theoretical foundation for this thesis. It also considers how current dating apps address - or fail to address - bias, inclusivity, and data privacy concerns.

By critically analysing existing research, this chapter identifies knowledge gaps and informs the study's methodological direction, contributing to a deeper understanding of how dating platforms can be designed to support more ethical, transparent, and user-centred experiences.

3.1 Methods

To ensure a comprehensive and systematic review of existing research on UX in dating apps, a two-step literature search strategy was employed. This approach combines a structured search string method with the pearl growing technique to identify and expand relevant academic sources. The hybrid approach allows for a balance between breadth and depth, ensuring that the review captures foundational studies, recent advancements, and interdisciplinary perspectives. To culminate the literature review, a thematic analysis was conducted based on the results. The thematic synthesis is a method used to integrate findings from multiple qualitative studies, particularly within systematic reviews, to generate comprehensive insights into a specific research area (Thomas & Harden, 2008). By the end of this chapter, Table 3 provides a summary of the deducted themes that are narrowed down and are connected to the relevant results of the literature review.

3.1.1 Search String Method

A systematic search strategy was implemented using Boolean operators to retrieve relevant literature from academic databases, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, AAU Digital Library and Scientific Information Centre and Academic Library (CINIBA). The search string was developed by identifying key thematic components of the research, incorporating synonyms and related terms to maximise coverage. The Boolean search query used was as follows:

("dating apps" OR "online dating platforms") AND ("user experience" OR "UX design") AND ("artificial intelligence" OR "AI-driven features") AND ("trust" OR "decision-making" OR "bias")

This query was applied with filters for peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters published within the last 10 years (2015–2025) to ensure the inclusion of recent and high-impact studies. Articles were further screened based on abstract relevance, citation count, and methodological rigour.

The systematic search was conducted following PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) to document the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process. This ensures replicability and transparency in the literature review.

Applying the above search query resulted in 444 findings on Google Scholar.

3.1.2 Pearl Growing Method

Following the initial structured search, a pearl-growing technique (Bates, 1989) was applied to expand the literature set iteratively. The pearl growing method is particularly useful in emerging interdisciplinary fields such as UX and AI in dating applications, where research may be scattered across computer science, psychology, and human-computer interaction (HCI).

The method involved selecting a core set of high-impact articles identified from the search string method. These "seed" articles were then used to discover additional relevant literature through two complementary approaches:

- Backwards Citation Searching (Reference Chaining): The reference lists of selected articles were examined to identify earlier foundational studies.
- Forward Citation Searching (Cited-By Analysis): The same articles were checked in databases such as Google Scholar to find newer research that cites them, ensuring that the literature review remains current and aligned with recent advancements.

To ensure a structured and focused literature review, specific inclusion criteria were applied when selecting academic sources. The goal was to capture research that is directly relevant to the intersection of dating app use, UX design, AI-driven features, and user trust. The Table below outlines the criteria used to determine which studies were included in the thematic analysis, based on research focus, user perspective, methodology, publication type, and relevance to the topic’s temporal and linguistic scope.

Table 2:

Inclusion Criteria for Literature Search

Inclusion Criteria	**Studies should…**
Research Focus	- Explore dating apps or platforms used for romantic/social matchmaking. - Cover aspects related to user experience (UX), user behaviour, trust, transparency, or design. **OR** - Include discussions of AI or algorithmic matchmaking, data privacy, or personalization.
Users	- Involve dating app users, either directly through user studies, surveys, and interviews, or indirectly through behaviour or experience analysis.
Methodology	- Include qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method studies. - Can also include conceptual/theoretical papers if highly relevant to core themes.
Publication Type	- Be peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, or academic book chapters.
Date Range	- Be published between 2015–2025 to reflect contemporary trends in app usage and digital design.
Language	- Be published in English or Polish.

3.2 Results

The selection process involved a combination of Boolean search strings and pearl growing techniques, allowing for both structured retrieval and iterative expansion of relevant sources. A total of 25 articles were identified, of which 19 were directly aligned with the core themes of this study, including UX design, AI-driven matchmaking, data privacy, and trust in dating applications. The final selection was based on sources that meet the inclusion criteria (Table 2) to ensure a high-quality and contemporary foundation for this research. To access the most relevant publications “sort by relevance” filter was applied. A thematic analysis-inspired approach was used, where keywords were extracted from abstracts and grouped into broader conceptual categories to identify dominant research themes. This process draws on principles of thematic synthesis for qualitative literature, as outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008), enabling a structured but flexible way to cluster findings across diverse sources. The following themes were identified (see Table 3) and are further explored in the subsequent subchapters, which highlight selected studies to illustrate and contextualise each theme.

Table 3

Thematic Analysis Table showcasing the Themes according to the results.

Themes	**Results**
AI & Algorithmic Trust	• Concerns about data linkage across platforms • Lack of transparency in matchmaking algorithms • Desire for more control or explanation over how matches are generated
User Behavior & Emotional Experience	• Mixed motivations (love, casual, boredom, validation) • Feelings of burnout, gamification fatigue, and emotional detachment • Influence of swipe mechanics and rapid decision loops on user mood
Data Privacy & Ethical Concerns	• Limited user awareness of data collection or usage • Concerns over consent mechanisms and third-party sharing • General distrust in platform privacy standards
Inclusivity & Identity Expression	• Need for ethically informed and adaptive interface design • Inadequate representation of non-binary and marginalized identities • Algorithmic bias reinforcing normative beauty and identity standards
UX Design & Interaction Patterns	• Frustration with repetitive or impersonal design elements • Desire for meaningful prompts and self-expression • Positive impact of thoughtful onboarding and profile flows

3.2.1 User Behaviour, Motivations, and Emotional Experiences in Dating App Use

Research into dating app use reveals varied user motivations-ranging from romantic intentions and casual sex to boredom and self-validation (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017). These motivations are shaped by platform features, such as swipe-based interfaces, limited profile information, and gamified feedback (likes, matches), which promote rapid judgments and visually driven interaction.

Such design choices can contribute to emotional fatigue and frustration, particularly when users experience repeated rejection or find the matching process superficial or unrewarding. Ranzini and Lutz (2017) link these emotional outcomes to the app's design, noting that Tinder's low-effort, appearance-based interactions can simultaneously provide gratification and amplify feelings of disconnection or self-doubt.

Sumter et al. (2017) further found that Tinder users were motivated by entertainment and validation as much as by dating itself, suggesting that emotional experiences are often shaped by the platform's design affordances. Features encouraging quick engagement and addictive loops may undermine user well-being over time.

In summary, user behaviour is influenced not only by individual goals but by specific UX patterns that affect agency, expectations, and emotional outcomes, highlighting a need for more reflective, supportive design in dating apps.

3.2.2 Algorithmic Transparency and Trust in AI-Driven Matchmaking

The integration of AI in dating apps has transformed how users interact with these platforms, particularly concerning trust and transparency in matchmaking algorithms. While Wu and Kelly (2020) highlight that unexplained AI-generated content can diminish emotional connections, further research provides a broader perspective on user perceptions and the implications of algorithmic opacity.

Paul and Ahmed (2023) conducted a study analysing factors influencing users' perceived effectiveness of matchmaking algorithms. They found that perceptions of AI fairness and social presence significantly impact users' trust in these systems. Notably, individuals with prior successful experiences in online dating were more likely to trust and perceive the algorithms as effective.

Exploring potential biases, Kalra et al. (2023) examined gender disparities in Bumble's match recommendations. Their research revealed that the platform's algorithms could inadvertently reinforce existing societal biases, emphasising the need for transparency and fairness in AI-driven matchmaking.

Beyond dating apps, studies in algorithmic decision-making provide insights into the broader implications of fairness and trust. Zhou et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between perceived fairness and trust in algorithmic decisions, concluding that enhanced transparency and fairness perceptions positively influence user trust.

Similarly, Draws et al. (2021) found that perceived disparate impacts in algorithmic systems could diminish trust, even among users who benefit from the system's outcomes. This underscores the importance of addressing fairness and transparency to maintain user confidence.

In summary, these studies collectively emphasise that algorithmic transparency and perceived fairness are crucial for building trust in AI-driven matchmaking. Designing interfaces that clearly communicate how algorithms function, allowing user feedback, and ensuring equitable treatment across user demographics are essential steps toward enhancing user trust and satisfaction.

3.2.3 Data Privacy, Consent, and Ethical Concerns in Dating Apps

A growing area of concern in dating app research involves how platforms collect, manage, and share personal and behavioural data. As apps rely on user input and interaction data to deliver personalised experiences, studies have highlighted design shortcomings around transparency, consent, and ethical data handling.

Users often remain unaware of what data is being collected or how it is processed, due in part to minimal in-app cues and dense, legalistic privacy policies (Farnden, Martini, & Choo, 2015). Design patterns that default to broad data access, such as automatic location tracking or access to contact lists, can undermine informed consent by offering little opportunity for granular control. Additionally, dark patterns like delayed privacy setting access or opt-out friction contribute to user disempowerment.

For instance, Farnden et al. (2015) found that several dating apps stored sensitive data - including location, age, and sexual orientation - in unencrypted formats, posing significant privacy risks. These issues are intensified by the intimate nature of dating app content and the lack of transparency regarding third-party data sharing (Rosenfeld, Thomas, & Hausen, 2019).

Scholars argue that ethical design must prioritise privacy-by-design principles, where users are clearly informed, given meaningful choices, and provided with tools to manage their data. Following that may not only reduce risk but also strengthen trust and long-term engagement.

3.2.4 Inclusivity, Identity Expression, and Bias in Dating App Design

A key contribution to understanding bias and identity representation in dating app design comes from Hutson, Taft, Barocas, and Levy (2018), whose study “Debiasing Desire” examines how intimate platforms may unintentionally reinforce social inequalities through both algorithmic personalisation and interface design. Their research highlights that users’ expressed preferences - often shaped by racial, gendered, and body-normative stereotypes - are commonly built into matchmaking systems without critical examination. As a result, these systems may systematically marginalise users who fall outside dominant norms, including people of colour, trans and non-binary individuals, and those who do not conform to mainstream beauty standards.

Hutson et al. (2018) argue that while dating apps often aim to optimise for user satisfaction, doing so without acknowledging the discriminatory patterns embedded in user behaviour risks perpetuating harm. They suggest platform interventions such as reconsidering the use of sensitive demographic data in recommendation engines and prompting users toward more reflective engagement, rather than reinforcing superficial sorting. Their work emphasises that inclusive design must be supported not only through identity labels or expanded profile options, but also through ethically informed algorithmic logic and interface mechanisms that challenge structural bias.

Other researchers have investigated related challenges in digital self-presentation and algorithmic impact. For example, Zytko, Grandhi, and Jones (2014) examined how users struggle with impression management on dating apps, especially when platform constraints limit authentic self-expression. Similarly, Alisadeh et al. (2024) explored perceived algorithmic harms among Tinder users, and Kalra et al. (2023) analysed gender-based disparities in Bumble's match recommendations. While these studies contribute to a broader understanding of bias, platform limitations, and user frustration, Hutson et al.'s work is notable for explicitly linking personal preference, system design, and structural inequality within a cohesive ethical framework.

Taken together, this body of research underscores that promoting inclusivity in dating apps requires more than technical optimisation. It demands a conscious effort to rethink how digital intimacy is mediated through both the interfaces users see and the invisible systems that drive what (and who) they are shown.

3.2.5 UX Design Strategies and Interaction Patterns in Dating Apps

User experience (UX) design significantly influences interaction, behaviour, and satisfaction on dating platforms. Researchers have examined how elements like onboarding flows, swipe mechanics, visual hierarchies, and profile constraints affect user engagement and perception.

Swipe-based interfaces, while intuitive and engaging, often gamify the dating experience, promoting binary, appearance-driven decision-making. This design can lead to decision fatigue, superficial interactions, and reduced emotional investment over time. Zytko, Grandhi, and Jones (2018) found that users often struggle to balance self-promotion with authenticity due to rigid profile structures and visual cues prioritising attractiveness or uniqueness.

Further research by Tyson et al. (2016) analysed user activity on Tinder, revealing gender disparities in interaction patterns. Their study indicated that women receive a higher number of matches compared to men, leading to different engagement strategies. This imbalance can influence user behaviour and satisfaction, highlighting the importance of considering diverse user experiences in UX design.

Additionally, the aesthetic–usability effect, as discussed by Kurosu and Kashimura (1995), suggests that users perceive more aesthetically pleasing interfaces as more usable. This effect underscores the importance of visual design elements, such as colour schemes and layout, in enhancing user satisfaction and engagement on dating platforms.

Overall, these studies underscore that UX design plays a central role not only in usability but also in the emotional and ethical dimensions of dating app use. Design choices influence whether users feel understood, in control, and able to trust the experience, factors essential for cultivating meaningful and respectful digital connections.

3.3 Challenges, Limitations & Interim Conclusion

Although the literature provides valuable contributions to the study of online dating, UX, and data-driven systems, several limitations remain, especially in relation to how these areas intersect. Much of the research is fragmented, often addressing psychological motivations, AI features, or interface design in isolation. This split approach limits understanding of how these elements interact to shape trust, emotional experience, and perceived control in dating apps.

A key gap is the limited attention paid to onboarding, decision-making, and relationship intentions from a UX design perspective. While some studies examine emotional fatigue or privacy concerns, few explore how specific features, such as swiping mechanics, filter design, or profile setup, contribute to user distress or satisfaction. Similarly, the influence of design on perceptions of authenticity, inclusion, and fairness remains underexplored.

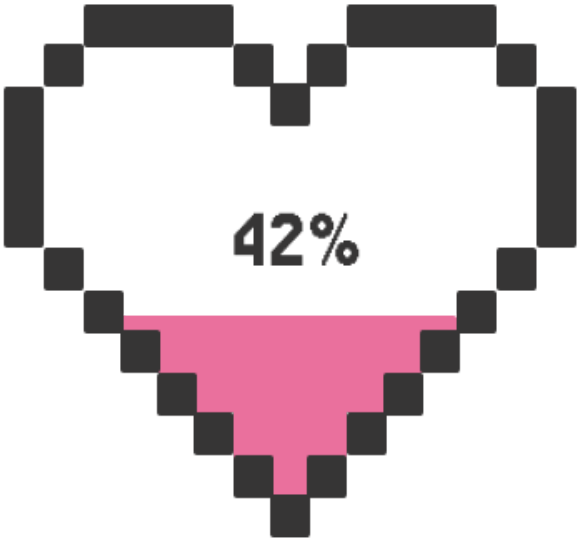
Additionally, little work has examined how dating app features support or hinder users' relationship intentions (e.g., short- vs. long-term goals), despite these being central to user expectations and platform trust.

These limitations highlight the need for more interdisciplinary, user-centred approaches - drawing from UX research, behavioural psychology, and digital ethics. This thesis responds to that need by investigating how design choices affect user behaviour, perceptions, and experiences in the context of contemporary dating apps.

The following chapter outlines the methodology used to explore these dynamics through a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interview insights.

Chapter 4

Methodology



4 Methodology

The study will employ a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of user experiences and challenges in dating apps. Surveys will be conducted on a user group to identify broad patterns in user behaviour, privacy concerns, and trust in AI-driven features. This survey will serve as a foundation for identifying key trends, which will then be explored in greater depth through qualitative methods.

In addition to the survey, in-depth interviews will be carried out to gather complex insights into user perceptions and experiences related to AI-driven matchmaking, onboarding processes, and transparency features. These interviews will help contextualise the quantitative findings, providing a richer understanding of user concerns and expectations.

Although the algorithm analysis will not be a part of this study, a significant challenge in this research will be assessing algorithmic transparency within dating apps. Understanding how matchmaking algorithms operate and influence user experiences is crucial, yet access to these proprietary systems is often restricted.

By combining quantitative analysis with qualitative inquiry, this methodology ensures a holistic examination of UX challenges, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and the development of well-informed recommendations for improving transparency, user trust, and overall design in AI-powered dating apps.

4.1 Philosophy of Science

This study adopts the Social Relativist paradigm as the underlying philosophical framework for exploring user experiences with dating applications. Rooted in anti-positivist epistemology and a nominalist ontology, Social Relativism emphasises that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hirschheim & Klein, 1989). In this view, information systems are not objective, value-neutral tools, but rather are interpreted and shaped through the lived experiences and subjective meanings of their users. As such, knowledge is generated not through measurement or prediction, but through understanding how individuals perceive, engage with, and assign meaning to the technologies they use.

This paradigm is especially relevant to the field of Human-centred Interaction and UX research, where the emphasis is placed on how design, interface choices, and algorithmic behaviours are experienced by real users in social and emotional contexts. In alignment with this perspective, the present study seeks to explore how users of dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge experience issues of trust, transparency, privacy, and authenticity. Rather than evaluating these

platforms through performance metrics or efficiency scores, this thesis focuses on users' subjective responses to features like algorithmic matchmaking, profile-building tools, and perceived inclusivity.

Methodologically, the study draws on user-centred approaches such as surveys and open-ended responses, allowing participants to express their interpretations and preferences in their own terms. While the Social Relativist paradigm provides the primary lens through which this study is framed, elements of the Neohumanist paradigm are also acknowledged, particularly in relation to themes of digital inclusion, ethical AI design, and empowerment. These critical elements help broaden the inquiry to consider how dating platforms may support or inhibit users' ability to represent themselves authentically and navigate relationships on their own terms.

Adopting a social relativist paradigm is particularly relevant to this research, which investigates user experiences within dating applications. This paradigm presumes that reality is not a fixed entity but is instead shaped by individual and collective experiences (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). According to this view, reality is subjective and can vary from one person or group to another, influenced by social, cultural, and historical contexts (Dervin, 1983). Researchers who adopt a relativist ontology emphasise the importance of understanding how people make sense of their world (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Here, the focus is on capturing the richness of human experience, acknowledging that multiple realities may coexist. Reality is seen as fluid and negotiated, with knowledge being constructed through interactions between the researcher and the subject (Klein, Moon, & Hoffman, 2006). Researchers working within this ontology tend to use qualitative methods to explore how individuals or groups interpret their experiences, recognising that these oftentimes different interpretations are equally valid reflections of reality. Their approaches focus on establishing rapport, encouraging participants to reflect on their experiences, developing empathy, using active listening, and engaging in storytelling to represent their participants' realities (Dervin, 1983; Klein, Moon, & Hoffman, 2006).

4.2 Research Design and Framework

4.2.1 The Strategy (Bryman)

The research design of this study is rooted in an interpretivist approach aligned with the Social Relativist paradigm (Hirschheim & Klein, 1989), where the aim is to explore and understand user experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes within dating applications. Given the focus on how users interpret AI-driven features, trust, data privacy, and the design of dating platforms, a mixed research strategy focusing on both qualitative and quantitative data was selected to enable an in-depth, context-sensitive understanding of these phenomena.

According to Bryman (2021), qualitative research is particularly suited to studies that seek to examine the meanings individuals attach to social phenomena, especially when exploring users'

thoughts, emotions, and interactions with technological interfaces (pp. 391–422). This methodological approach prioritises depth over breadth, enabling the researcher to capture complex, subjective insights that are not easily reduced to numerical data.

The primary data collection methods employed in this study include a thematically structured survey incorporating both closed- and open-ended questions, as well as the option for participants to take part in follow-up interviews. This design reflects Bryman's emphasis on using flexible, iterative methods that allow participants to voice their own interpretations and experiences (pp. 533–540). The inclusion of open-ended responses supports the interpretive goal of the study while still allowing for some quantitative analysis where relevant.

Furthermore, the research design acknowledges the importance of trustworthiness and credibility in qualitative inquiry (Bryman, 2021, pp. 604–625). To enhance transparency and consistency, the study adopts clear inclusion criteria, thematically organises the literature review, and incorporates participant perspectives across multiple themes such as UX, algorithmic transparency, inclusivity, and data privacy.

This combination of user-centred design, interpretive analysis, and methodological flexibility supports the overarching aim of the thesis: to understand how users experience and make sense of the design and functionality of dating apps, particularly in relation to trust, ethical design, and digital autonomy.

4.2.2 Design Framework: Double Diamond

This study was guided by the Double Diamond model developed by the UK Design Council (2005), which builds on earlier system design concepts, notably Banathy's work on designing social systems (Banathy, 1996). The model provides a structured approach to problem exploration and solution development, organised into four phases - Discover, Define, Develop, and Deliver - based on cycles of divergent and convergent thinking. It is particularly well suited to human-centred, exploratory research (Design Council, 2005; Banathy, 1996).

For this thesis, the first three stages - Discover, Define, and Develop - were applied. The Deliver phase was not included, as the study aimed to conceptually explore user-centred design improvements rather than fully implement them. This allowed for a focus on discovery and ideation, while still producing design outcomes such as low-fidelity prototypes.

The Discover phase encompassed the background review (chapter 1), literature review, and empirical data collection (surveys and interviews), surfacing key patterns and knowledge gaps (Design Council, 2005). The Define phase involved thematic analysis of the data, identifying core challenges related to trust, privacy, inclusivity, and interface design. These insights informed the Develop phase, which translated findings into practical wireframes and user-centred design concepts (Design Council, 2005; Banathy, 1996).

Using the Double Diamond, balanced openness with structured analysis. Banathy's perspective highlights the systemic nature of designing within complex social contexts, which is particularly relevant for dating technologies. The framework thus supported both interpretive and human-centred dimensions of this research.

Complementing this, the study also applied principles from human-centred design (HCD), as outlined by IDEO.org (2015), which emphasises empathy, co-creation, and iterative problem-solving, key to addressing the emotional and ethical dimensions of dating app UX. These values aligned with the Double Diamond's structure, especially in the Discover and Develop phases.

Empathy was a foundational principle throughout. As Köppen and Meinel (2015) note, design thinking promotes a deeper understanding of users' lived experiences (pp. 15–28), guiding ethical and inclusive decisions. This approach also reflects Maguire's (2001) emphasis on contextual understanding and iterative user involvement as core components of human-centred design (pp. 588–589), ensuring alignment between design features and users' real-world needs.

4.3 Mixed Methods Approach (Creswell)

This thesis employs a mixed-methods research approach, guided by Creswell's (2014) framework, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of user experiences, behaviours, and perceptions in dating apps. Mixed methods research, defined by Creswell (2014), involves the integration of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis within a single study to leverage the strengths of both paradigms. The central rationale for adopting this approach is that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods alone could fully capture the complexity of the research problem related to AI-driven UX, trust, privacy concerns, and emotional experiences of dating app users.

In this study, a quantitative method, such as the survey, is used primarily to identify overarching patterns, preferences, and trends in users' experiences, providing measurable insights into phenomena such as perceived algorithm fairness, trust, and satisfaction levels. However, these quantitative data alone cannot fully explain why users hold specific attitudes or how they interpret their interactions with the app interfaces and algorithmic features. Thus, qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured one-to-one interviews and thematic analysis, are integrated to explore the subjective nuances behind user responses, giving voice to personal perspectives, emotions, and motivations that quantitative data alone might overlook (Creswell, 2014).

According to Creswell (2014), combining these two methodological streams allows researchers to support the findings across different types of data (triangulation), providing stronger validation and richer interpretation. In this study, quantitative survey data serve as a foundational overview, while qualitative insights from interviews offer depth and detailed contextual understanding. This integration ensures that the research addresses not only what users experience but

also how and why they experience it in certain ways, thus generating more actionable insights relevant to UX design.

Adopting Creswell's (2014) mixed methods framework ensures methodological thoroughness, balances the strengths and weaknesses inherent in singular approaches, and ultimately enables a deeper and more thorough exploration of complex user-centred phenomena within digital dating contexts.

4.3.1 Survey

To investigate how users perceive and interact with dating applications, a digital survey was chosen as one of the primary methods of data collection. The decision to employ a survey aligns with the study's interpretive and user-centred approach, offering a structured yet flexible way to gather diverse perspectives from individuals who have used dating platforms. As Bryman (2021) notes, surveys can be effectively used in qualitative research to identify patterns in opinion and experience, particularly when designed with open-ended elements that allow for interpretive depth (pp. 468–500). The survey was meticulously designed to ensure clarity, relevance, and user engagement. Drawing from best practices outlined by Goodman, Kuniavsky, and Moed (2012), the survey incorporated a mix of closed and open-ended questions to capture both measurable data and detailed user insights.

The survey was created using Google Forms and distributed via digital channels, including social media platforms, and survey exchange forums (Facebook groups and SurveySwap platform. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling strategies, targeting individuals aged over 18 who have experience using at least one dating app such as Tinder, Bumble, or Hinge. Participation was anonymous and voluntary, and respondents were informed of their rights and data protection measures before beginning the survey. The survey was distributed by the end of March 2025 and online for approximately two weeks; the aim was to collect between 50-100 responses. By the middle of April 2025, there were collected over 100 responses (n=130) had been collected.

To ensure the relevance and validity of the collected survey data, the questionnaire included an initial screening question: "Have you ever used a dating app before?". Respondents who answered "no" to this question were automatically redirected to the end of the survey, and their responses were not included in the analysis. This approach was implemented to guarantee that the data analysed reflected genuine experiences and informed perspectives from individuals who had actual interactions with dating apps, thus minimising potential biases from speculative or hypothetical responses.[1]

The questionnaire was designed to reflect the themes and constructs identified during the Discover phase of the Double Diamond framework, to explore user attitudes, behaviours, and

[1] The total number of respondents who participated in survey equalled to 140. Ten (10) of them never used the dating app before, thus were excluded from the data.

experiences in relation to dating app design. To address the multifaceted nature of the research problem - including trust, inclusivity, and algorithmic transparency - the survey included both closed-ended questions (e.g., Likert scale and multiple-choice formats) and open-ended prompts. The closed-ended items enabled the collection of quantifiable patterns across a broader sample, offering insights into trends such as users' satisfaction with match suggestions or their concerns about data use. Meanwhile, open-ended questions were incorporated to capture the subjective reasoning behind these responses, allowing participants to articulate personal experiences, frustrations, or motivations in their own words. This mixed-question format was chosen to ensure that both measurable indicators and deeper qualitative reflections could inform the analysis, ultimately supporting a more comprehensive understanding of how UX and design choices shape dating app experiences.

The survey was divided into sections which navigated the participants through the discussed themes. As the survey started with an introduction to the concept of the study and required consent to proceed, the users went through six topic sections ending with a section aiming to gather demographic data about the participants. The last question allowed participants willing to take part in 1-1 interviews to leave contact information (email address) to be contacted by the researcher.

In line with Bryman's (2021) emphasis on flexibility and researcher reflexivity in qualitative design (pp. 533–540), the survey was iteratively reviewed and revised following pilot testing. Feedback from peers and early participants helped clarify ambiguous questions, improve logical flow, and ensure that response options captured a full range of user perspectives.

The responses generated through this method are thematically analysed and discussed in the Analysis chapter. These insights provide a foundation for understanding users' lived experiences with dating apps and directly inform the design direction outlined in the Develop phase of the Double Diamond model. The draft of the survey's question can be found in Appendix B1.

4.3.2 Qualitative Interview Method

To complement the survey and deepen understanding of user experiences with dating apps, this study employed one-on-one semi-structured interviews. This qualitative method enables rich exploration of perceptions, behaviours, and challenges, particularly regarding algorithmic trust, privacy, and interface design (Bryman, 2021, pp. 474–475). It aligns well with the interpretive paradigm of this research, allowing participants to express their perspectives while providing structure around key themes (Bryman, 2021).

The interview methodology was informed by Kvale and Brinkmann's (2008) framework, which treats interviewing as a reflective and ethical craft (pp. 122–142). Their seven-stage model - thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying, and reporting - guided the process. In addition, Seidman's (2019) phenomenological approach, which focuses on participants'

lived experiences (pp. 14–32), inspired the interview structure, drawing from his three-interview model (life history, details of experience, reflection on meaning) (pp. 121–146).

Brinkmann (2013) further highlights that qualitative interviews are socially situated practices where meaning is co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee (pp. 15–18). This perspective encouraged reflexivity during data collection, acknowledging both experiential and discursive dimensions of interaction (pp. 23–28).

Participants were recruited from survey respondents who volunteered for follow-up (see Table 4 in chapter 6.1.9). This allowed deeper exploration of themes identified in the survey and space for new insights. The focus was on how users experience features such as onboarding flows, profile prompts, algorithmic suggestions, and privacy controls.

Interviews were conducted online using a semi-structured guide with open-ended questions. This format encouraged conversational engagement while enabling follow-up tailored to each participant's responses. As Maguire (2001) notes, this method is ideal when researchers are familiar with the domain but wish to explore personal meanings and reactions (p. 600).

All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed using an AI tool to preserve accuracy and communication style. Recording also allowed the interviewer to remain fully engaged and responsive (Bryman, 2021, p. 476).

Thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts to identify patterns and recurring concerns. These insights were integrated with survey findings and informed both the problem definition and potential design interventions in the Develop phase of the Double Diamond framework.

4.4. Thematic Analysis

To systematically analyse the qualitative data collected from interviews and open-ended survey responses, this study employed thematic analysis (TA), a method particularly well-suited for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within rich, textual data. Given the exploratory nature of this research into users' experiences with dating applications, TA offered the flexibility and depth required to uncover thoughtful perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight thematic analysis as a widely accessible and theoretically flexible qualitative research method, capable of producing rich and detailed interpretations of participant narratives (p. 79). Its adaptability makes it especially appropriate for research focused on subjective user experiences, attitudes, and perceptions-aligning well with the objectives of this study. Through TA, this research explored themes related to user trust, privacy concerns, and emotional responses to the design of dating apps and their algorithmic features. Thematic analysis also supports systematic interpretation of diverse qualitative data, facilitating both pattern recognition and deep engagement with meaning across individual cases.

This study followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (figure 3) for conducting thematic analysis, which includes: (1) familiarising oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 86–93). These stages ensured a structured yet flexible approach to data interpretation, allowing insights to emerge inductively from the data while remaining grounded in a coherent analytic process.

Figure 3

Braun & Clarke's 6-Phase Coding Framework

Each phase of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework has a distinct objective aimed at identifying patterns in qualitative data.

1) Familiarisation with the data involves transcribing verbal material, such as interview recordings, into written form. This step is not merely mechanical but interpretive in nature, where meaning is actively constructed during the act of transcription (Bird, 2005, p. 227; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). After transcription, researchers immerse themselves in the data by reading and re-reading transcripts while making initial observations. It is useful at this stage to note words or phrases that are contextually meaningful. For example, a generic description like "poorly made" may be less analytically useful than a phrase like "handbook-like," which conveys a specific connotation within the studied context. Early notes, questions, or impressions recorded during this phase can guide later stages of analysis.
2) Generating initial codes - systematically identifying and labelling interesting features across the entire dataset. These codes can be semantic - focused on explicit, surface-level meanings - or latent, which seek to uncover underlying assumptions, ideologies, or conceptual patterns embedded in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 88–89). Organisational tools such as colour coding, note-taking, and post-it annotations are often used at this stage to manage and sort codes effectively.
3) Searching for themes involves collating codes into broader patterns or categories. At this point, the researcher begins to map connections among codes and groups them into candidate themes and subthemes, gathering all relevant data associated with each.
4) In reviewing themes, the initial thematic map is refined. The researcher examines whether the themes accurately reflect the coded data and whether they work in relation to the overall dataset. This stage may involve splitting, merging, or discarding themes to ensure coherence and analytic depth.

5) Defining and naming themes involves clearly articulating the essence of each theme and what aspect of the data it captures. The researcher develops detailed theme descriptions that contribute to the overall analytic narrative.
6) Producing the report, the researcher weaves together analytic insights with illustrative quotes or examples from the data. The final report presents a compelling and coherent interpretation of patterns found in the dataset, grounded in both participant voices and the research context.

Nowell et al. (2017) emphasise the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research, outlining strategies to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in TA. By adhering to these criteria, the analysis in this study aims to produce findings that are both rigorous and meaningful.

Castleberry and Nolen (2018) highlight that while TA is a powerful tool for qualitative analysis, it requires careful and systematic application to avoid superficial interpretations. Their guidance informs the structured approach taken in this study to ensure depth and validity in the analysis.

Throughout the process of conducting thematic analysis, strategies recommended by Nowell et al. (2017) are employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, including maintaining a detailed audit trail and engaging in reflexivity. Additionally, the practical recommendations from Castleberry and Nolen (2018) guide the systematic and thorough application of TA in this study.

4.4.1 Affinity Diagrams

In this study, affinity diagrams are used as a visual tool within the thematic analysis process to organise and synthesise qualitative data from interviews and open-ended survey responses. Rather than serving as a separate method, they support the transition from initial codes to broader themes, enhancing clarity and collaboration.

Affinity diagramming, central to Contextual Design, structures raw data into hierarchies that reveal patterns and user needs (Beyer & Holtzblatt, 1998, pp. 153–183). Holtzblatt, Wendell, and Wood (2005) describe it as a means of consolidating insights across users to uncover common issues. This approach is particularly valuable in the emotionally complex context of dating apps.

Additionally, Gibbons (2017) emphasises affinity diagrams' role in mapping user journeys, helping identify pain points and opportunities. In this study, they serve to strengthen the overall thematic analysis by visually anchoring the emerging insights in user-centred evidence.

4.5 Post-Submission Testing Considerations

Although formal usability testing is not included within the scope of this thesis, it is planned as a subsequent step following the hand-in. This future evaluation aims to validate the effectiveness, clarity, and emotional resonance of the proposed design solution. As Rubin and Chisnell (2008) argue, usability testing is essential for assessing how well a product meets user expectations, measuring performance, and identifying areas for improvement. By incorporating user feedback through observational testing and task-based scenarios, the design can be iteratively refined to better align with real-world usage patterns and user needs.

The design development employed both low- and high-fidelity prototypes to explore alternative concepts and to assess usability and user response. This aligns with prototyping guidelines outlined by Camburn et al. (2017), who emphasise the strategic use of fidelity levels to support specific stages of the design process - from early ideation to detailed refinement. The iterative use of prototypes facilitates ongoing feedback and supports a flexible approach to evolving user insights.

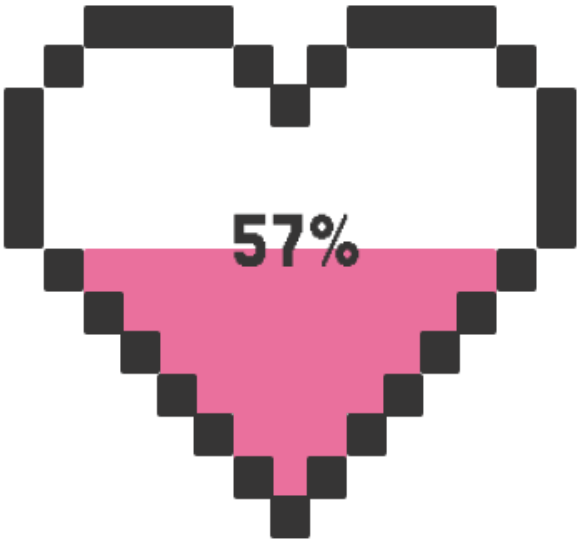
In this context, prototypes were treated not merely as static tools for evaluation, but as dynamic epistemic artefacts - means of inquiry that embody design ideas and support learning through making (Lim, Stolterman, & Tenenberg, 2008). This framing situates prototyping as an essential cognitive activity that both filters possibilities and manifests intent.

The refinement process was also grounded in established UX practices outlined by Sharp, Rogers, and Preece (2019), particularly those focusing on design iteration, user involvement, and task-centred usability. Their work highlights the importance of continuously adapting design decisions based on real or anticipated user behaviours. These practices are further supported by Rogers, Sharp, and Preece (2019), who underscore the value of interaction design principles - including feedback loops, perceived affordances, and usability heuristics ensuring that digital experiences are intuitive and satisfying.

Together, these perspectives shape a roadmap for post-submission testing and refinement, ensuring that the design solution is not only theoretically grounded but also practically validated and optimised for real-world use.

Chapter 5

Theoretical Framework



5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 User Experience

User Experience (UX) has evolved into a key construct for evaluating the effectiveness, appeal, and emotional resonance of digital products, particularly within the context of mobile applications such as dating platforms. While early definitions of UX were rooted in usability and interface efficiency, the field has progressively expanded to incorporate a more holistic understanding of how users perceive, interact with, and are emotionally affected by technology (Hassenzahl, 2008).

Morville's (2004) UX Honeycomb model provides a foundational structure for understanding UX as a multidimensional concept. It identifies seven facets of user experience - useful, usable, desirable, findable, accessible, credible, and valuable - that together define the quality of a user's experience with a product. This model is particularly relevant to dating apps, which must balance functional usability with emotional desirability and trustworthiness in order to facilitate successful interactions.

Garrett (2011) similarly underscores the importance of integrating both functional and experiential layers of UX. His five-plane model - from strategy and scope to structure, skeleton, and surface - emphasises that meaningful user experiences emerge when business goals, user needs, and interface design are cohesively aligned (pp. 21–23). This is especially applicable in dating app environments, where users engage with the interface to pursue personal, often emotionally charged, goals such as forming romantic relationships.

Moreover, Kalbach (2016) argues that experience mapping allows designers to visualise the entirety of a user's journey, revealing moments of friction and opportunity across various touchpoints. Applied to dating platforms, such mapping can highlight how users progress from onboarding to profile creation, through swiping and matching, and into communication step contributing to their overall perception of the app.

Beyond usability, users respond to the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of interactive products - a concept Hassenzahl (2004) frames as the interplay of beauty, goodness, and usability. In emotionally driven contexts like dating apps, these affective elements can play a decisive role in shaping user satisfaction and perceived authenticity. Similarly, Hassenzahl, Diefenbach, and Göritz (2010) argue that emotional fulfilment and the satisfaction of psychological needs - such as autonomy, relatedness, and competence - are central to creating meaningful user experiences. These needs are often especially salient in dating app use, where users seek not only interaction but also validation, connection, and emotional resonance.

In their extensive survey, Law et al. (2009) identify several conceptual tensions in defining UX but ultimately support a broad view that integrates pragmatic factors (such as task efficiency) and

hedonic factors (such as aesthetics and emotional appeal). Their findings reinforce the importance of context-dependent interpretations of UX and validate a user-centred design approach that accommodates diverse user motivations and responses, key considerations for understanding dating app behaviour.

Concluding, these perspectives frame UX not as a fixed attribute but as a dynamic, situated process shaped by both the design of the platform and the user's goals, values, and emotional states. This theoretical framework brings a valuable perspective into this study's investigation of design choices in dating apps and how they affect users

5.2 Design Principles (Norman)

To support user-centred improvements in dating app interfaces, this study draws on Don Norman's (2013) foundational design principles, which identify key psychological aspects of how users interact with digital products. These principles - discoverability, feedback, conceptual models, affordances, signifiers, and mappings - help designers evaluate and enhance usability by aligning interfaces with users' cognitive expectations and behaviour.

Discoverability refers to the ease with which users can determine what actions are possible within an interface. In dating apps, clearly labelled buttons, profile features, and filters contribute to discoverability. Feedback, or the system's response to a user's action, reassures users that the app is functioning as intended-such as confirming a sent like or showing a match notification.

Conceptual models help users form a mental representation of how the system works. When users understand how matches are generated or how privacy settings operate, they are more likely to feel confident and in control. Affordances and signifiers work together to show users what they can do (affordance) and how to do it (signifier) - for example, the familiar swipe gesture is both intuitive and culturally reinforced through repeated app use. Lastly, mapping refers to the relationship between controls and their effects, such as how swiping left results in a "pass" and swiping right in a "like."
Norman's principles guide the design of interfaces that reduce confusion and strengthen trust. In the context of dating apps, applying these principles can lead to more accessible, intuitive, and emotionally satisfying user experiences.

5.2.1 Affordances in Design

Affordance theory, originally introduced by psychologist James J. Gibson, refers to the actionable possibilities that an environment offers to an individual. Donald A. Norman (1999) adapted this concept to the realm of design, particularly emphasising the importance of *perceived affordances* - what users believe they can do with a given interface element. In digital contexts, where physical cues are limited, the design must clearly communicate possible actions to users.

In the context of user interface design, perceived affordances are crucial. For instance, a button's appearance should suggest its clickability. However, Norman cautions that designers often merge affordances with conventions. While a button may afford clicking, the understanding that a blue underlined text signifies a hyperlink is a learned convention, not an inherent affordance. Recognising this distinction helps designers create more intuitive interfaces by aligning design elements with users' expectations and experiences.

In the context of dating applications, affordance theory is particularly relevant. Users interact with various interface elements - swipe gestures, scrolling, icons, buttons - that must clearly convey their function. For example, the swipe-right gesture to indicate interest has become a standardised convention in many dating apps. If a new app introduces a different gesture without clear indicators, users may experience confusion, leading to a diminished user experience.

Moreover, the design must consider constraints and conceptual models. Constraints guide user behaviour by limiting possible actions, such as disabling a "Send" button until a message is typed. Conceptual models refer to the user's mental representation of how the app works. A well-designed interface aligns with these models, ensuring that users can predict the outcome of their actions, thereby enhancing usability. (p.40)

Applying affordance theory to the study allows for a deeper analysis of how dating app interfaces support or hinder user interactions. By examining whether users can easily perceive the intended actions and whether these align with their expectations and experiences, it is possible to assess the effectiveness of the app's design in facilitating desired outcomes, such as forming connections or initiating conversations.

5.4 Networked Learning Theory

Networked Learning Theory offers a useful lens for examining how individuals engage with dating apps not just as users, but as participants in evolving socio-technical systems. Originally defined by Steeples and Jones (2002), networked learning refers to “the use of ICT to promote collaborative or cooperative connections between learners, their tutors and learning resources” (p. 18). While the framework is rooted in educational contexts, its emphasis on relational, technology-mediated interaction can be extended to more informal, experiential environments, such as dating apps.

In this context, user activity may not constitute “learning” in a formal sense, but it involves continuous knowledge gaining: individuals develop personal strategies, understand implicit norms, and adapt to platform logic through trial, interaction, and observation. Haythornthwaite (2008) reinforces this by positioning learning as a social network relation, where meaningful understanding emerges through interaction with both human (e.g., matches, peers) and non-human (e.g., algorithms, UI elements) actors.

Rather than being passive recipients of app functionality, users actively interpret, negotiate, and co-construct meaning through repeated engagement with app features and each other. Knowledge acquisition here is relational, situated, and shaped by the digital ecosystem in which it unfolds. This view supports a broader understanding of dating app use as not just behavioural, but cognitive and culturally-grounded in ongoing adaptation and reflection within a networked environment.

5.5 Flow Theory

Flow Theory, developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), describes a mental state in which individuals become fully immersed in an activity, experiencing a sense of energised focus, deep involvement, and enjoyment. This optimal state occurs when there is a balance between the perceived challenges of an activity and the individual's skills, combined with clear goals and immediate feedback. Within digital environments, such as dating apps, flow can be intentionally designed and encouraged - or disrupted - through user interface, interaction design, and algorithmic feedback.

Dating apps often incorporate gamified mechanisms (e.g., swiping, matching, push notifications) that mirror the conditions Csikszentmihalyi (1990) outlined as essential for entering flow. The repetitive yet varied task of swiping through profiles, the uncertainty and anticipation of matching, and the instant feedback (match/no match) can create a feedback loop that encourages continued engagement. For some users, this may lead to a heightened sense of control and enjoyment, while others may experience overstimulation, decision fatigue, or even compulsive use.

Furthermore, the emotional experiences reported by users often relate to their ability - or inability - to enter a satisfying flow state. Flow Theory thus provides a valuable perspective for analysing how and why users interact with dating platforms. It helps explore not only the positive feelings of immersion and enjoyment but also the potential for addictive behaviours and dissatisfaction when the user’s psychological needs are not met or are manipulated by the platform’s design.

5.6 Sensemaking-Abductive

Designing effective user experiences for dating applications involves interpreting complex, evolving user behaviours and expectations. Jon Kolko (2010) describes design synthesis as a nonlinear process that employs abductive reasoning-inferring plausible explanations from incomplete data-to generate innovative solutions (pp. 15–28). This approach is particularly valuable when addressing "wicked problems," where user needs are not immediately apparent.

Kolko emphasises the use of visual tools, such as affinity diagrams and journey maps, to externalise and organise data, facilitating the identification of patterns and insights (2011, pp.

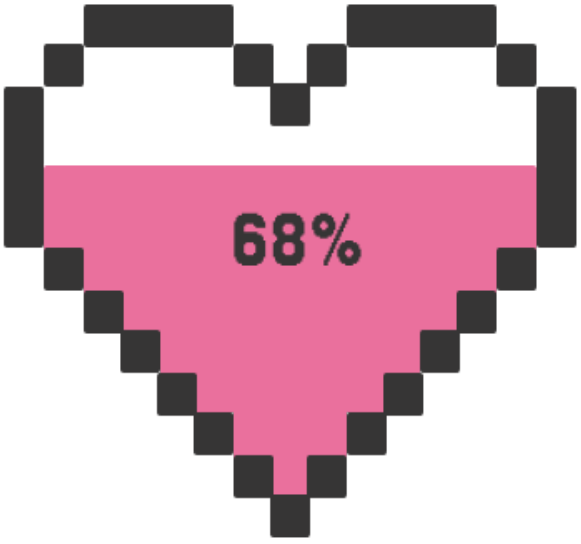
166–167). By reframing user challenges, designers can uncover new perspectives and opportunities for innovation.

Moreover, Karl Weick (1995) presents sensemaking as an ongoing, retrospective process through which individuals interpret cues from their environment to construct meaning (pp. 17–18). In the context of dating apps, users continuously interpret ambiguous signals, such as profile pictures and messaging behaviours, drawing on personal experiences and social norms. Weick outlines seven properties of sensemaking, including identity construction, retrospection, and social context, which collectively shape how users navigate and make sense of their interactions (pp. 17–18).

Together, Kolko's and Weick's frameworks underscore the importance of designing interfaces that support users in constructing coherent narratives from ambiguous information, enhancing their overall experience within complex social environments.

Chapter 6

Analysis



6 Analysis

6.1 Survey Results

In the following section, the findings are presented according to the seven thematic sections included in the survey. The primary aim of the survey was to gather quantitative insights into individuals' experiences, perceptions, and preferences related to the use of dating applications. In addition, the survey collected demographic information to contextualise user behaviour across different age groups, gender identities, and locations. The survey data was collected over a two-week period from April 3rd to April 17th, resulting in a total of 130 responses. All quotes in this section come from open-ended survey responses (see Appendix B2 or CSV file for the full dataset).

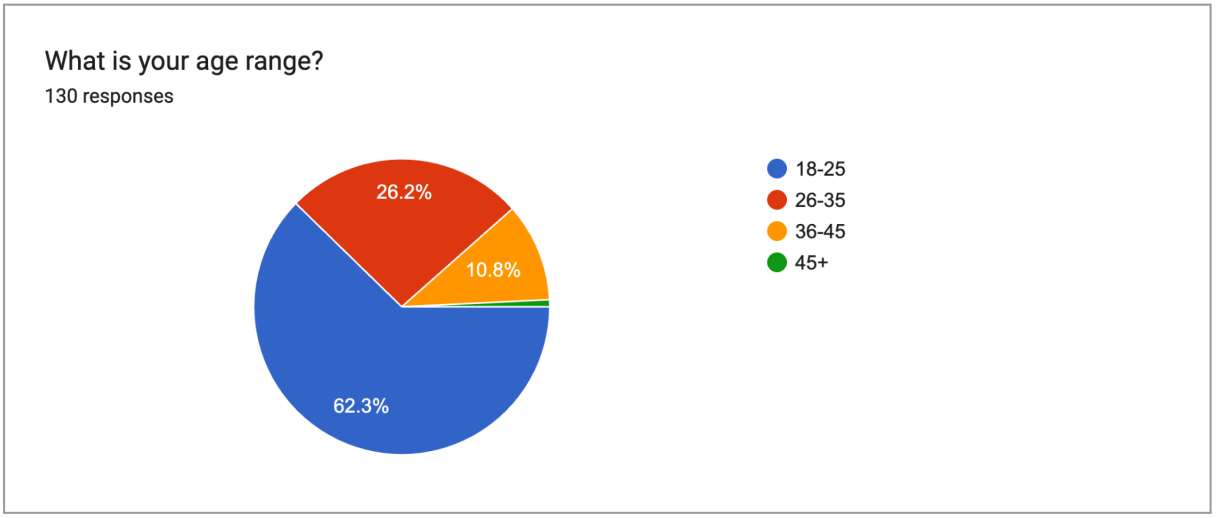
6.1.1 Demographics

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the survey participants, focusing on age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and geographical location (country in which they are using the dating app), as these factors are relevant to understanding user experiences with dating applications.

The majority of respondents fell within the 18–25 age range (62.3%), followed by those aged 26–35 (26.2%), and 36-45 (10.8%). This distribution indicates a predominantly younger participant pool, which is reflective of the primary user base for many dating applications; another reasoning for this age distribution might be linked to the channels used for publishing the survey which was author's personal Instagram, Facebook, as well as survey exchange platforms popular among students (the exact examples of such pages are mentioned later in the chapter).

Figure 4.1

Age Distribution of Survey Participants



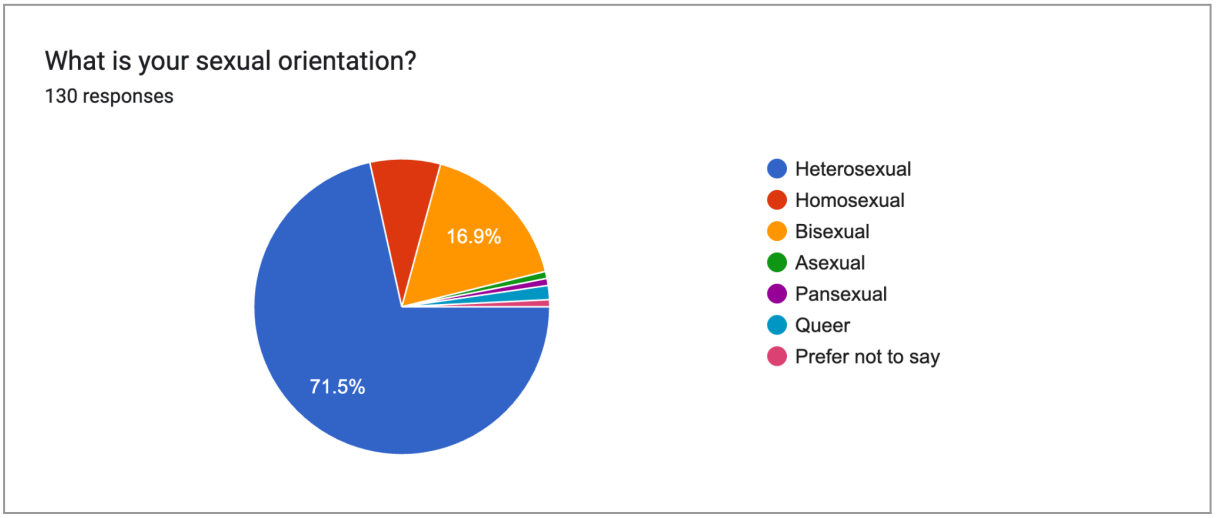
Participants reported using dating applications in various countries, with the highest representations from the Netherlands (18.5%), the United States (13.8%), the United Kingdom (12.3%), Poland (12.3%) and Denmark (11.5%). This distribution may be influenced by the survey's dissemination channels, including the researcher's personal Instagram account-predominantly followed by individuals from Denmark and Poland-and the SurveySwap platform, which has a strong presence in the Netherlands. Instead of asking for respondents' nationality, the survey focused on the countries in which participants currently use dating apps, as this context was more relevant to understanding how geographical and cultural settings may influence user experience.

Participants self-identified their gender as follows: 69.2% identified as women, 28.5% as men, and 1.5% as non-binary. To ensure inclusivity and respect for all gender identities, the survey provided options beyond the traditional binary categories, aligning with recommended practices for demographic data collection.

A major part of respondents determined their sexual orientation as heterosexual (71.5%), followed by bisexual (17%), and homosexual (7.7%).

Figure 4.2

Sexual Orientation of Survey Participants.



6.1.2 Section 1: Dating Apps Usage & Relationship Goals

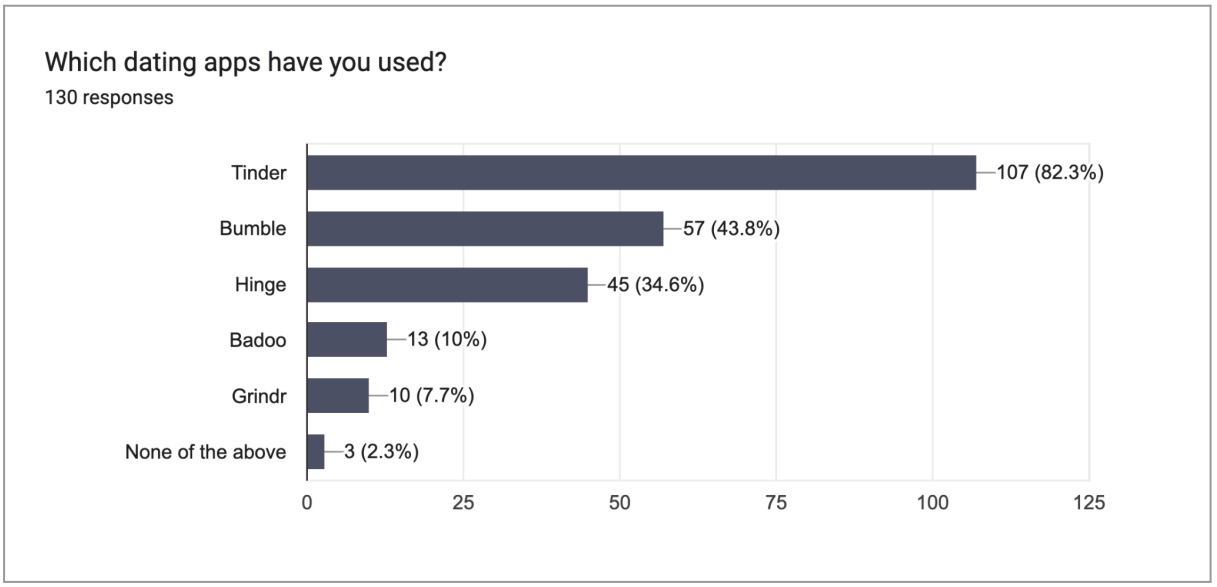
This section explores participants' patterns of dating app usage and their underlying relationship goals, providing insights into how individuals engage with these platforms in pursuit of various relational outcomes.

In the multiple-choice question about dating app selection, Tinder was most often selected (82.3%), followed by Bumble (43.8%) and Hinge (34.6%). This aligns with previously discovered data about

the most popular dating apps used (refer to figures 2.1 and 2.2 in this chapter). In the next question, participants had an option to type a dating app that was not proposed in the answers - 20 of the participants mentioned other dating apps such as Fruitz or Raya.

Figure 5.1

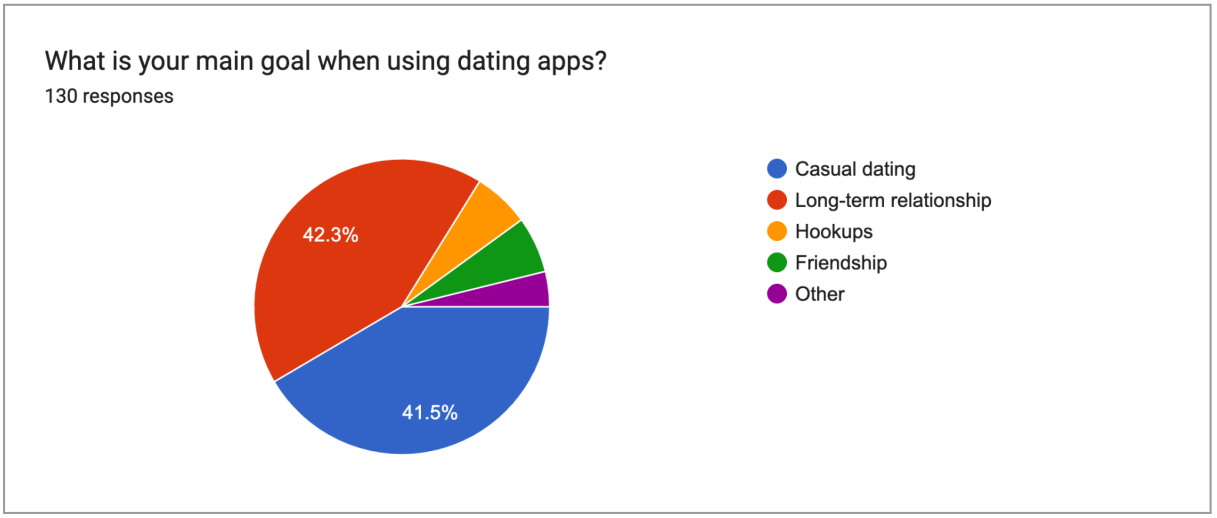
Dating Apps Usage



As a main dating goal, two answers were predominant - *long-term relationship* (42.3%), together with *casual dating* (41.5%). Only a small minority reported primarily looking for *hookups* (~6%) or *friendship* (~6%), with a few indicating *"other"* goals such as exploring options.

Figure 5.2

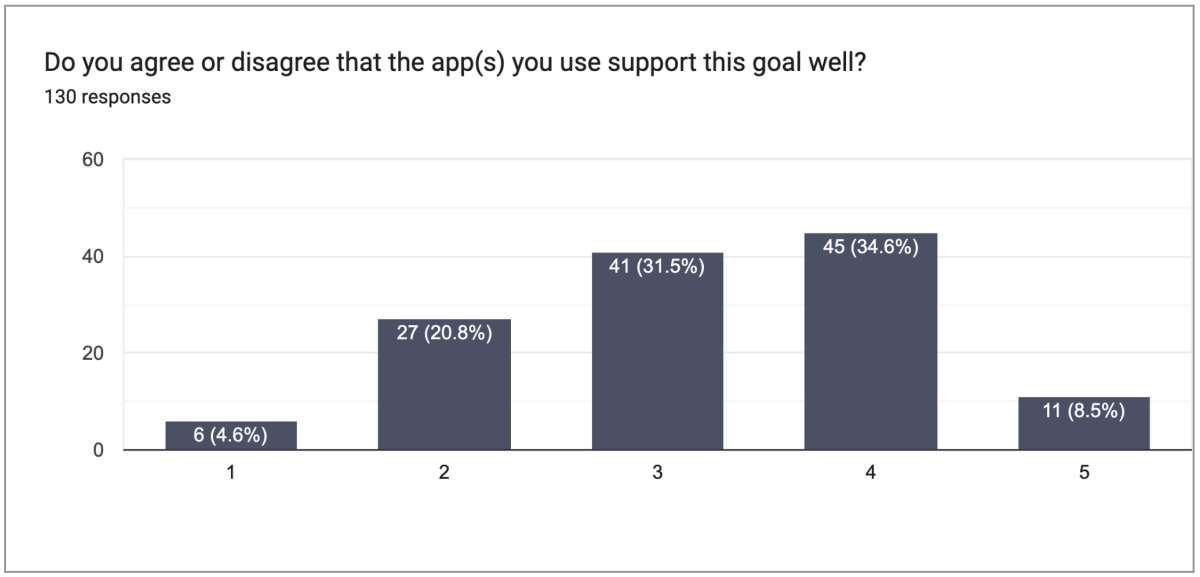
User Intentions on Dating Apps.



On a 5-point agreement scale, 34.6% of respondents selected 4, indicating moderate agreement that dating apps support their dating goals. An additional 31.5% selected 3, reflecting a neutral or ambivalent stance. Only 8.5% strongly agreed (rating 5), while 4.6% strongly disagreed (rating 1).

Figure 5.3

Supporting User Intentions in Dating Apps.



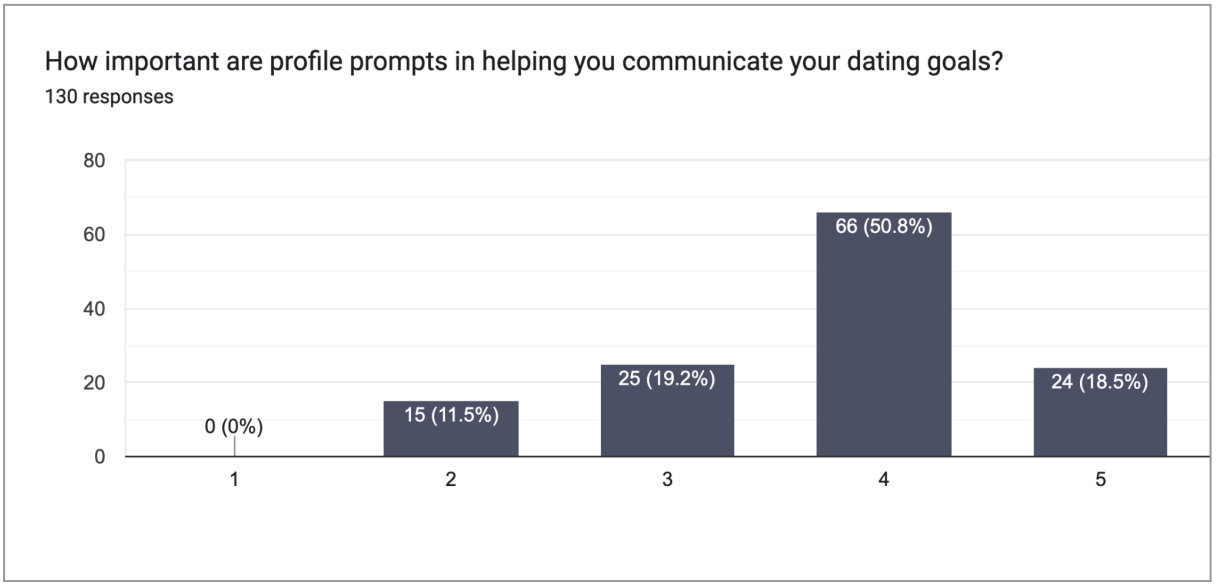
The distribution suggests that while most users find dating apps somewhat effective, few perceive them as fully aligned with their goals. The relatively low percentage of strong agreement (8.5%) may point to unmet expectations or cautious optimism, while the small proportion of strong disagreement (4.6%) indicates that outright dissatisfaction is rare. Overall, the data reflects a generally functional, yet not fully satisfying, user experience in supporting dating intentions.

6.1.3 Section 2: Profile Building

Profile creation is a critical aspect of the dating app user experience, and survey responses indicate that users put a lot of value on features that help them express themselves and their intentions. A strong majority of participants appreciate guided profile elements: about 70% rated in the positive range that *profile prompts* (pre-set questions or prompts on profiles) are important or very important for communicating their dating goals. These prompts – such as "*What are you looking for?*" or ice-breaker questions – appear to help users articulate what they want and show off personality. Only a small fraction (around 12%) felt profile prompts were not very important. This highlights that most users want to convey their intentions clearly and see structured prompts as useful cues to do so.

Figure 6.1

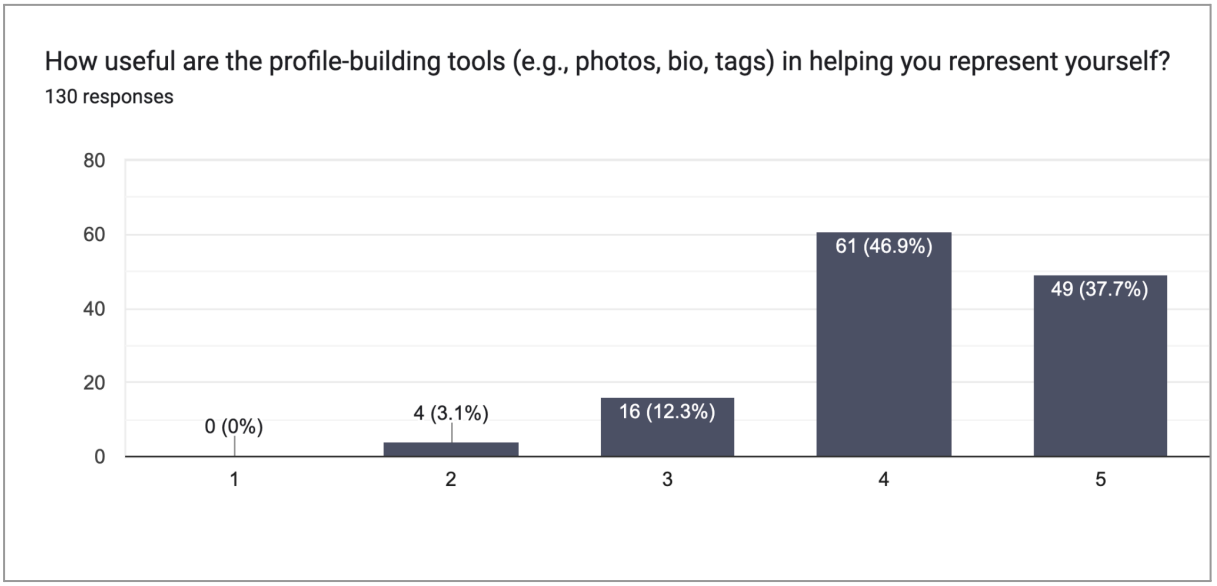
Perceived Importance of Profile Prompts in Communicating Dating Goals



Participants also largely find the standard profile tools effective for self-expression. Nearly 85% said the combination of photos, bio text, and tags provided by apps is *useful or very useful* in representing who they are. Having multiple photos, a written bio, and interest tags (like hobbies or personal attributes) gives people a way to showcase different facets of themselves. Only a tiny minority (just 3.1%) felt these tools were not useful. In other words, current dating apps generally offer adequate means for users to create a portrayal of themselves that they're satisfied with. This is a positive sign for user-centred design – it means the basic profile features align well with user needs. Some respondents did comment that dishonesty can undermine profiles (e.g. *"People are lying on their profiles… so at the end the description doesn't matter"* as R17 commented), indicating that while the tools are useful, the content's truthfulness is another challenge. This points to a possible need for features like profile verification (which is already implemented in the apps) or prompts that encourage honesty.

Figure 6.2

Perceived Usefulness of Profile-Building Tools in Self-Representation



When asked if they have *enough space on their profile to express themselves*, a majority agreed. About 58% felt the profile allowed them to show who they are sufficiently (with around 20% strongly agreeing). Another 30% were neutral, and only about 11% felt they did not have enough space or freedom on their profile. A few people would like more flexibility – perhaps the ability to write more text or showcase themselves in additional ways – but most are content with the amount of information a profile can contain. This suggests that current profile lengths and fields are generally adequate, though some users desire more customisation. For instance, someone with niche interests or a non-traditional identity might feel constrained by the profile templates. One non-binary respondent mentioned feeling that others did not fully understand their identity through the limited profile options.

> *"I'm non binary, so in the queer seen, women want "real" women and men want "real" men even though there is no such thing."* (R93)

Figure 6.3

Perceived Sufficiency of Profile Space for Self-Expression

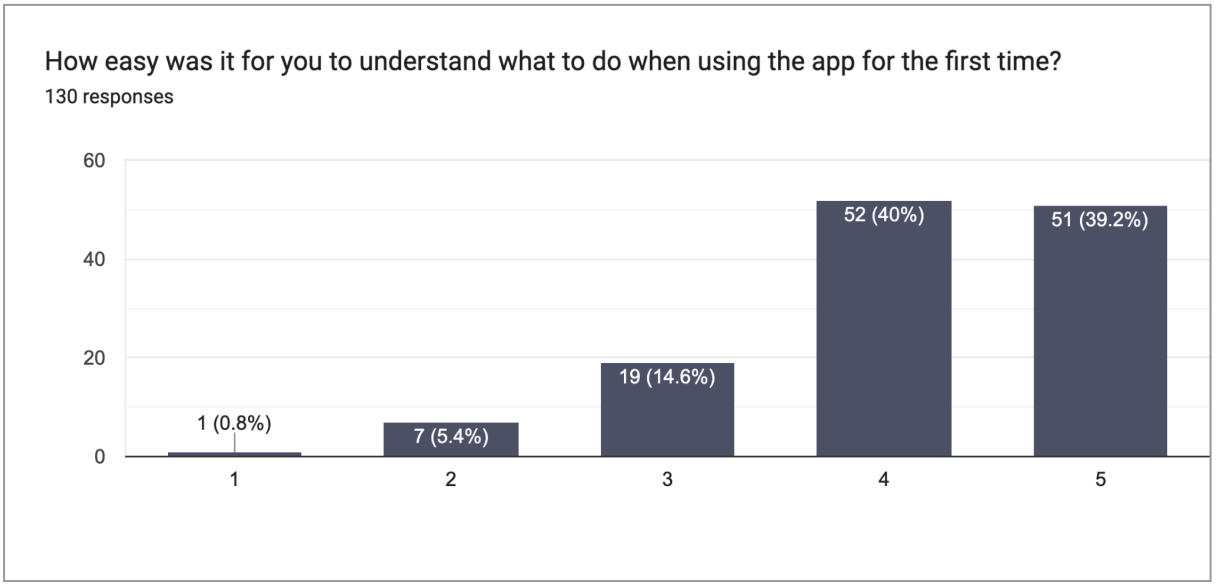
6.1.4 Section 3: User Experience in Dating Apps

This section aimed to investigate how the participants perceive the overall user experience of the dating apps.

Overall, the usability of dating apps was rated positively by most participants. From the moment the very first time of using the app (known as *onboarding*), users generally found the app intuitive to navigate. Nearly 80% of respondents said it was *easy or very easy to understand what to do the first time* they used a dating app. Essential actions like creating a profile, swiping, or browsing matches were clear to them. Only a small minority (around 5%) found the initial learning curve difficult. This indicates that common design patterns across dating apps (swipe gestures, match buttons, etc.) are now familiar conventions, which reduce friction for new users. Similarly, the presentation of other people's profiles was straightforward - about 80% of users found it *clear to view and interpret profiles*. The profile layout (photos, text, and icons) is not confusing for most, though a few did struggle (5% said profiles were unclear). App developers seem to be succeeding in making key UI elements and actions self-explanatory. Many users effectively *"learn by doing"* within minutes on these platforms, which can indicate good UX design consistency in the industry.

Figure 7.1

Perceived Ease of Use When First Using the App

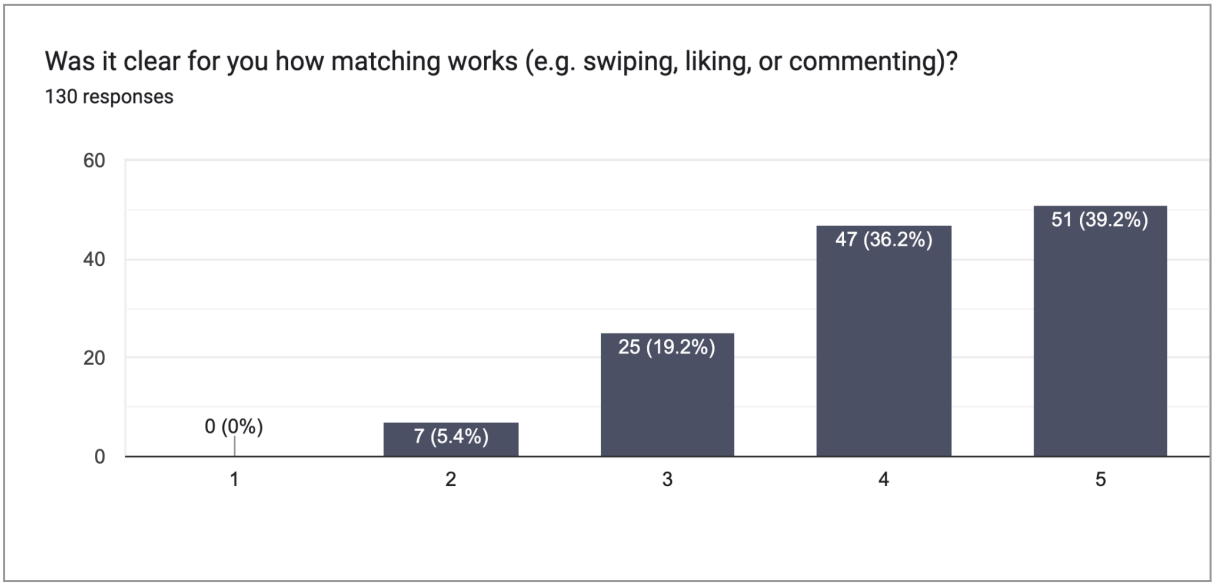


Basic matching mechanics were also well understood. Approximately 75% of users found it clear how the matching process works (for example, swiping right to like someone, or sending likes/comments on prompts). Because most apps use similar mechanisms (mutual likes leading to a match, etc.), users have little trouble grasping how to express interest and what leads to a match. Only a handful of people felt the matching interactions were unclear (perhaps that could be the case in an app like Hinge, where one person must show interest in a specific part of the profile, such as a photo or a prompt). This ease-of-use in core features means users can focus more on interacting and less on figuring out the interface. One respondent mentioned that the app was: *"[...] very much reliant on how the users use the app – the app may be well designed, but if users misrepresent themselves you'll get varying experiences."* (R101)

In other words, from a pure usability standpoint, the apps work fine; the challenges often arise from user behaviour or expectations rather than the interface itself.

Figure 7.2

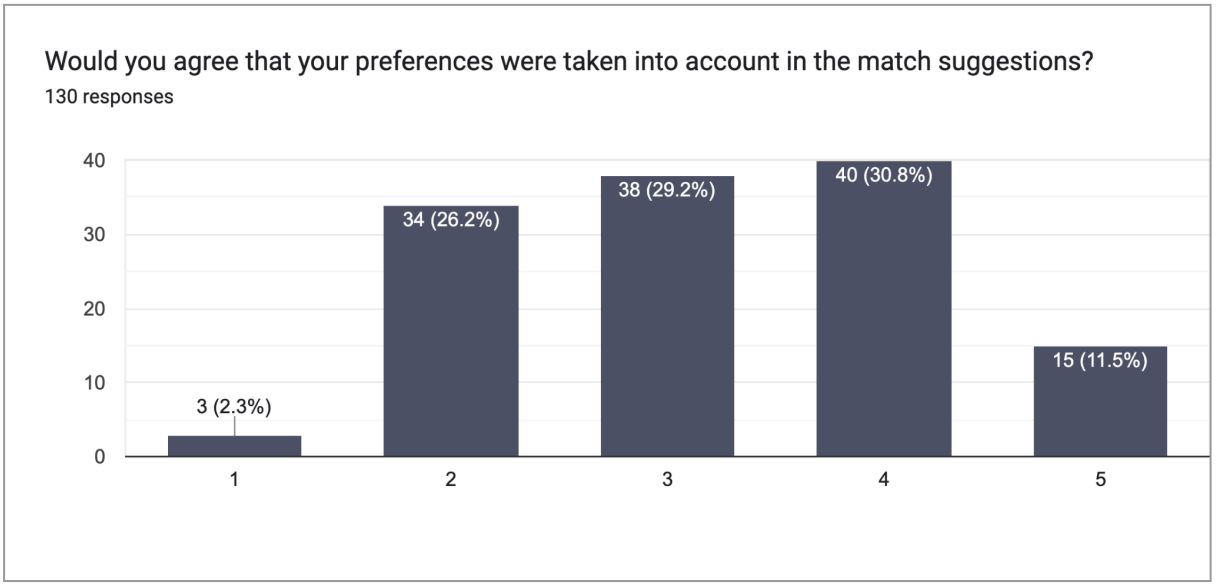
Perceived Clarity of Matching Functionality (e.g., Swiping, Liking, Commenting)



One area of concern is how well the app's results meet user expectations; specifically, whether the matching algorithm truly respects the user's stated preferences. Only about 43% of respondents agreed that the *match suggestions reflected their preferences* (such as desired age range, distance, interests, etc.), while roughly 28% disagreed with that. The rest were neutral. This indicates that a significant portion of users feel the recommendations they see are *not sufficiently tailored*. For example, some participants complained that even when they set specific filters or expressed certain preferences, they would still see many profiles that did not fit, such as incompatible age ranges or people with very different goals. In the open responses, a few users responded that *"[...] the algorithm does not show people that fit the parameters of search and is very random"* (R81) or that matches often *"had different goals anyway."* (R9) This can lead to frustration because users might feel their needs are not met by sorting through unsuitable matches. It also ties into trust in the app – if people consistently see mismatches, they may start doubting the app's effectiveness or fairness.

Figure 7.3

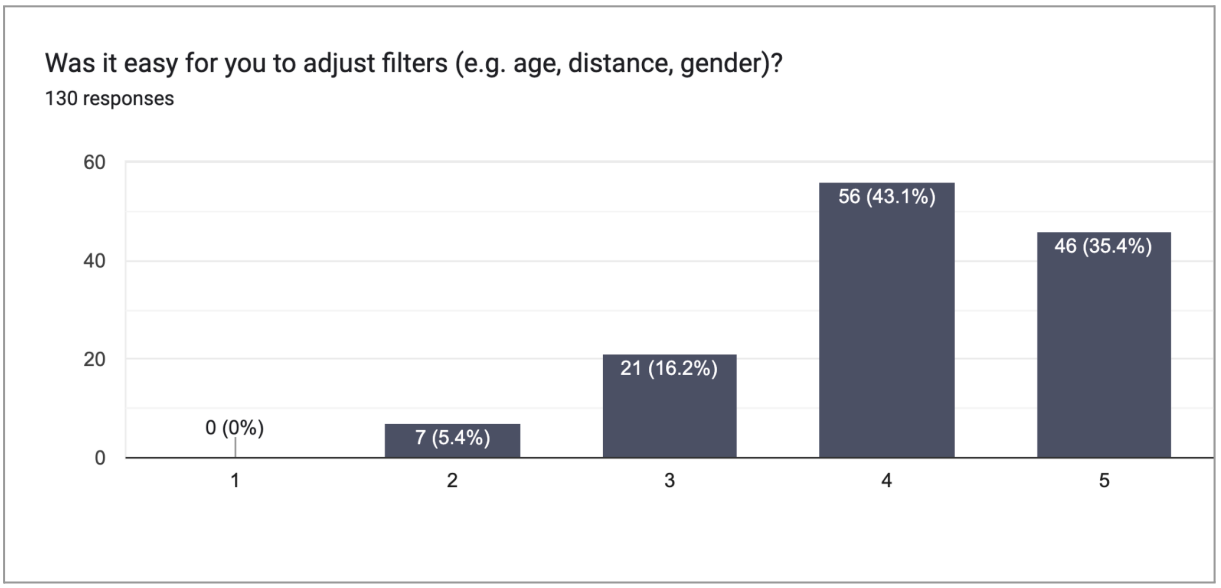
Perceived Accuracy of Match Suggestions Based on User Preferences



Use of filters is a related aspect: the survey found that adjusting filters (like age, distance, gender) was *easy* for most – about 78% reported filter controls were easy to find and use.

Figure 7.4

Perceived Ease of Adjusting Filters (e.g., Age, Distance, Gender)

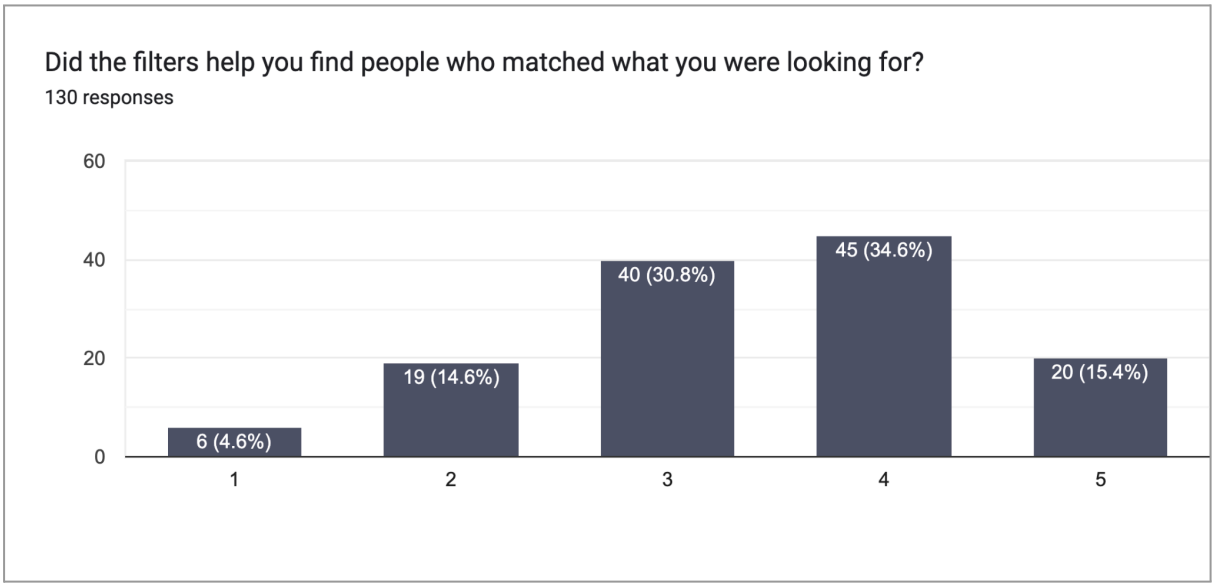


However, the *effectiveness* of those filters was not as universally felt. Only around half of the users agreed that using filters actually helped them find more appropriate matches. About 20% said filters did *not* help them much, and the remaining ~30% were neutral. This suggests that even though the UI lets people set preferences, the outcomes sometimes do not meet the needs and expectations of the users. It could be due to a limited pool of people meeting the criteria in their area, or the app's

algorithm, which might still show some users outside the filters to broaden options (for instance, some are showing a "recommended" match who might be slightly outside of the set criteria). For users, though, it can be perplexing when they feel their explicit inputs are not fully taken into consideration. This impacts the user experience by introducing doubt – the frustration of users might increase due to the fact that the set preferences are not respected. Improving the transparency around how filters are applied, or ensuring the algorithm prioritises those user-set parameters, would make the experience feel more *user-controlled* and satisfying.

Figure 7.5

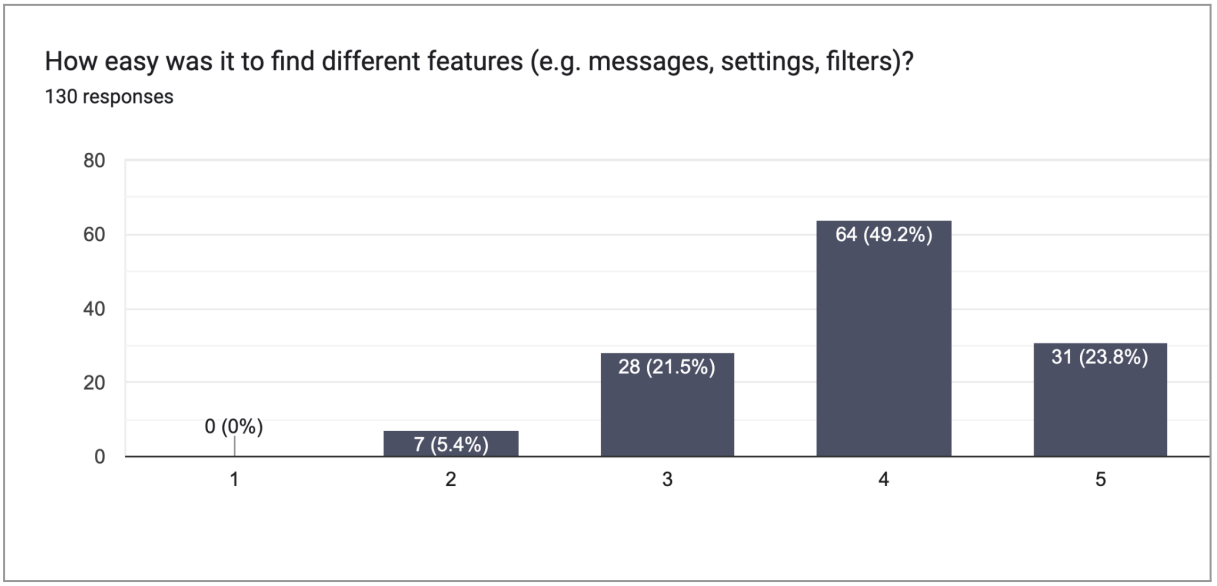
Perceived Effectiveness of Filters in Finding Relevant Matches



The navigation and feature-finding in dating apps are positive aspects - over 70% of respondents found the different features, such as messaging, settings and filters, easy to find. This indicates that menus and icons are generally intuitive. A few people (5%) had trouble locating some features, which might point to specific app design characteristics or users who are perhaps tech illiterate and thus in need of clearer labels. Nevertheless, participants did not struggle with moving around the app or finding where to chat, adjust settings, etc. The consistency in design (e.g., gear icon for settings, chat bubbles for messages) likely indicates in a clear way the purpose of the icon and/or feature.

Figure 7.6

Perceived Ease of Navigating App Features (e.g., Messages, Settings, Filters)

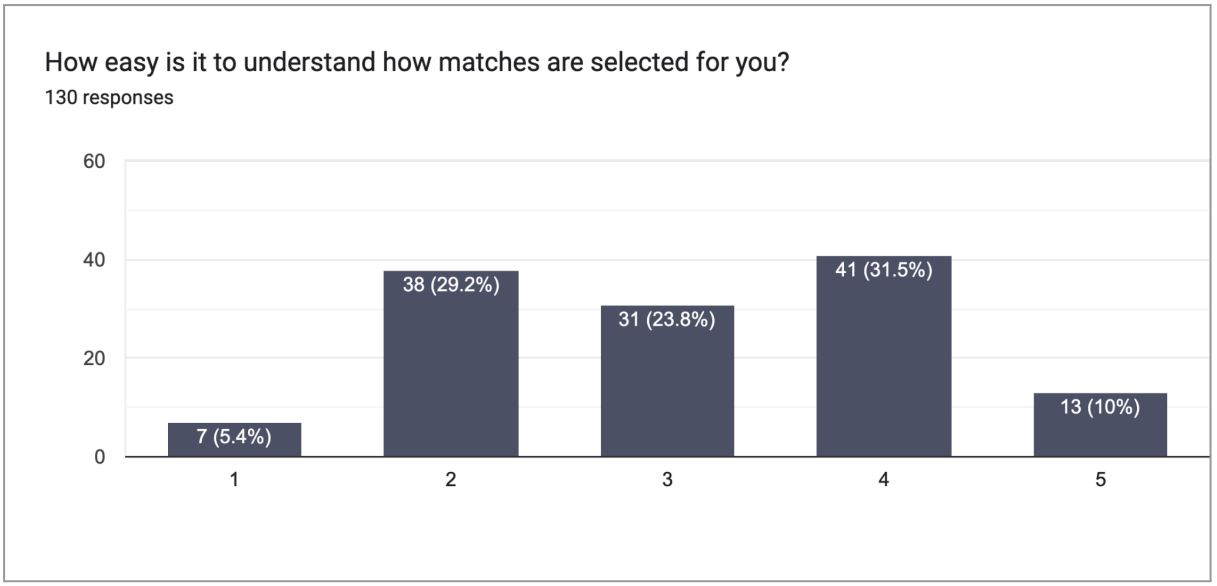


6.1.5 Section 4: Perceived Transparency & Trust in AI (Artificial Intelligence)

This section of the survey investigated how much users *trust the dating apps' algorithms* – essentially the AI-driven matching – and whether they feel the process is transparent. The findings reveal a significant trust deficit and desire for greater transparency.

Figure 8.1

Perceived Ease of Understanding How Matches Are Selected



First of all, the results from the first question in this section indicate that many users do not fully understand how the matching algorithm works, and opinions vary on this understanding. Only about

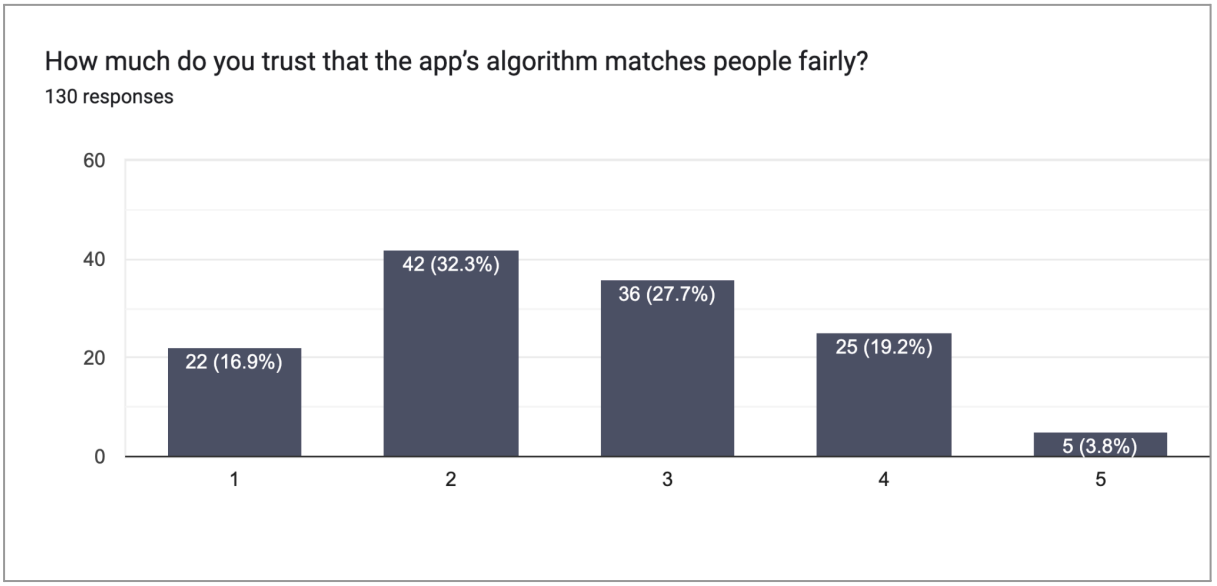
10% found it “very easy” to be aware of how matches are selected for them, with another ~31% saying it was somewhat easy. On the other hand, around 34% admitted it was difficult to understand how the app decides who to show as a potential match. The rest were neutral or unsure. This indicates that for a large portion of users, the algorithm’s workings are an “enigma”. Modern dating apps use complex ranking algorithms (taking into account activity, likes received, etc., or like Hinge, which uses a matching system that combines the Gale-Shapley algorithm) which are not explained to users. As a result, a significant subset of users feel unaware of why they see certain profiles. For example, one participant commented: “*The algorithm is designed for you to need to constantly come back… it does not support you in finding your future partner*” (R60). This statement expresses a rather negative and perhaps distanced view on a system perceived as optimised for engagement over genuine matching. Rather than a simple lack of understanding, such sentiments may reflect users' critical awareness of how these systems operate. Several comments point to growing scepticism about the authenticity of app interactions and the fairness of user visibility, especially as platforms promote paid features that claim to increase match likelihood.

> *“Problem which I see is dating apps lying. I see difference if I pay for them or I just use free. I thing if I don’t use pay version people don't see me, because I don’t have match when I pay I have a lot. And strange thing is also lying about people around apps show you information “we don’t have any more” then next day you can swiping new people.”* (R42)

Another participant mentioned: *“I will say the idea of making dating apps a money machine, Like “pay and you can find love” concept is stupid”* (R1). These perceptions, whether true or not, negatively affect trust in the platform’s fairness.

Figure 8.2

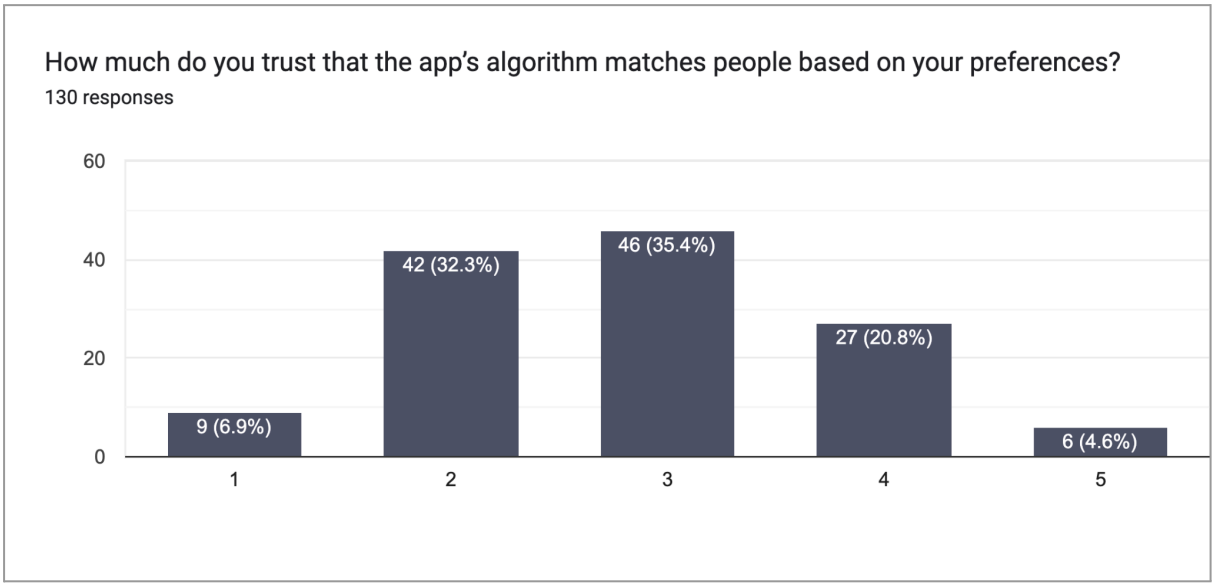
User Trust in the Fairness of the App's Matching Algorithm



The pattern of perception continues, as when it comes to trust in the algorithm's fairness and accuracy, the survey results are remarkably low. Nearly 50% of respondents indicated they do *not trust* that the app's matching algorithm works fairly (only about 23% responded that they find it fair).

Figure 8.3

User Trust in the Algorithm's Ability to Match Based on Stated Preferences



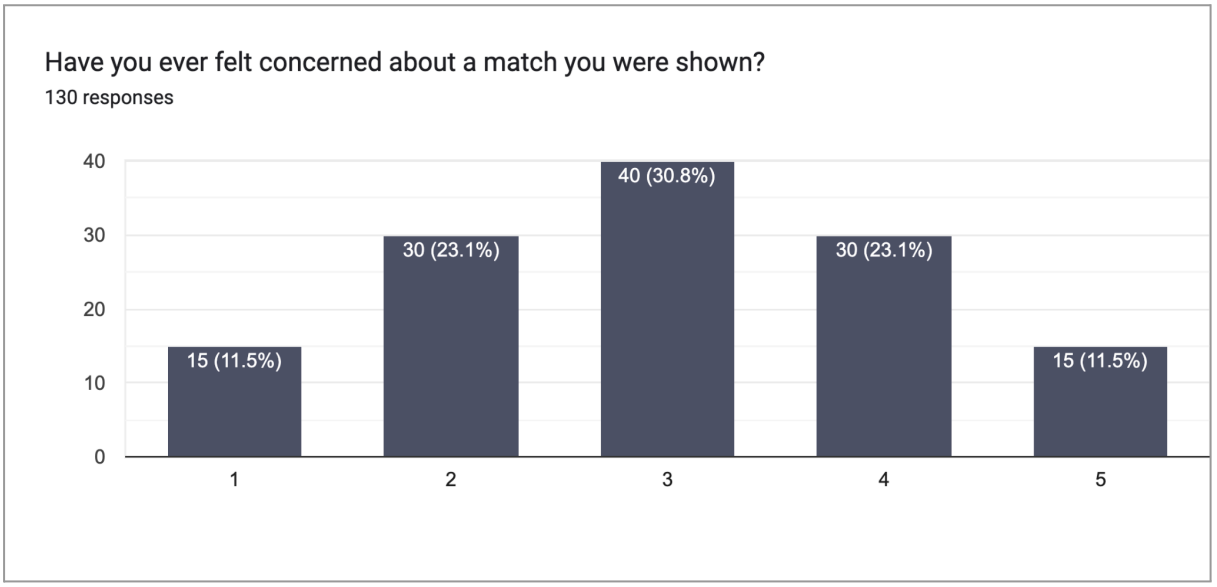
Likewise, only about a quarter trust that the algorithm truly uses their preferences to match them with suitable people, while roughly 40% do not trust it. Many others are ambivalent; this scepticism may stem from observed mismatches (as noted in the UX section) or a general wariness of non-transparent

AI systems. For instance, if a user keeps seeing profiles far outside their preferred age range or distance, they might conclude the algorithm is ignoring their inputs, hence losing trust in its accuracy. Fairness is another concern; some users wonder if the app favours certain profiles. A common sentiment, especially among male users in the data, is that the algorithm might *favour attractive or popular people* (creating an imbalanced experience). One respondent (R43) pointed out that *"Top profiles are usually people that can be generally described as visually beautiful/handsome",* which points towards, once again, a diversity problem. It implies the algorithm's sorting might raise looks-based popularity, which feels unfair to others. Additionally, participants from LGBTQ+ communities or those with less common preferences might feel the algorithm is not suitable for them, which can reduce trust.

Another significant indicator of trust issues is how users responded to being shown concerning matches. When asked if users ever felt *concerned* about a particular match suggestion (perhaps finding it suspicious, inappropriate, or puzzling) the answers varied; about one-third of users have *often or very often* felt concerned by someone the app suggested, another third have felt that way only rarely if at all, and the remaining third said "sometimes."

Figure 8.4

User Concerns About the Appropriateness of Shown Matches



Types of concerns could include seeing fake-looking profiles (raising safety flags), matches far outside one's criteria (making one question the algorithm), or seeing people they know or situations that felt uncomfortable. For example, a few people refused to give apps access to their contacts because they *did not want to see or be seen by people they already know* on the app. The fact that a non-table fraction experienced frequent concern suggests some mismatch or trust-breaking incidents

during matching. One user mentioned being uncomforTable that *the app might show their profile to acquaintances* if contacts were accessed, while another answered that in the queer dating scene, they often encountered people who would exclude them for not fitting certain body ideals:

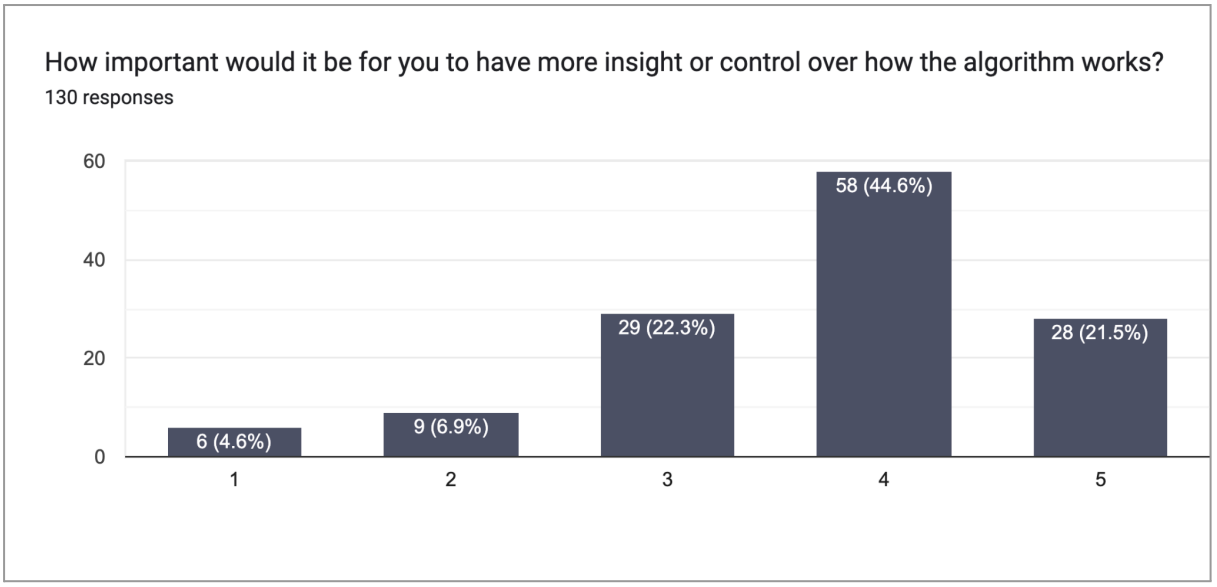
> *"In the gay scene you are literally ignored and blocked by some if you are not super muscled. People are generally less interested in you if you are over 25. People of colour are often fetishised which can lead to very uncomfortable conversations."* (R73)

The results highlight a mix of algorithmic and social factors that lead to bad matches affecting the feeling of safety and comfort.

Last but not least, respondents reported a strong desire for more transparency and control over the matchmaking process. About 67% of users said it is important or very important for them to have *more insight into or control over how the algorithm works*. This is a clear majority calling for change.

Figure 8.5

Perceived Importance of Having Insight or Control Over the Matching Algorithm



People want to know, for instance, why a particular person is recommended. They also express interest in having some control, such as adjusting the algorithm's priorities (perhaps indicating they want to see more matches who share a specific interest, or fewer matches who have not filled out their profiles). Such features are largely absent in current apps in the free version, which tend to keep their matching logic hidden and offer minimal user autonomy over managing basic filters. The results indicate that this phenomenon is not in favour of users. As one participant wrote:

"If they resolve the issue of data sharing or privacy concerns, it will be a great value addition to these dating apps. [...] Make it more encrypted and personalised." (R94)

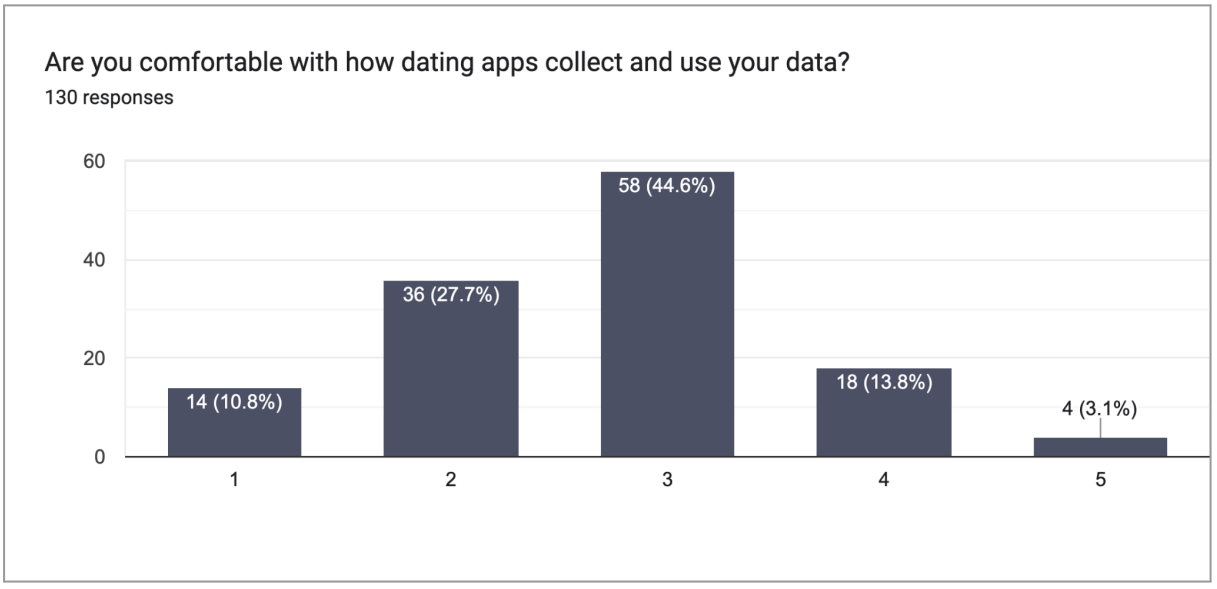
The transparency in algorithms and data handling would be seen as a significant improvement that would increase users' trust. Users essentially want the transparency: rather than just accepting the matches appearing, they would like to be aware and feel that the system works in their favour. This could involve clearer explanations (e.g., a note like "You see this match because you both liked hiking") or user controls (like toggles to prioritise certain match criteria).

6.1.6 Section 5: Data Privacy & Control

Participants expressed pronounced concerns about data privacy on dating apps, revealing a gap in comfort and awareness. When asked if they are *comfortable with how apps collect and use their personal data*, a large share did not feel at ease. Only about 17% reported feeling comfortable with the data practices of dating apps, whereas roughly 39% were uncomfortable (including 11% who are very uncomfortable).

Figure 9.1

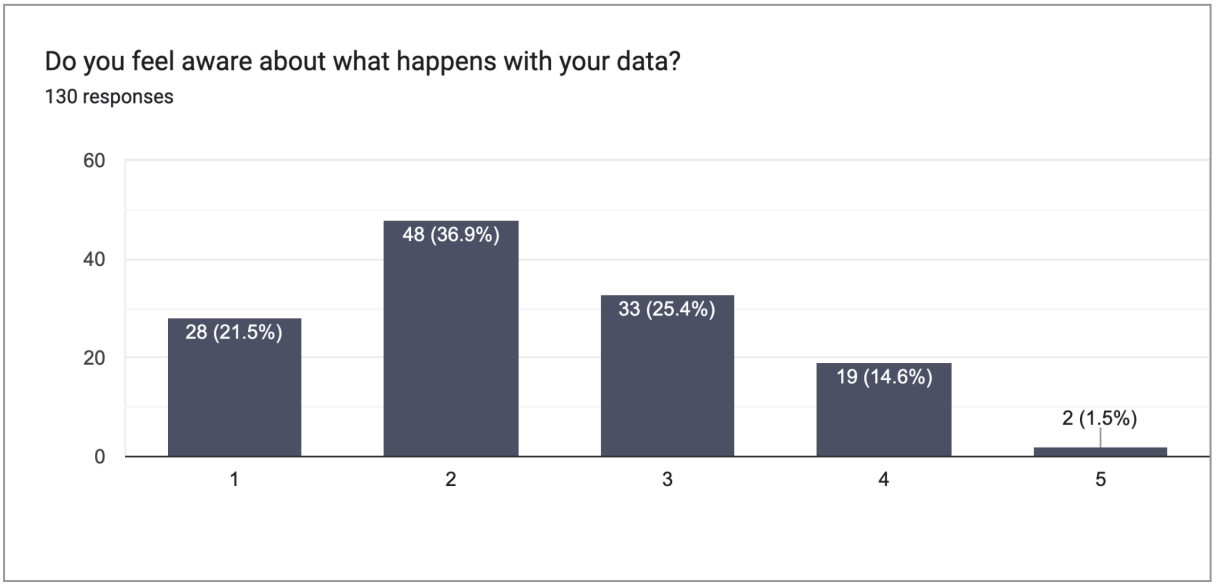
User Comfort with Data Collection and Usage by Dating Apps



The remaining were neutral or unsure, which often indicates a lack of knowledge. In open-ended questions, many users admitted they *don't really know what happens with their data*: nearly 60% said they do not feel informed about how their data is used by the apps. Only a tiny fraction (around 17%) felt confident that they were aware of the apps' data practices.

Figure 9.2

User Awareness of How Dating Apps Store and Use Their Data



This combination of low comfort and low awareness suggests that dating app providers have not put enough effort into earning user trust through transparency, or that they are abusing data and thus, users' trust. People express concern that their personal information (profile details, photos, behaviours on the app, etc.) might be shared or misused, yet they also do not have a clear understanding of the specifics.

The results from the next question delve into the topic; This unease translates into user behaviour around privacy settings and permissions. When asked whether users adjust privacy settings in the app, only 20% said *"Yes, I always review and adjust my privacy settings."* About one-third (31%) reported that they *sometimes* adjust privacy settings, depending on the app – that could be indicating that they are more careful on apps they trust less or those that have more expanded privacy options. However, the majority, 35%, answered that they usually *leave the default settings as-is*. Additionally, a significant minority (around 11%) were not aware they could change privacy settings on dating apps.

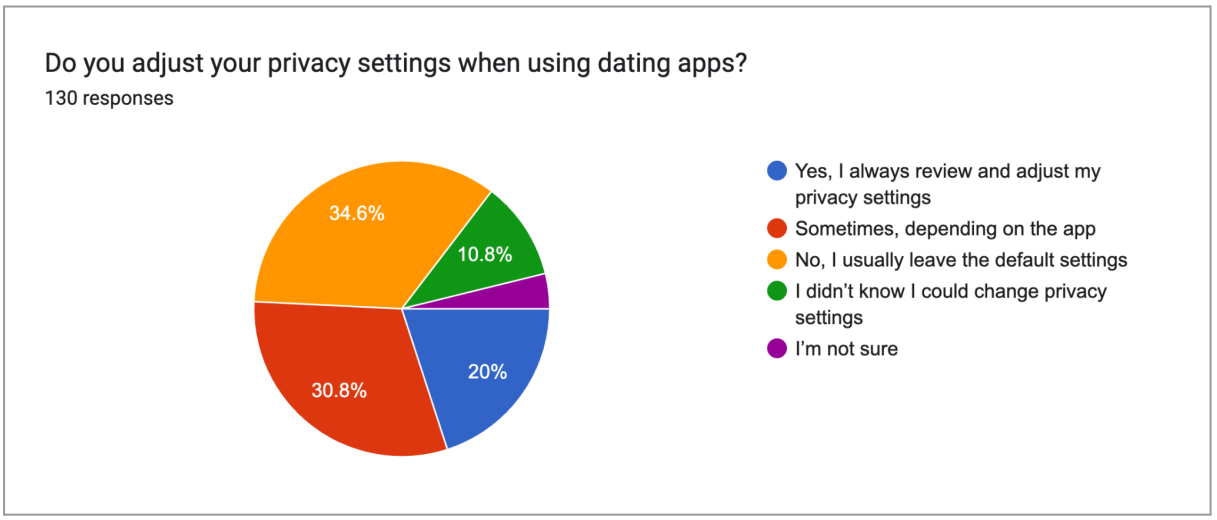
This reveals a couple of things - first, there is an awareness and education issue – not all users know about the privacy controls available, which could be due to those options being hidden in menus or not clearly communicated.

Second, there might be some inactivity or implicit trust in defaults; many users might leave the default settings out of convenience or perhaps based on the assumption that the app's default is "good enough." If default settings are set to maximise data collection, users who do not adjust them might be exposing more information than they are aware of. The fact that only about one in five actively secure their settings shows that most users could be vulnerable if the app mishandles data. On the other hand, it also gives an opportunity for improvement - better user-centred design of privacy

settings, making them more visible and easier to understand, could empower more people to protect themselves.

Figure 9.3

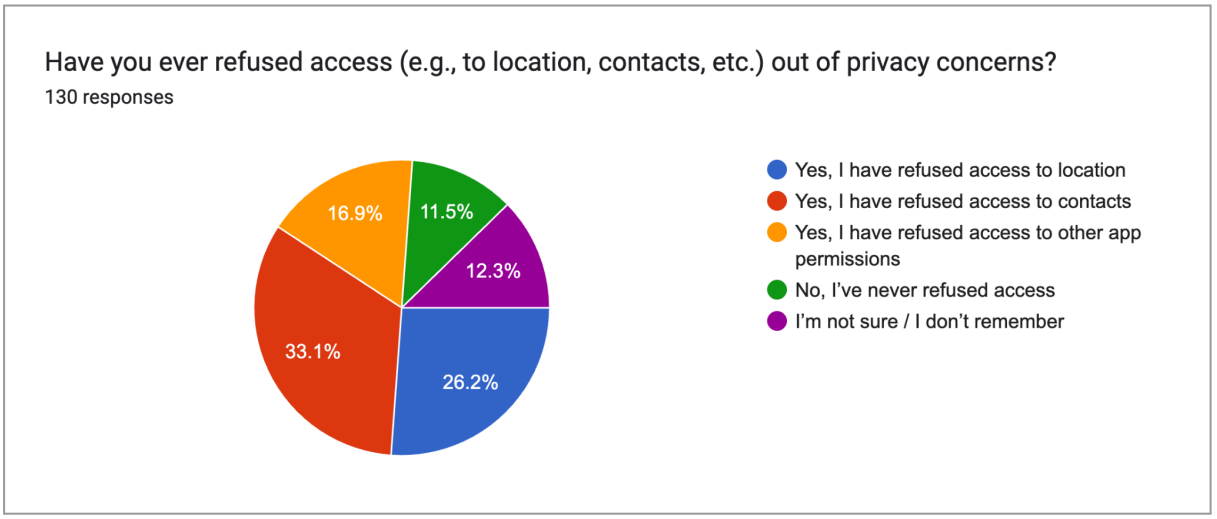
User Behaviour in Adjusting Privacy Settings on Dating Apps



Another phenomenon is observed in the next question and the results. Significant insights into privacy concerns can be observed in how users handle app permission requests (like access to location, contacts, camera, etc.).

Figure 9.4

User Refusal of App Permissions Due to Privacy Concerns.



A majority of respondents have at some point refused certain permissions out of privacy or safety concerns. Notably, contact list access is the most refused permission - many users (33.1%) indicated they denied the app access to their phone contacts. The open-ended explanations explain why – a

common theme was fear of exposing one's dating app use to people they know. For instance, several participants wrote that they did not want the app to show them people from their contacts, or similarly, to notify anyone that they joined. One person (R8) said they were *"scared of contacts getting a notification that I am on the app"*, highlighting concern over social privacy. Others felt the app *"doesn't need to know who's in my contact list"* (R87) – perceiving it as an unnecessary intrusion.

Location access was another commonly refused permission (26.2% refused it at least once). While location is fundamental to how many dating apps function (showing nearby matches), some users choose to deny constant GPS access and perhaps manually set a location or only allow coarse location. Reasons for this include safety – *"It's dangerous"* (R92) noted, reflecting a fear that precise location sharing could lead to stalking or unwanted encounters. A few users were also wary of granting other permissions like access to device storage or sensors if they felt it was not needed for the app's core purpose, citing a principle of *minimal data sharing*. Only a small group (around 12%) said they *never refused any* permission, implying they grant what is asked, possibly either because they trust the app or they did not feel strongly enough to object.

The qualitative responses underline a desire for control and privacy - users want autonomy and control. Some quotes: *"They don't need my contacts for the service"* (R81), *"I didn't think it needed access to some of what it was asking for"* (R53), and *"The less I can share… the better."* (R74). These comments show that users are actively thinking about what data is relevant and refusing to share things that seem irrelevant to the app's functioning. On the other hand, a few users mentioned they allowed access simply because *"I don't really care about that info"* (R16) or they found certain permissions useful (for example, allowing location to see nearby matches is core to the experience, like in Tinder). This indicates a split where some users are privacy-conscious and assertive, while others are either more trusting or more convenience-oriented.

From a design and ethics perspective, these findings suggest that dating app users would benefit from greater transparency and assurances about data use. Since many do not feel informed, apps could provide clearer, more accessible explanations about what data is collected and for what purpose. Additionally, making privacy settings and permission controls easy to find and use is key, possibly with prompts or onboarding tips that encourage users to review their settings. The fact that a lot of people skip adjusting settings either due to unawareness or effort implies that a *proactive UX approach* is needed (for instance, a friendly step-by-step guide of privacy options when a new user signs up, instead of hiding the information).

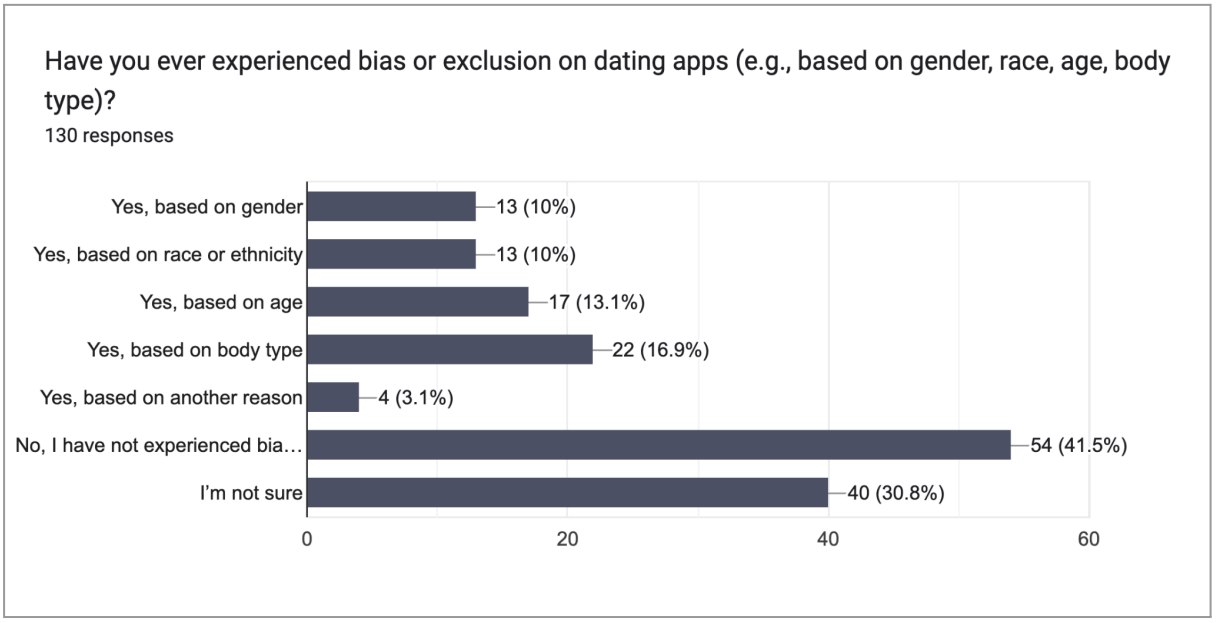
6.1.7 Section 6: Emotional Experience & Perceived Bias

Using dating apps is not just a technical experience but an emotional one. Survey responses revealed a wide spectrum of emotional outcomes - from success stories and satisfaction to frustration, anxiety, and feelings of bias or exclusion.

One area investigated was whether users had experienced bias or exclusion on dating apps, such as discrimination or judgment based on attributes like gender, race, age, or body type. Approximately 28% of respondents indicated "yes" - they had encountered some form of bias or exclusion.

Figure 10.1

User-Reported Experiences of Bias or Exclusion on Dating Apps (Multiple-Answers Allowed)



The most commonly reported forms of bias are centred around physical appearance and age. Several users - especially women and those in the LGBTQ+ community - described being ignored or subjected to negative comments related to body shape or weight. One participant reflected:

> *"There were a few instances in which people felt I did not match my pictures closely enough and were disappointed with my size and marks on my skin. Though I did not alter my pictures in any way, I think people on dating apps hold high expectations for in-person interactions that are not reasonable to fulfil."* (R117)

Such experiences highlight the appearance-driven culture of many platforms, where visual cues dominate initial interactions and further unrealistic expectations.

Building on earlier observations of subcultural body norms (see Section 6.1.5), several participants also noted community-specific appearance pressures - for example, biases toward certain

body types within the gay male scene. These insights suggest that appearance-based biases are not isolated but reflect broader structural dynamics within dating app ecosystems.

Age-based bias was another frequently cited issue. Users above 25 or 30 often reported receiving less attention or being excluded. As one participant stated: *"People are generally less interested in you if you are over 25"* (R73) - pointing to a youth-centric culture that permeates many dating apps.

Gender-based bias also surfaced, particularly affecting non-binary and transgender individuals. One non-binary participant shared feeling invalidated: *"Many women on the apps only wanted 'real women,' and many men only wanted 'real men,'"* - a reflection of how many dating platforms still operate on a binary gender model, which can leave those outside these categories feeling unwelcome or invisible. Additionally, some women reported sexist behaviour- being objectified or dismissed - which they perceived as gender bias (though it is important to note that such experiences may stem from user behaviour rather than platform algorithms alone).

Racial and ethnic bias was reported by about 10% of respondents. While fewer participants explicitly cited racism, some reported fetishisation based on race, an equally problematic form of bias. One user of colour described frequent uncomfortable interactions where they were objectified for their race, rather than valued for their personality. This indicates that subtle, racialised biases do persist within dating app spaces.

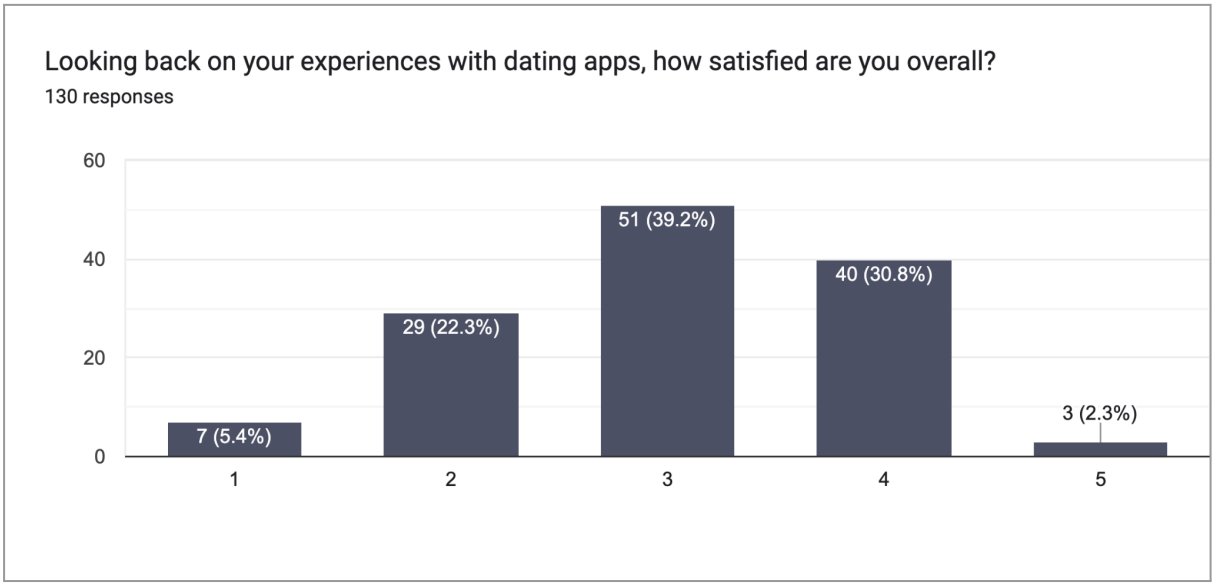
Importantly, over 40% of respondents reported no personal experience of bias or exclusion, while about 30% were unsure. It is possible that certain biases remain unrecognised or were not encountered by these users. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that a substantial minority face issues that negatively affect their emotional well-being when using dating apps.

These forms of bias reflect broader societal prejudices (fatphobia, ageism, racism, transphobia) that manifest in online dating spaces. While such structural problems may not be fully solvable through design alone, platform-level interventions can help mitigate some negative impacts. Examples include improved moderation, more inclusive gender options, and algorithmic adjustments that do not simply reinforce conventional beauty standards. Additionally, features such as offensive language filters and customisable visibility settings can empower users to better control their experiences and reduce exposure to bias and harassment.

Finally, users' overall emotional satisfaction provides an important summary of their dating app experiences. When asked to rate their satisfaction, the most common response was neutral - about 39% of users felt neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. A small minority (about 2%) reported being very satisfied, while around 30% were somewhat satisfied, indicating that roughly one-third had a generally positive experience. Meanwhile, 27% were somewhat or very dissatisfied. This skew toward mixed or neutral responses suggests that while dating apps offer value to many users, they also leave a significant portion feeling unfulfilled or emotionally drained.

Figure 10.2

Overall User Satisfaction with Dating App Experience (1 = Very Dissatisfied, 5 = Very Satisfied)



Following the 1-5 scale, an open-ended question allowed participants to elaborate. Those who were satisfied often had a concrete success - *meeting a long-term partner*. Several respondents reported that they met their partner or even spouse through a dating app – some are in multi-year relationships or are married. Naturally, these users view the apps in a positive light, seeing them as effective tools for significant relationships. For example, one person said:

"I met my boyfriend on Tinder and I know many other people who met their partners via Tinder, so I believe it to be useful for significant relationships." (R4)

For these individuals, the outcome justifies the experience, and they tend to tolerate or overlook the app's inconveniences.

However, many others expressed dissatisfaction or emotional strain. A prevalent theme was frustration with the culture and behaviour on dating apps. Users complained of matches that did not follow – *"it rarely leads to any conversation and if so, it ends after a few messages,"* R43 wrote, describing a cycle of ghosting or shallow interaction that left them feeling discouraged. Another common complaint was dishonesty and mismatch of intentions; people presenting themselves one way or claiming to want a relationship, but actually just looking for a casual encounter. *"The majority of them are not honest about what they're looking for. They say long-term, but it turns out they just want one-night stands,"* R70 explained. This kind of deception can leave users fatigued and mistrustful of profiles they see.

Some participants described feeling discouraged or lonely from using the apps. One person (R19) admitted, *"I felt more lonely than before,"* despite using the app presumably to find a

connection. This paradox – that an app meant to bring people together can sometimes heighten feelings of isolation – is an important insight. It might be due to repeated rejections or the impersonal nature of swiping, making people feel like just another face in a crowd. Another user (R117) commented: *"Dating apps are only good for getting laid, and even then, it leaves you with an empty feeling afterwards."* This quote captures how empty or transactional the interactions can feel for some, leading to emotional burnout or cynicism, suggesting that dating apps may be primarily suited to certain types of relationships (such as casual dating and meet-ups) rather than encouraging deeper or more meaningful connections. There is also mention of addictive usage patterns: that same user (R117) observed friends who *"still use it out of loneliness or addiction and are struggling to detach themselves."* This suggests that the app design (endless swiping - the similar phenomenon can be observed with endless scrolling common on social media, variable rewards of matches) might "trap" people in a way that is not emotionally fulfiling and potentially unhealthy – a concern aligning with ethical design, where one would want to avoid exploiting addictive tendencies at the cost of user well-being.

Nonetheless, not all dissatisfied users feel negative towards the app itself – some criticise it based on the human element. *"Apps are great, it's the human factor that messes up everything,"* R2 mentioned, citing how some individuals behaved inappropriately or how people would ghost. Another said (R17) their dissatisfaction was because *"people are lying on their profiles,"* which again, is not rooted in the app functionality or concept. This perspective indicates that the technology might facilitate connections, but it cannot fully control user behaviour. Another challenge can be observed - how might the app encourage better behaviour, honesty, and courtesy? Some apps attempt this with guidelines or AI filters for harassing language. Users in the survey clearly notice the toxic behaviour ("*so much toxicity around those apps*," R43 said) and seek a more genuine, respectful environment.

Several users mentioned the monetisation aspect of dating apps impacting their emotional experience. They felt that if one does not pay for premium features, the algorithm ranks them down, making them "invisible". *"It's clear that those apps are built like a P2W game. If you want better recommendations, you need to pay… They fail to deliver and show profiles with different goals anyway"* (R9). Feeling forced to pay for a fair chance can lead to resentment and a sense that the system is manipulative, which affects one's experience negatively. Transparency around how the algorithm works for free vs. paid users, or ensuring a basic level of visibility for all, could alleviate this particular complaint.

6.1.8 Interim Conclusion

Users generally find profile-building features helpful for expressing both identity and intentions. Prompts and tags that clarify dating goals are especially valued, suggesting that clear communication through profile design improves matching outcomes. From a UX standpoint, profile interfaces should remain intuitive and flexible, supporting both creative self-expression and signalling of preferences. Since users rely on these fields to evaluate others, authenticity becomes crucial, potentially supported by community guidelines or verification features.

Usability across dating apps is largely smooth: onboarding is fast, interfaces are clear, and core interactions are intuitive. However, major frustrations are linked to mismatched results rather than interface flaws. When recommendations feel random or misaligned with user input, satisfaction declines. This highlights a core UX challenge: aligning the system's behaviour with user expectations, bridging the gap between usability and usefulness.

The data also reveals a transparency issue undermining trust in matching systems. Many users do not understand how matches are generated and suspect bias or monetisation influences. However, rather than accepting this, users call for greater transparency and control, pointing to a demand for more ethical and explainable systems. This reinforces the thesis aim of promoting transparent and user-centred algorithmic design.

A privacy-awareness paradox is also evident. While users express discomfort and often restrict permissions, few engage with in-app privacy settings. This suggests a need for more visible and empowering privacy tools, which could enhance trust and align with ethical UX principles.

Finally, the emotional experience of dating apps is mixed. While some users find meaningful connections, many report frustration, fatigue, and bias. These findings suggest that ethical and user-centred design must go beyond usability to include emotional well-being. Improving onboarding, reducing superficial swiping, addressing harassment, and promoting respectful behaviour could support healthier, more rewarding interactions.

6.1.9 Voluntary Interview

In the last section of the survey, there was an open-ended question with the possibility for the participants to input their email addresses - five participants expressed interest in taking part in the interview. The course and results analysis of the interviews will be described in the next chapter.

Table 4

Demographic Overview of Interview Participants

Participant ID	**Demographics (Gender, Age, Location)**
Participant 1	Male, 26, Denmark
Participant 2	Male, 29, Denmark
Participant 3	Male, 41, Poland
Participant 4	Female, 26, Denmark
Participant 5	Female, 26, Denmark

6.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of interview data from five participants, supplemented by survey responses from 130 individuals, was conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006). This process revealed six overarching themes that reflect participants' experiences and perceptions of dating app use: *Design Limitations and Usability Frustrations, Trust and Safety, Interactions Between Users and Emotional Dynamics, Algorithmic Opacity and Matching Doubts, Inclusion and Minority Representation,* and *User Control and Agency*. These themes capture both the functional and emotional aspects of dating app interactions, while also highlighting deeper concerns around identity, transparency, and inclusivity. Each theme, coded at the latent level, includes several recurring subthemes (semantic codes) and is supported by direct quotes from interview participants and survey respondents. Together, they present a meticulous picture of how technical and design choices influence user trust, decision-making, and overall user experience. The themes and their corresponding subthemes are summarised in Table 5, followed by quotes from the dataset. Each theme is then analysed in detail in the subsequent sections. Interview participants are cited as P(n), and survey respondents as R(n).

Table 5

Themes, Subthemes and Illustrative Quotes from Thematic Analysis

Themes (latent coding)	**Subthemes (semantic coding)**	**Quotes from data as examples of how participants talk about themes**
1. Design Limitations and Usability Frustrations	• Rigid profile setup and prompt requirements • Poor user onboarding and confusing interfaces • Interrupted setup flow causing user drop-off	• *"That's the hardest part because there's no examples… I don't finish the setting up." (*P5) • *"Grindr UI is confusing… Hinge interface is unclear." (*P1) • *"Then you come back and it actually reloaded… you have to put in everything."* (P5) • *"The apps are overused and there are too many options"* (R36)
2. Trust and Safety	• Mismatch between stated preferences and shown profiles • Lack of moderation and user verification • General distrust due to lack of transparency in filtering/matching	• *"I saw women even though my settings said men only."* (P1) • *"So many fake profiles… I feel it keeps getting worse."* (P2) •*"You could request… whatever information they store from you… I have a huge file."* (P5) •*"They need better safeguarding protocols for when men are disgusting on them, like removing their profile when they're reported"*(R106)

3. Interactions between Users and Emotional Dynamics	• Cyclical and reactive app use (burnout, deleting, rejoining) • Emotional discomfort with gamified or superficial interactions • Shifting personal intentions over time (casual to serious)	• *""Deleted them all… sometimes had them all."* (P1) • *"Download-delete cycle… pretty bad… depressing."* (P2) • *"Right now I'm more looking for something very casual… but maybe in two months…"* (P5) • *"The app is not the issue, people are. They say one thing but don't really mean it." (*R88)
4. Algorithmic Opacity and Matching Doubts	• Lack of transparency around how matches are selected • Perceived mismatch between user data and recommended matches • Confusion or indifference about AI presence in matching	• *"Don't understand matching algorithm."* (P1) • *"I didn't even know about this… AI matching?"* (P5) • *"I think it's related with your preference… age, location…"* (P3) •*"Algorithm does not show people that fit parameters of search and is very random as to whether likes come in"* (R81)
5. Inclusion and Minorities Representation	• Lack of inclusive filters and options for marginalized users • Designs that cater primarily to heteronormative experiences • Desire for community-specific design paths (e.g. queer-friendly modes)	• *"As a Latin woman… I'm just being perceived as an object."* (P4) • *"It's frustrating as a queer person when you still get straight men in your matches."* (P5) • *"I wish there was a queer-only mode or filter that actually works."* (P3) • *"dating apps have to better on cutting down on discrimination"*(R79)
6. User Control and Agency	• Desire for more flexibility in what users can show or hide • Low concern for data privacy despite high data exposure • Desire for transparency to regain control over experience	• *"I like having the option to choose what I link - Instagram, Spotify, or none."* (P2) • *"I block all my contacts… it's awkward when your boss shows up…"* (P4) • *"I really don't care about any data that I'm giving out… I reuse every single password…"* (P5) •*"I would suggest allowing matches to comment on their experience with each other [...]"* (R125)

6.2.1 Theme 1: Design Limitations and Usability Frustrations

Participants consistently highlighted friction points in the basic functionality and design of dating apps, emphasising that poor usability directly impacted their engagement. A prominent subtheme was the rigid and mandatory profile setup process, particularly the requirement to complete prompts before activating a profile. Participant 5 described this as "annoying," noting that not only was she unable to skip the setup, but also that the app would reset her progress if she closed it mid-process:

> *"[...] with the prompts that it's annoying that you have to set it up right away and then it disappears if you like put away your phone and you want to write something later. I don't know."* (Appendix C2.5, p.65)

This created a barrier to entry, especially for users who needed more time or creativity to respond to prompts. Additionally, confusing interfaces and onboarding were frequently mentioned, such as the use of nonstandard or cryptic icons (as noted by P5 when describing the Nectar app) or a lack of guidance during setup.

> *"But I'm not sure if I really like the UI right now. It's a bit confusing. Yeah, because they use their own navigation icons like they created very unique ones and you have no idea what you're clicking on because it's just shapes."* (Appendix C2.5, p.66)

These frustrations reflect a broader lack of accessibility and user-centred flexibility in the design. Further, interrupted flows and poor error handling, such as losing all input when exiting the app, discouraged completion and led to drop-off. While some participants appreciated features like linking to Spotify or Instagram, the overall sentiment pointed to a disconnect between the app's technical structure and users' real-world needs for flexibility, clarity, and iterative setup. These design limitations may appear minor, but they fundamentally shape whether users feel invited, frustrated, or excluded from engaging with the platform.

On the other hand, most of the participants, when asked about the ease of the onboarding process and profile set-up, expressed rather positive feedback: *"There were some hints and tips regarding when I was building my profile, so there was no issue to create one."* (Appendix C2.3, p.48). Participant 1 described his experiences with the use of different dating apps.

> *"They're usually the two ones that will remain that I use the most, um is Tinder and Grinder. Um, but that's okay, but that's mostly because of the because it's easy to use for me. Um, so like Tinder, for example, it's very straightforward. Doesn't need much."* (Appendix C2.1, p.25)

Survey data further reinforces users' frustrations with dating app interfaces and interaction design. Several respondents expressed ambivalence toward the gamified mechanics, with one noting, "*I think the main dating apps are seen as a 'fun game' to a lot of people, and they just like getting the rush of getting a match. Idk if that is a good or bad thing tho.*" (R77). While such features may encourage engagement, they can also contribute to emotional detachment or a sense of superficiality. Others pointed to communication challenges - particularly the reliance on text-based interaction - with one respondent admitting, "*I don't really like texting, so dating apps are complicated for me.*" (R24). Additionally, the sheer volume of available options was identified as overwhelming: "*The apps are overused and there are too many options,*" R36 shared, suggesting a sense of overwhelming choice overload. These responses align with interview data in revealing how design decisions can constrain user experience and add to cognitive or emotional fatigue.

On the other hand, the survey data revealed a somewhat different pattern - respondents generally did not report issues with usability features. As discussed in chapter 6.1.3, which explored the profile-building journey, the vast majority of respondents (84.6%) found the available tools helpful for self-representation. Additionally, nearly 80% indicated that it was easy or very easy to understand how to use the app during their first experience. This ease extended to adjusting filters such as age, distance, and gender, with 78.5% responding positively. Finally, 73% reported that locating key features - such as messages, settings, and filters - was relatively easy. These findings suggest that, despite certain frustrations reported in interviews, most users perceive dating apps as having intuitive and accessible navigation systems.

Concluding this theme, across the interviews, several participants voiced frustration with the design and usability of dating apps. Issues ranged from interface confusion to limited customisation options, especially when setting up a profile. Participant 1 commented on Hinge's interface, noting, "*I remember being always confused… am I now on the front page where I like, or am I on the… people have liked me page?*" Others found onboarding processes to be overwhelming or unnecessarily rigid, particularly when users were forced to complete multiple prompts or provide information that did not feel personally relevant. This aligns with Zytko et al.'s (2018) findings in chapter 3.2.5, which highlight how app interfaces often prioritise efficiency over user authenticity, pressuring individuals to present themselves in overly optimised or surface-level ways. The literature review also revealed that gamified interactions, such as swipe mechanics and limited daily likes, may contribute to decision fatigue and diminished satisfaction. In this study, participants expressed a desire for more control and clearer navigation flows, echoing broader UX research that emphasises the value of flexibility, transparency, and meaningful customisation in digital environments. The evidence suggests that while dating app interfaces aim to simplify interaction, poor design choices can hinder genuine connection and contribute to user disengagement over time.

This theme is well explained by Affordance Theory by Norman (2013), which highlights how users' frustrations often come from a mismatch between their expectations and what the app interface actually supports. When design elements are unclear or promote shallow engagement, users experience friction, confusion, or emotional fatigue, pointing to the need for more thoughtful and intentional UX design that reflects users' real intentions.

6.2.2 Theme 2: Trust and Safety

Participants frequently voiced concerns about the reliability and integrity of the dating apps they used, with trust and safety emerging as central themes. A common issue was the mismatch between user preferences and actual matches, particularly in queer contexts. For instance, Participant 5 expressed frustration that despite selecting "women and non-binary," she was consistently shown cisgender men, eventually leading her to report users.

> "*You can put who you're interested in and then because as a lesbian, you put a woman and then also non-binary people. But then it just shows you a bunch of men who are trying to date and then you're like no. Oh, I don't see that it's helpful. It's actually really annoying. And at this point, I started reporting people because I got to that level of anger. Because they like you and you see that they like you."* (Appendix C2.5, p. 67).

Another participant mentioned a similar issue: *"I don't know, I could be wrong, but it just seems like they're adding people who I don't want, gender wise, just like one or two every now and then."* (Appendix C2.1, p.31). This breach of expectation not only undermines the platform's filtering system but also signals to users that their identities and preferences are not being respected. Lack of moderation and verification was also a key concern; several participants noted the high prevalence of fake profiles or catfishing, which affected a sense of vulnerability. Participant 2, who had been using Grindr for over a decade, stated, "*So many fake profiles… I feel it keeps getting worse,*" while also noting the absence of meaningful verification tools. When asked about negative experiences on dating apps, participant 2 mentioned the issues of fake profiles (bots[2]) occurring on Tinder.

> *"... This is waste of time using such Tinder application. chatting with bots, especially when they were having photos of Asian girls. The scenario of discussion were pretty similar every time. That's why this is something that was disgusting me when I was using the application."* (Appendix C2.3, p.51)

[2] A "bot" (short for robot) in the context of dating apps refers to an automated account or software agent that mimics human interaction, often used for deceptive purposes such as data harvesting, phishing, or promoting external services (Ferrara et al., 2016)

Moreover, transparency around data handling and filtering logic was widely seen as insufficient. While some users were aware they could request data files (e.g., Participant 5), most were unclear about how matches were selected or what information was stored and used behind the scenes. These experiences collectively highlight that safety and trust in dating apps are not just technical challenges but deeply affect users' sense of control, authenticity, and emotional security.

Survey responses reflected many of the trust and safety concerns raised during the interviews. Several respondents expressed doubts about the authenticity of users and the integrity of platform moderation. One respondent (R16) emphasised, "*All profiles should be verified before showing up, because there is a lot of fake acc.*" This view was shared by another (R27), who noted that while dating apps can be enjoyable for casual connections, "*it is very easy to fake profiles and spread false information, so you never know.*" These comments suggest that concerns about misleading identities can erode trust and limit the potential for meaningful engagement. In addition to profile authenticity, data privacy also emerged as a key issue: "*If they resolve the issue of data sharing or privacy concerns, it will be a great value addition to these dating apps.*" (R94). Together, these reflections underscore a desire for safer, more transparent, and better-regulated digital spaces for romantic and social interaction.

Furthermore, as described in chapter 6.1.5, almost 50% of respondents expressed a lack of trust that the app's algorithm matches people fairly (only 23% answered in a positive manner, while the remaining 27.7% stayed neutral). When asked about algorithm matching people fairly based on set preferences, nearly 40% answered that they do not trust it. Most people choose a neutral answer, which can be linked to a lack of knowledge or awareness. In addition to respondents' concerns about fake profiles and the lack of safety measures, survey data visually reinforces this general sense of unease. As illustrated in figure 8.4 (p. 61), responses to the question about feeling concerned with suggested matches reveal that many users experience some level of uncertainty or discomfort while using dating apps. Although the responses span the full scale, the majority cluster around the midpoint, indicating that concern is not uncommon. This suggests a widespread underlying tension among users, not always equalling distrust, but enough to affect their perception of safety and reliability. It supports the qualitative findings in which users reported unease over profile authenticity and the ease with which others can misrepresent themselves.

Participants often linked these experiences to a broader lack of platform accountability. While some apps now offer profile verification features, their implementation was described as inconsistent or ineffective. This reflects concerns raised by Farnden, Martini, and Choo (2015) described in chapter 3.2.3., who found that many dating apps store and manage sensitive user data - including location, age, and sexual orientation - in ways that raise ethical and safety questions. In this study, several users actively adjusted their privacy settings or restricted contact access, citing fears of being "found" by people from their real-life networks. The perceived absence of safeguards extended beyond fake

profiles to broader emotional and physical safety. One participant suggested integrating an SOS or emergency button into the app - a reflection of how seriously users view the risks associated with digital dating. This aligns with calls in the literature for dating platforms to implement privacy-by-design principles and user-centred safeguards that go beyond cosmetic safety features. Trust in dating apps, as evidenced by this study, is deeply tied not only to how data is handled but to how well platforms protect users from manipulation, harm, and emotional exploitation.

In summary, concerns about fake profiles, unclear data practices, and user behaviour show that trust and safety remain key issues for dating app users. Networked Learning Theory helps explain how people build their understanding of what is safe based on others' experiences and stories, not just from the app itself. Affordance Theory is also relevant - it highlights that safety features need to be clearly visible and easy to use, or users might feel unprotected. While design choices matter, users also rely on social cues and shared knowledge to decide whether they feel secure. Together, these theories highlight that trust and safety are shaped by both design and social experience.

6.2.3 Theme 3: Interactions between Users and Emotional Dynamics

Participants described their engagement with dating apps as highly cyclical, emotional, and context-dependent, highlighting how design and interpersonal experiences shape ongoing usage patterns. One recurring subtheme was the download-delete cycle, often driven by burnout or disillusionment. Participant 2 reflected this, calling Grindr "pretty bad… addictive… depressing," and describing how emotional fatigue led to repeated deletion and reinstallation. This pattern was also visible in Participant 1's statement, "Deleted them all… sometimes had them all," signalling how dating app use becomes reactive rather than intentional. Another important subtheme was the **e**motional discomfort with gamified or superficial interactions, particularly on apps like Tinder. Participant 4 compared it to a "supermarket," describing it as "online shopping" that lacked authenticity or depth. *"...[Hinge] it's better than Tinder, since then, there is just like, kind of like a supermarket, in my opinion, kind of thing, like online shopping."* (Appendix C2.4, p.54)

Meanwhile, when asked about emotions associated with the activity of using dating apps, participant 5 described usage as "doom scrolling," often driven by boredom rather than genuine connection-seeking. *"I think usually I'm bored. That's why I also, it's like doom scrolling, but then you're doing it on a dating app. In the beginning, I felt horrible, honestly."* (Appendix C2.5, p.72) The shifting nature of dating goals also influenced how users engaged. While some, like Participant 5, reported changing intentions depending on life stage, others described a general openness to various outcomes.

> *"Apparently, I'm looking for a long-term relationship, open to short. I think right now, like this month, I'm more looking for something very casual, very funny, better. But maybe in two months, I would be open to something more serious."* (Appendix C2.5, p.65)

As Participant 4 expressed:

> *"For me, it's to get to know like people that I feel like attracted to, which could either lead to a casual thing or friendship or, like, a long-term relationship. If we're gonna be hoping, we all hope for like, you know, finding love in a way."* (Appendix C2.4, p.53)

This highlights how motivations for using dating apps often resist simple categorisation, and how apps that rigidly classify users' intent may fail to accommodate their evolving expectations and emotional realities. These behaviours reveal how users' emotional states and life circumstances intersect with app design, sometimes strengthening the connection but often increasing fatigue, confusion, and a sense of alienation. Apps that ignore this emotional complexity risk pushing users toward disengagement or surface-level interaction. These emotional states and user experiences are explored in more depth in chapter 6.3.3, where Flow Theory is applied to better understand how different design elements impact user engagement and satisfaction.

In the open-ended survey responses, many participants reflected critically on the emotional and social outcomes of using dating apps. Several respondents shifted the blame away from the technology itself and pointed instead to broader social patterns: "*The app is not the issue, people are. They say one thing but don't really mean it.*" (R88). Similarly, others emphasised that the challenges lie in the digital culture and expectations it builds: "*It's not necessarily a problem with the apps… the issue lies in society and the digitalisation.*" (R130). A recurring sentiment was that dating apps encourage shallow or short-lived interactions. One user noted, "*Dating apps are only good for getting laid, and even then, it leaves you with an empty feeling afterwards,*" (R117) while another added, "*They come with a downside on the psychological and social impact… they can affect individuals on a self-esteem level, auto perception, communication skills, etc.*" (R74). For some, the gamified experience provided short-term excitement - "*people just like getting the rush of getting a match*" (R77) - but this often gave way to emotional fatigue and cynicism. These insights support the interview findings and illustrate how dating apps not only connect people but also shape emotional responses that range from excitement to frustration, disillusionment, and even withdrawal. Finally, survey results on overall satisfaction with dating apps (rated on a scale from 1 to 5) showed an average score of 3.02, suggesting a generally neutral or mixed level of user satisfaction.

While dating apps are often positioned as tools for romance, companionship, or casual interaction, this study revealed a much more emotionally layered and complex landscape. Users expressed a wide spectrum of feelings throughout their experiences, ranging from excitement and hope to frustration, fatigue, and emotional detachment. These findings align closely with existing research (chapter 3.2.1) that highlights the affective dimension of dating app use. For example, Sumter et al. (2017) found that motivations for using Tinder include not only romantic or sexual interest but also curiosity, boredom relief, and self-validation, which can result in mixed emotional outcomes over time.

Several participants described moments of excitement when a meaningful connection appeared to emerge - "*It's exciting… I really want to meet this person… they seem so sweet,*" said Participant 4, reflecting on the anticipation of meeting someone perceived as compatible. However, such moments were often offset by more difficult experiences, such as ghosting or disappointing in-person encounters. The same participant articulated this emotional volatility: "*You get a great chemistry with someone online… then you see them in person and get the ick*." Another recounted being called "opinionated" after answering a prompt sincerely, leading to feelings of rejection or misalignment.

These emotional swings - from hope to disenchantment - echo the work of Wu and Kelly (2020), who discuss emotional burnout in app usage, particularly when engagement feels gamified or inauthentic. In this study, several participants referred to the repetitive, transactional nature of interactions: "*This is a waste of time… chatting with bots*," said one, while another commented on the fatigue that comes with "downloading and deleting" apps in cycles. These accounts suggest that dating apps not only facilitate social interaction but also shape affective labour, often amplifying feelings of vulnerability, discouragement, and even cynicism.

At the same time, the desire for emotional authenticity and meaningful engagement remained strong. Participants appreciated thoughtful prompts and profile features that allowed some form of self-expression, even if they also acknowledged the limits of such tools. This tension between the potential for connection and the emotional cost of navigating digital spaces underscores the importance of centring emotional dynamics in dating app research and design. Interactions between users are not purely rational exchanges - they are embedded in emotional contexts, shaped by expectations, cultural scripts, and interface design.

6.2.4 Theme 4: Algorithmic Opacity and Matching Doubts

Across participants, there was a clear sense of uncertainty, confusion, and even scepticism regarding how dating apps determine and display matches. A dominant subtheme was the lack of transparency around algorithmic processes. When asked about perceived AI transparency and functionality in dating apps, Participant 5 plainly stated, "*I didn't even know about this… AI matching?*" reflecting the

widespread perception that apps fail to explain their matching mechanisms. Participant 4 similarly admitted, "*I don't really have any idea how it works*," while expressing concerns that algorithms are more focused on encouraging monetisation than meaningful connection:

> *"I think it's kind of shady, like, of course, they are there to profit from people who are looking for love. And, you know, like love and sex, it's a concept that kind of overthrows God, even if you want to say it in a bad way. So I feel like, of course, their best interest is people, like, spending money on it, so they're not gonna, kind of like, make you find, you know, like a straight match right away from your like, preferences and stuff like that. But you know, like, it's fair, because it's a business, so…"* (Appendix C2.4, p.56)

These insights point to perceived manipulation or commercial bias, where users suspect that the app's logic prioritises user engagement over actual compatibility. Another subtheme involved the perceived mismatch between user input and suggested profiles. Multiple participants noted being shown people who did not align with their preferences or past interactions, leading them to question whether their data was truly being used meaningfully. Interestingly, Participant 5 had gone as far as requesting her data file from Tinder, highlighting how some users actively try to understand or reclaim visibility into how they are profiled.

> *"Once I actually requested my profile, because there was this huge thing about the algorithm of Tinder, and people were saying that their profile is not being shown and why. And then you could request whatever information they store from you. And I requested that information and I have a huge file, but it was years ago, so I don't remember what was inside. But there are definitely a lot of things inside, like when you logged in, when you opened the app, what times usually, when did you delete, come back, all of this information."* (Appendix C2.5, p.69)

Others, like Participant 3, displayed a more passive relationship to algorithms, stating, "*I haven't been analysing this so much*," though still expressing moderate trust or lack of interest. Together, these perspectives underline that a lack of algorithmic clarity can negatively affect trust, particularly when match suggestions feel misaligned or when users sense they are being nudged toward premium features rather than authentic connections.

Responses from the open-ended survey questions also revealed a consistent concern around the perceived randomness and lack of transparency in algorithmic matching. One respondent (R81) noted that the "*algorithm does not show people that fit parameters of search and is very random as to whether likes come in,*" pointing to a disconnect between user preferences and what the system displays. Others shared a broader scepticism about the underlying logic of the algorithms: "*The*

algorithm is designed for you to need to constantly come back to it. Therefore, it does not support you in finding your 'future partner"" (R60). This critical view aligns with suspicions that engagement and monetisation are prioritised over compatibility. Additionally, users called for clearer communication, as reflected in the comment: "*I suggest that these apps give more insight on how they determine these algorithms.*" (R67). Finally, concerns about trustworthiness surfaced alongside doubts about algorithmic fairness, with one respondent stating that "*all profiles should be verified before showing up, because there is a lot of fake acc.*" (R16). These responses highlight not only frustration with algorithmic opacity but also how it intersects with broader concerns around authenticity and user experience.

The findings of this theme tie strongly to the literature review findings mentioned in chapter 3.2.2. Participants expressed varying degrees of trust in dating app algorithms, with many highlighting a lack of clarity in how potential matches were selected. While some users acknowledged having little understanding of the system ("*I don't really have any idea how it works"*), others were more critical, not due to ignorance, but because they suspected the algorithms were primarily designed to drive engagement and monetisation. One participant stated, *"They're not gonna make you find a straight match right away… their best interest is people spending money on it,*" indicating a belief that paid users were favoured in the matching process. These concerns reflect findings from the literature review, where scholars such as Wu and Kelly (2020) emphasise that opaque matchmaking processes often reduce perceived fairness and authenticity. Their study showed that users may feel disconnected when interactions are heavily shaped by unseen AI systems. Additionally, Farnden et al. (2015) revealed how algorithmic decisions are frequently tied to monetised visibility, which undermines user agency. The research results expand on these concerns by showing that some of the users are not merely confused by the algorithm - they are critically aware of its commercial logic and view it as manipulative. Thus, trust in algorithmic matchmaking appears less dependent on technical understanding and more on the perceived integrity and fairness of the system itself.

From a theoretical perspective, Affordance Theory (Norman, 2013) offers a useful lens for understanding users' frustration with algorithmic opacity. When dating apps do not clearly signal how preferences influence outcomes, or when matches feel random, users experience a breakdown between perceived and actual affordances. This undermines user agency and trust, revealing a gap between system behaviour and mental models. Additionally, such doubts are often escalated through shared narratives and peer interactions, as highlighted by Networked Learning Theory (Haythornthwaite, 2008), where trust or scepticism in algorithms can circulate within users' social learning networks. While Flow Theory may be less central here, extended confusion or lack of feedback may slow down users from reaching a satisfying or immersive experience, reinforcing disengagement rather than flow.

6.2.5 Theme 5: Inclusion and Representation of Minorities

Participants - particularly those identifying as LGBTQ+ or culturally marginalised - frequently described feelings of exclusion or misrepresentation on dating platforms, despite having access to apps marketed as inclusive. A key subtheme was the lack of inclusive filters and functional preference settings, which resulted in participants being shown matches that contradicted their expressed identities. Participant 5, for instance, selected "women and non-binary" as preferences but was repeatedly shown cisgender men, stating, "*It just shows you a bunch of men… I started reporting people.*" This experience occurred in the case of Participant 1, who noted being shown women despite selecting men only. These experiences suggest systemic flaws in how user identities are honoured - or ignored - by platform algorithms. Another subtheme addressed the dominance of heteronormative experiences, with users expressing frustration at how platform culture centers straight, cisgender users. Participant 4, a Latina woman, mentioned unpleasant experiences where she often felt reduced to a stereotype (induced by other users or perhaps the algorithm):

> *"They just want a pretty girl that comes from South America to [..], have it in the checklist. [..] I'm just being perceived as an object [..] I have faced a lot of petty situation and, yeah, it's, it is a topic that we don't speak enough, because then it's also like, the stereotype of, like, yeah, you're like, a toxic Latina, oh my God, you're probably crazy and stuff like that. And I'm like, the way I am. I cannot kind of go against delegations, right? But, you know, it's not nice to say those things [..]"* (Appendix C2.4, p.60)

Such experiences point to how identity-based bias is planted in both the design of the system, through broken preference filters, defaults, and user flows, and in user interactions shaped by broader platform culture. Finally, some participants voiced a desire for community-specific or queer-friendly modes to carve out safer, more relevant spaces. Participant 5 brainstormed, "*Maybe a separate dating app for queer people… different experience,*" underlining the need not just for inclusive settings, but for environments that centrediverse identities by design. These reflections show that inclusive UX is not simply about offering options - it is about making those options functional, visible, and respected across the user journey. Last but not least, providing a safe, respectful space for the community.

Open-ended responses from the survey further revealed concerns about exclusion, appearance-based bias, and identity-based discrimination. One respondent pointed out that "*top profiles are usually people that can be generally described as visually beautiful/handsome,*" highlighting how beauty standards dominate visibility within the apps. Several participants, especially from the LGBTQ+ community, described experiences of exclusion and objectification. For instance, R73 noted: "*In the gay scene you are literally ignored and blocked by some if you are not super muscled… People of*

colour are often fetishised," reflecting how both body image and race intersect to shape negative interactions. Another individual, identifying as non-binary, shared how both men and women questioned their legitimacy, saying: "*even though there is no such thing as a 'real' man or woman.*" (R93). These perspectives showcase broader concerns about limited gender and identity representation and how dating apps can reinforce narrow norms. As one user reflected, "*people on dating apps hold high expectations for in-person interactions that are not reasonable to fulfil*" (R117), pointing to a disconnect between appearance-driven interfaces and the complexity of real-life identities. These experiences reflect not just individual frustrations but a broader issue rooted in social media culture, where algorithmic design and visual-first interactions often reinforce unrealistic beauty standards that are often portrayed on social media. Instead of helping people feel accepted and seen, they can make those pressures even stronger.

Issues of inclusivity, representation, and bias were consistently raised by participants, particularly those who identified as members of marginalised or minority groups. For these users, dating apps were not neutral platforms but spaces where cultural assumptions, stereotypes, and exclusionary dynamics frequently surfaced. These observations are consistent with studies such described in chapter 3.2.4, which highlight how interface design, filtering mechanisms, and implicit algorithmic biases can limit the visibility and desirability of users who do not conform to dominant beauty standards or identity categories.

In the interviews, one participant spoke openly about how, as a Latin woman, she often felt hypersexualised and objectified by potential matches: "*They're not afraid to tell you they'd take you to bed right away… I'm just being perceived as an object.*" This supports the broader findings in dating app research (described again in chapter 3.2.4) that examine how racialised and gendered biases manifest through both user behaviour and design structures (Chen, 2024). Rather than promoting inclusive environments, dating platforms may inadvertently reinforce damaging stereotypes and facilitate the fetishisation of certain groups.

Another participant from the LGBTQ+ community described the dating app environment as "*very racist regarding social status*" and noted that some profiles explicitly stated preferences for whiteness or particular body types. These kinds of interactions reinforce patterns of exclusion and social sorting, turning what should be spaces for exploration and connection into arenas of discrimination and judgment.

Such feedback highlights a key concern in the literature: dating apps often provide insufficient space for identity expression beyond binary gender or normative preferences (Zytko et al., 2018). While some platforms have begun to introduce more multifaceted gender and orientation options, participants in this study still felt that the capacity to present a fuller, more authentic self was often

constrained, whether through rigid profile structures or the lack of moderation on discriminatory behaviour.

To counter these issues, participants offered suggestions ranging from better profile verification and anti-discrimination guidelines to the incorporation of design features that support meaningful cultural and political alignment. As one participant reflected, "*I don't want to date someone from the right wing… I wish I could filter that from the start.*"

These experiences affirm the need for inclusive UX practices and ethical algorithm design that account for diverse identities and resist reinforcing marginalisation. As digital dating becomes a normative part of social life, it is critical that platforms design for equity and dignity, not just efficiency or scale.

From a Networked Learning perspective, dating apps are not just platforms for romantic connection - they are digital ecosystems where norms, identities, and expectations are negotiated through ongoing interactions. For users from marginalised groups (such as LGBTQ+ communities), this often means learning how to navigate biased design structures and cultural assumptions embedded in the app experience. As Steeples and Jones (2002) suggest, meaningful knowledge gaining occurs through socially situated exchanges; yet, when users face exclusion or stereotyping, the opportunity for mutual understanding and authentic engagement is disrupted. Networked Learning Theory thus highlights the need for more inclusive design that supports diverse identities and encourages unbiased participation in these social-technological spaces.

6.2.6 Theme 6: User Control and Agency

The ability to customise one's experience and manage personal information emerged as a meaningful aspect of user satisfaction, though participants expressed differing levels of concern about data privacy. A recurring subtheme was the desire for more flexibility in how profiles are built and displayed. Participant 5, for example, proposed a modular system where users could treat profile elements, allowing people to highlight music, social media, or values based on what matters most to them:

> *"I mean, this would be fun that you could do different things on it, like kind of like widgets or something like that with your phone. So if you want to put music and it's really important for you, you put your Spotify first and then if you want to connect your Instagram, you can put it next to it or something like you kind of build your own. OK, whatever is important for you, like if for some reason Twitter is important for someone because they tweet all the time."* (Appendix C2.5, p. 66)

This reflects a broader need for user-centred customisation, rather than fixed, one-size-fits-all profiles. Additionally, several participants noted taking active steps to manage their visibility and data exposure, not necessarily due to fear, but to avoid awkward encounters. Participant 4 shared, "I block all my contacts… it's awkward when your boss shows up," while Participant 1 said he refused contact permissions to avoid being seen by people in his network. Furthermore, despite these efforts to manage visibility, concern for data privacy itself was often low. As Participant 5 stated, "*I really don't care about any data that I'm giving out… I reuse every single password,*" highlighting a gap between user behaviour and security awareness.

However, this indifference did not always signal trust - more often, it reflected resignation or lack of transparency. What users repeatedly called for was not just control over what they share, but more transparency around how platforms use their data and preferences. Participant 4 expressed her view on how her data is collected:

> *".... Because I feel like, [..] when you're accepting, like this kind of like dating apps, [..] they get to hold a lot of information about you, [..]. Conversations people get like [..] if you're me, then you're a little bit of an overshare. Like, you can just say a lot of shit about your life, your emotional state, [..] your family, your beliefs, and then, of course, they say that data, [..] you can almost see it afterwards, you get into [..], Tik Tok, Instagram, and you get ads for specific topics that you didn't get before."* (Appendix C2.4, p. 57)

In this sense, agency is not only about settings - it is about giving users a sense of ownership, autonomy, and clarity in how their digital selves are represented and managed.

Participants' reflections on privacy and personalisation suggest that user agency extends beyond discrete control mechanisms and into the realm of system transparency and feedback. While some interviewees expressed low concern for data privacy, such as Participant 5, who noted, "*I really don't care about any data that I'm giving out*", this did not necessarily indicate trust or satisfaction. In fact, many participants revealed an underlying curiosity or scepticism about *how* their data was being used. For example, Participant 5 actively requested her Tinder data file, while Participant 4 described noticing shifts in targeted advertising after using dating apps. These accounts reveal a desire not just for control over what data is shared, but for greater understanding of how that data influences platform behaviour.

A recurring theme in both interviews and survey responses was a sense of limited control over the dating app experience. While users are provided with basic filters and customisation options, many felt that deeper intentions - such as the kind of relationship they were seeking - were not well supported by the platforms. One respondent (R112) noted, *"I think it's good to have different sections on what people are looking for, like hookups vs relationships,*" highlighting a desire for more tailored

matchmaking pathways. Another (R114) shared a wish for dating apps to better bridge online and offline interactions: "*Maybe consider adding features that support real-life dating rather than spending most time chatting online.*" Additionally, many survey participants expressed a clear interest in gaining more insight into how the algorithm works and how matches are generated (refer to chapter 6.1.5, figure 8.5). This reflects a broader need for transparency and agency, suggesting that users not only want more control over what they see but also over how the system behind the app operates. Together, these insights point to a gap between user expectations and the current affordances of dating apps when it comes to navigating personal goals, values, and trust.

This theme captures the tension between user autonomy and the platform-driven nature of dating apps, where certain design choices and monetisation strategies limit how users interact with content, shape their visibility, and manage their personal data.

Several participants expressed frustration over restricted access to features, especially those locked behind paywalls. The freemium model, employed by most dating apps, was perceived as gatekeeping core functionalities such as unlimited swiping, seeing who liked them, or accessing expanded filtering options. As one participant noted: "*You only have a few likes to send… which is not a lot. So you have to choose wisely*" (Participant 2). This pressure to make each interaction count, paired with the awareness of paid users having more advantages, introduced a sense of inequality in the user experience. These findings align with Zytko et al. (2018), who argue that gamified designs often push users toward more strategic and less authentic interactions.

The lack of transparency around algorithmic logic further complicated users' sense of agency. Many interviewees acknowledged they did not fully understand how matches were presented or why certain profiles appeared. While some attributed this to a lack of interest in reading terms and conditions, others speculated that apps might intentionally obscure these processes to encourage repeated engagement or purchases. As one participant shared: "*They want you to pay for the upgrade… so that's what they are usually highlighting*". This reflects concerns in the literature (chapter 3.2.2) that AI-driven matching, when not explainable, reduces user trust and minimises feelings of control (Wu & Kelly, 2020).

In terms of data control, user practices varied. Some participants admitted they rarely reviewed their privacy settings or gave much thought to what data was being collected. Others, however, actively adjusted app permissions, especially to hide their profile from people in their contact list. For instance, one user commented: "*I don't feel that everyone needs to know I have a profile on that application*" (Participant 5). This reflects a basic desire to manage visibility and maintain boundaries between digital and personal life, reinforcing what Farnden et al. (2015) highlight as a growing demand for more accessible and meaningful privacy controls (chapter 3.2.3).

Interestingly, the feeling of limited agency did not always come from technical constraints. Some participants also reflected on how app culture and user behaviour shaped their interactions. The fear of being ghosted, the expectation to initiate contact, or emotional fatigue from superficial connections influenced how users chose to engage or disengage. This social layer of control, or lack thereof, highlights the entanglement of technological design and human dynamics.

From a user experience perspective, this theme highlights how perceived agency is shaped by the alignment between users' mental models and system feedback (Norman, 2013). When users' inputs feel ignored or inconsistent with outcomes, trust and control can diminish. Affordance Theory further explains this by focusing on how design signals what actions are possible. In dating apps, users expressed a need for clearer distinctions between relationship intentions and more support for real-life transitions. These findings suggest a gap between what users expect and what the app affords, pointing to a broader UX challenge of creating transparent, responsive, and empowering systems.

To summarise, user control and agency in dating apps are mediated by a combination of technical affordances, monetisation strategies, and social expectations. While platforms provide certain customisation options, the overarching system often favours engagement and revenue generation over user empowerment. These findings suggest the need for more transparent, user-centred design that prioritises ethical data use, inclusivity, and meaningful choice over behavioural manipulation.

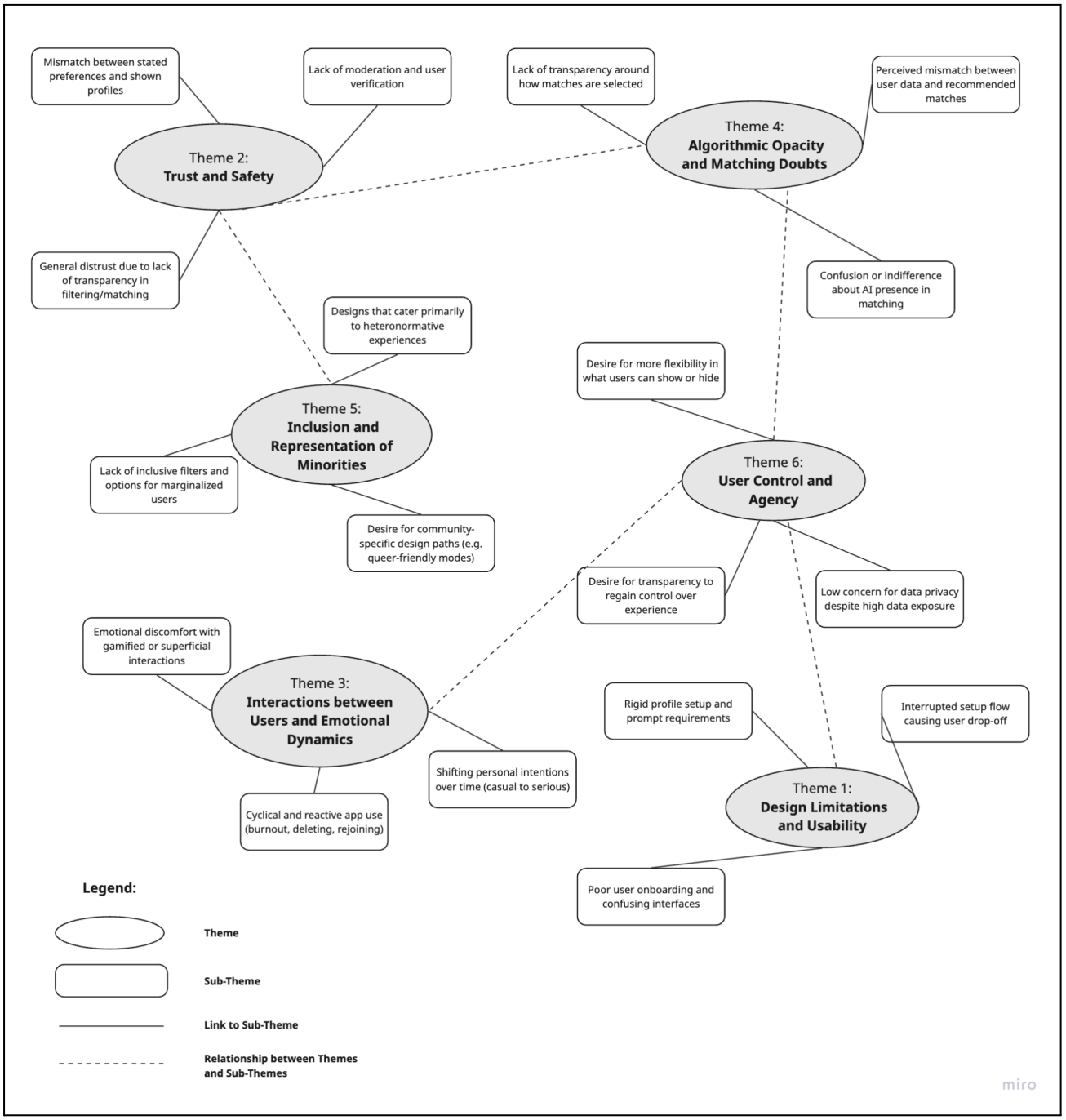
6.2.7 Connections between the Themes and Theories

Connections between subthemes across themes are not only common but *valuable* in qualitative analysis; they reveal how users experience the app in complex, interrelated ways, not in isolated categories. Braun & Clarke encourage looking at the *relationships between themes* to deepen the analysis. Therefore, figure 11 showcases the map of themes, subthemes and how they are connected with each other.

While each theme in this analysis stands on its own, many subthemes revealed strong interconnections, underscoring the complex, linked nature of user experiences with dating apps. As Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise, thematic analysis benefits not only from identifying discrete patterns but also from exploring the relationships between them (p.92). For instance, a recurring sense of mistrust in algorithms (Theme 4) often came from the mismatch between stated preferences and shown profiles, which also appeared under concerns related to safety and identity (Theme 1 and Theme 5). Similarly, frustrations with static design structures (Theme 2) frequently influenced users' emotional states and cyclical engagement with apps (Theme 3), pointing to a feedback loop between design limitations and behavioural responses. These thematic overlaps illustrate that user trust, decision-making, and perceived inclusion are shaped not by isolated features but by how technical and design elements interact across the user journey.

Figure 11

Thematic Map of Key Themes in Dating App Use



6.3 Interpreting User Actions through the Theories

6.3.1 Affordance Theory and Sociotechnical Adaptation

Affordance Theory, introduced by Gibson (1977) and extended by Norman (1999), explains how users perceive and act on interaction possibilities offered by interfaces. On dating apps, both actual and perceived affordances influence behaviours around swiping, profile creation, messaging, and privacy.

Participants described apps like Tinder and Grindr as "easy to use" and "straightforward," reflecting strong perceived affordances - users understood available actions through visual cues and prior app experiences. One user compared swiping on Tinder to "*scrolling Instagram*" (Interview P2), showing how learned conventions shape interaction. However, perceived affordances reflect what users think they can do, not necessarily what's supported (Norman, 1999).

This mismatch appeared with Hinge prompts. Though designed to support self-expression, several users found them restrictive: "It's hard for me to portray anything meaningful with those preset questions" (Interview P4). The prompts did not afford the flexibility needed for authentic identity representation.

Uncertainty about algorithmic matching also revealed affordance breakdowns. Users expressed confusion: "*I don't really have any idea how it works*" (R60, Appendix B2). Some received matches that ignored set preferences, undermining transparency and trust. The system afforded matching but not predictability, limiting users' sense of control.

Privacy settings added to the confusion. Many blocked contact list access on Tinder, fearing it would alert others to their presence. In reality, the feature is meant to hide known contacts (Tinder, n.d.). This highlights a misalignment between user and system models -while the app affords control, its intent is not clearly communicated.

Emotional affordances were equally important. Some users described excitement and hope: "*I really want to meet this person; they seem so sweet*" (Interview P3). Others reported frustration and fatigue: "*This is a waste of time… chatting with bots*" (R88, Appendix B2). These emotional outcomes reflect how repetitive or gamified designs can hinder deeper engagement.

Monetisation further shaped perceived affordances. One Grindr user noted: "I can only see 20 profiles unless I pay" (Interview P5). Placing core features behind paywalls reduced perceived access and fueled scepticism about fairness.

These experiential frictions point to a deeper sociotechnical dynamic. Users do not engage with dating apps in isolation but as part of a broader network that includes platform norms, interface conventions, algorithmic logic, and social expectations. Drawing from Networked Learning Theory (Haythornthwaite, 2008), it becomes clear that users gradually build tacit knowledge about how to operate within this ecosystem. They adapt behaviours, interpret cues, and adjust their strategies based on feedback-often without formal guidance.

This is particularly evident in moments of "boundary crossing" (Engeström et al., 1995), such as transitioning from Tinder to Instagram, or moving from online chat to offline dates. Each shift demands a recalibration of self-presentation, tone, and expectations. Such navigation underscores that dating apps are not just tools but informal sites of learning and social negotiation.

In summary, Affordance Theory highlights how users engage with dating apps on functional, emotional, and cognitive levels. Gaps between perceived and actual affordances - especially when design is unclear - lead to confusion and mistrust.

Mental Models Comparison

A central tension identified through Affordance Theory is the mismatch between users' mental models and the systems designers build. Users often expect dating apps to enable easy, authentic, and spontaneous connections. In contrast, features are often optimised for engagement and monetisation, resulting in vague matching logic, repetitive swiping, and frustration.

For example, users interpret prompts and profile suggestions as chances for discovery and self-expression. Yet designers may prioritise retention and behavioural nudging. This misalignment shows that affordances are not neutral-they're shaped by design goals that may conflict with user expectations. Recognising and addressing this divergence is key to more transparent, user-centred design.

Table 6 compares users' expectations with system realities, illustrating the consequences of affordance mismatches and miscommunication.

Table 6

Mental Models Comparison Table

Conceptual Area	User Mental Model (Survey + Interview Insights)	Designer's Model (Affordances & System Design)	Supporting Data (Survey + Interview Insights)
Purpose of the App	Users perceive apps as tools to find love, connection, casual fun, or kill time - expectations vary and may shift over time	Apps are designed to maximise engagement and monetisation, using personalisation and gamification	34.6% said app "supports the dating goal well (e.g. long/short-term, casual, fun, etc.)" - survey, figure 5.3
Matching Logic	Users expect alignment with preferences and authenticity, but often do not understand or trust how matches are generated	Matching is driven by opaque algorithms influenced by monetisation, location, and swiping patterns	~60% reported not understanding the matching and algorithm process - survey, figures 8.1 and 8.2
Profile Representation	Users want space to express themselves (bios, photos, identity), but often feel constrained by prompts or	Platforms standardise onboarding to reduce friction; prioritise visual first impressions	Qual. data: "Not really, because [..] I am a very deep person, so it's hard for me to [..] be able to

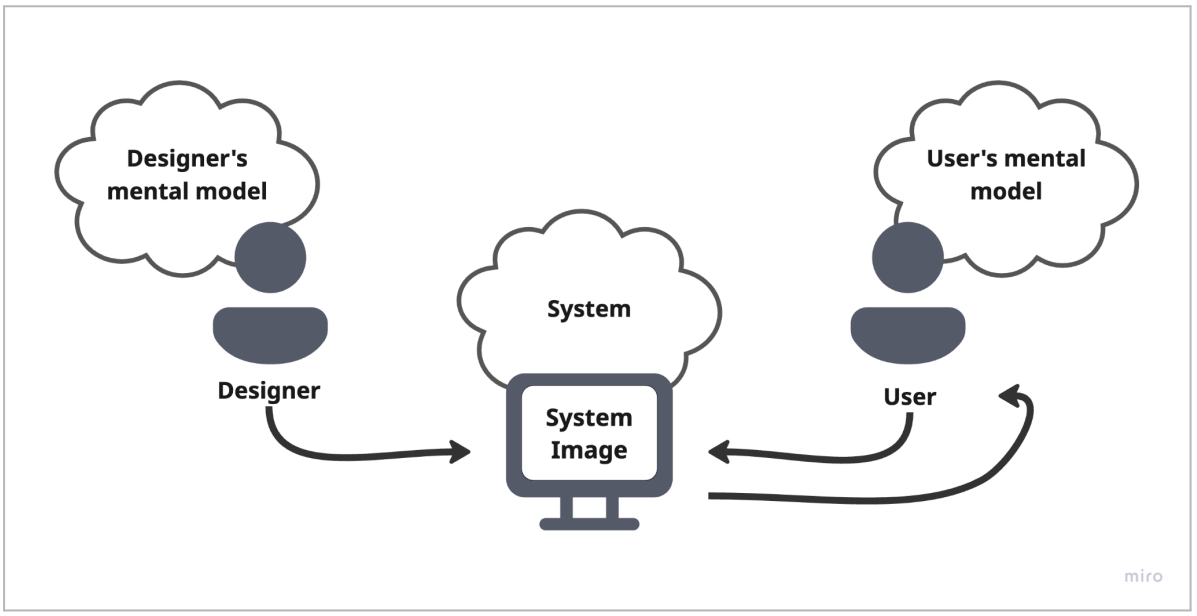
	limited customisation		portray something based on a generic kind of question" - interview, P4, Appendix C2
Visibility & Control	Users want control over who sees them and how visible they are (e.g. blocking, privacy, contacts)	Some controls exist, but premium features often gate key visibility tools	When asked about adjusting privacy settings in dating apps, many responded "yes" and "sometimes" - figure 9.3 (survey data)
Emotional Engagement	In surveys and interviews, users express hope, excitement, but also fatigue, rejection, and gamification burnout.	Apps are optimised for intermittent reward loops, swiping addiction, and dopamine triggers.	"I delete and redownload constantly" - interview with P1&2, Appendix C2

Survey data further supports these observations. For instance, nearly one-third of respondents indicated they were unsure how the matching algorithm works, while 34.6% agreed and 8.5% strongly agreed that dating apps support their dating goals well. This reflects a complex learning curve or the fact that the knowledge to understand the algorithm is not available nor easily accessible for the users - which was observed in the previous subchapter 6.3.1 Affordance Analysis; while some users adapt and find value, others remain uncertain or sceptical, reinforcing the idea that learning is not uniform but shaped by context, access, and reflection.

The Mental Models Comparison Table (Table 6) highlights key mismatches between users' mental models and the system model embedded in the dating app design. This dynamic can be further illustrated through Norman's (2013) conceptual model of designer, system, and user mental models (figure 12). While designers intend certain behaviours through the system image, such as promoting engagement or monetisation, users often form divergent understandings based on their interactions with the interface. These gaps in mental models help explain user frustrations with opaque matching algorithms, limited control features, and emotionally fatiguing interactions identified in this study's survey and interview data.

Figure 12

Adapted from Norman's (2013) conceptual model of designer, system, and user mental models. The Design of Everyday Things. Basic Books. (Original work published 1988).



6.3.2 Flow Theory

Flow Theory, developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), describes a psychological state of deep immersion and engagement, occurring when task challenges are balanced with the user's skill level and the activity provides clear goals, immediate feedback, and a sense of progression. In the context of dating apps, interaction patterns such as swiping, real-time notifications, and instant matching are designed to facilitate similar flow-like experiences.

Participants described using dating apps to fill idle moments or for casual engagement: *"Instead of going on social media and scrolling, swiping and seeing new people is also fun sometimes."* Such activities align with flow conditions - easy entry, immediate interaction, and low effort - similar to casual gaming or social scrolling (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

However, while apps further repetition, they often fail to sustain flow over time. Respondents described stagnant or frustrating experiences: *"Sometimes feels like a constant cycle of the same people shown, even when 'swiped' no."* (R90). Another remarked: *"Pretty waste of time, only works some times."* (R83). When feedback loops are ambiguous or progress feels blocked, flow breaks down, leading to disengagement or emotional fatigue.

Importantly, social uncertainty and inconsistent outcomes, such as matches that do not lead to conversation, further disrupt flow and may trigger anxiety. One respondent explained:

> *"I feel like there is so much toxicity around those apps. Even if you match with people, it kinda stays there; it rarely leads to any conversation and if so, the conversation most commonly ends after a few message exchanges."* (R43, Appendix B2)

In Flow Theory terms, this represents a mismatch where challenge exceeds perceived skill or control (unclear social norms, unpredictable responses), resulting in worry or anxiety states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

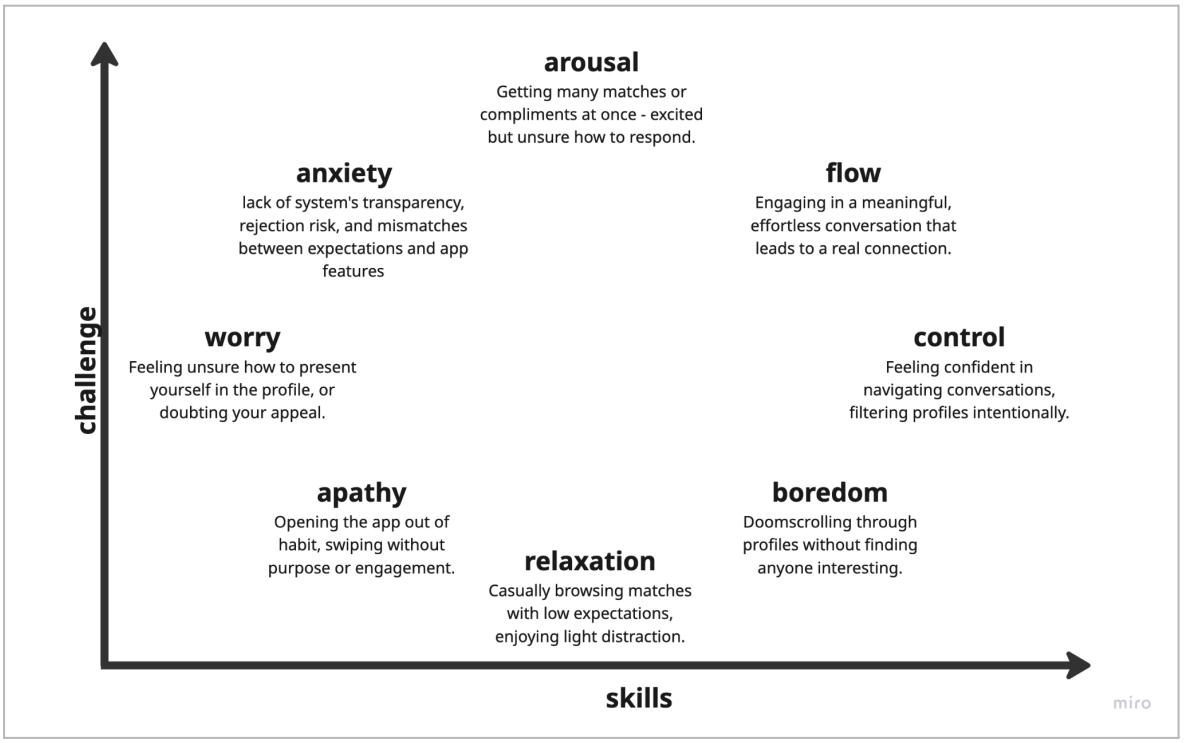
Monetisation further fractures the experience. As Participant 1 noted, *"There is literally no way to meet anybody unless you pay."* This shifts the experience from fluid progression to perceived external barriers, undermining autonomy and intrinsic motivation, both crucial to sustaining flow.

Positive moments were still present: *"It's always nice to get a like… it's a confidence boost,"* one participant shared. However, these instances were described as exceptions, not the norm.

In sum, while dating apps borrow flow-supporting mechanics, their opaque algorithms, social uncertainty, and monetisation strategies frequently disrupt sustained flow, instead contributing to fatigue, frustration, and anxiety cycles, as reflected in the adapted Flow chart for this study (figure 14).

Figure 13

Different States in Flow Theory - Dating Apps

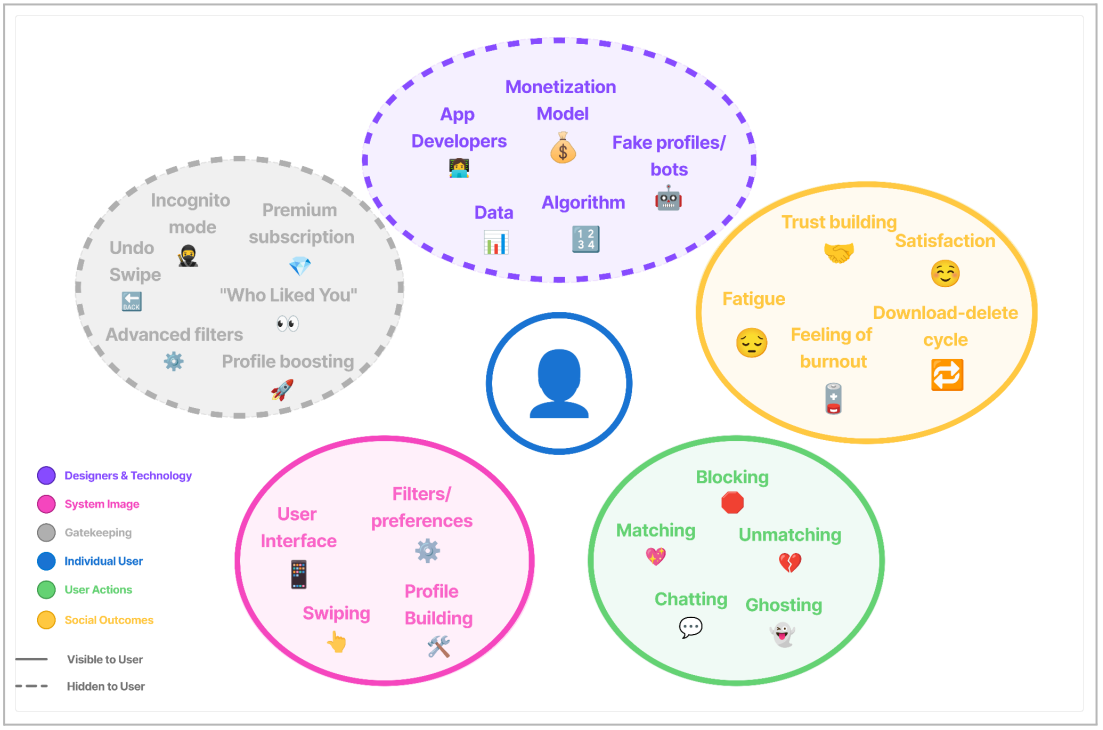


6.4 Interim Conclusion

The analysis has demonstrated that dating apps operate within a complex sociotechnical ecosystem, where user experience emerges not only from interface design but also from the interplay of algorithmic logic, social behaviours, platform monetisation models, and cultural expectations. By applying frameworks, this research has highlighted both effective aspects of UX (such as intuitive usability and lightweight onboarding) and persistent challenges, such as opaque matching logic, paywalled features, and emotional fatigue.

Figure 14

Networked Learning in the Dating App Ecosystem

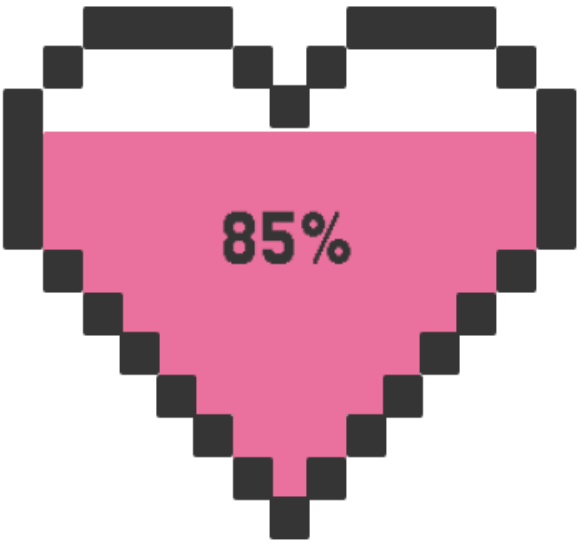


To synthesise these insights, figure 13 provides a conceptual visualisation of the dating app ecosystem, adapted from principles of Networked Learning Theory (Haythornthwaite, 2008). This mapping illustrates how the individual user is embedded in a network of technological, social, and economic actors. While core features such as swiping and profile building offer clear affordances and positive usability, deeper dynamics - including algorithm-driven gatekeeping, hidden monetisation mechanisms, and unmoderated social behaviours can create friction and diminish trust, which overall affects user experience.

This visualisation also showcases tensions between user expectations and system design: whereas users seek transparency, meaningful connection, and emotional satisfaction, platform models often prioritise engagement loops and revenue generation. Recognising this misalignment is crucial for informing more ethical, human-centred design practices, which will be further explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 7

Design



7 Designing the Solution

The earlier analysis identified key user challenges in dating apps, including limited control, superficial interactions, emotional fatigue, and concerns around inclusivity and trust. These findings point to a disconnect between user needs and the priorities embedded in platform design. While dating apps function as digital meeting grounds, many prioritise metrics like engagement and monetisation as swiping mechanisms or paywalled features over emotional depth, transparency, or ethical interaction (Tyson et al., 2016; Alisadeh et al., 2024). As a result, the experience may feel gamified or transactional, rather than meaningful.

This chapter marks the start of the "Develop" phase within the Double Diamond model (Design Council, 2005), where insights from the “Define” phase inform ideation and prototyping. Rather than propose a universal solution, the design directions aim to address user-identified pain points and aspirations. Drawing on frameworks such as Affordance Theory, Networked Learning Theory, and Flow Theory, the design explorations in this chapter seek to support more inclusive, emotionally resonant, and transparent dating experiences.

7.1 “Date like a Pro” Onboarding Quiz

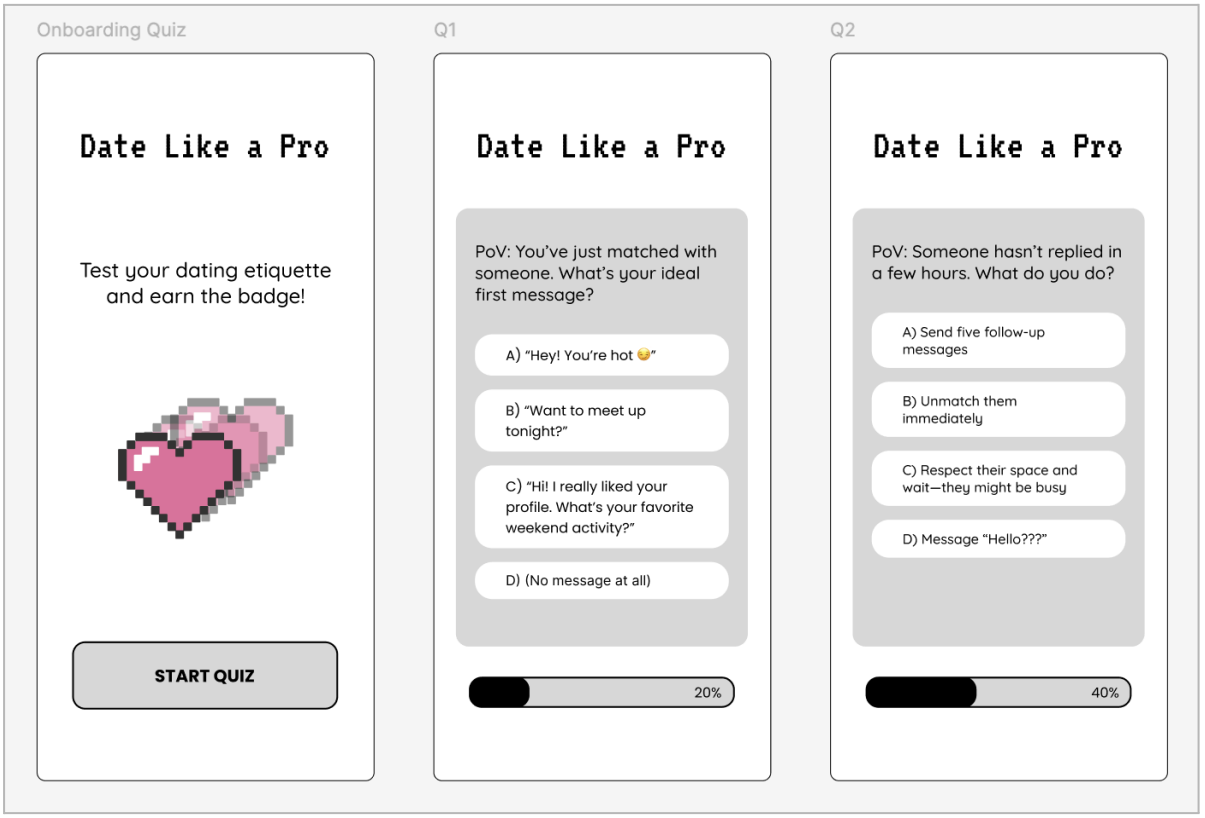
To promote respectful and inclusive user behaviour within the dating app environment, this design solution introduces an interactive onboarding feature in the form of a gamified quiz titled “Date like a Pro”. Embedded within the user onboarding flow, the quiz presents a series of multiple-choice questions and brief scenarios related to digital consent, communication etiquette, and online dating norms. The experience is designed in alignment with Peter Morville’s UX Honeycomb (2004), with particular emphasis on creating an experience that is useful, usable, and desirable.

To ensure the onboarding quiz aligns with best practices in human-centred design, Don Norman’s six design principles were applied throughout the concept. Visibility was addressed by presenting all interactive elements - such as multiple-choice responses and navigation buttons - in a clear, intuitive layout with appropriate colour contrast and spacing. Feedback was incorporated through a confirmation screen upon completion that explained the badge earned. Affordances were designed into the interface, such as tappable answer cards.

The overall flow leveraged natural mapping, with a linear progression from question to question and interface conventions consistent with common onboarding patterns. Constraints were used deliberately: users could only proceed after selecting a response, and the quiz was kept short (5 questions) to avoid fatigue while still encouraging engagement.

Figure 15

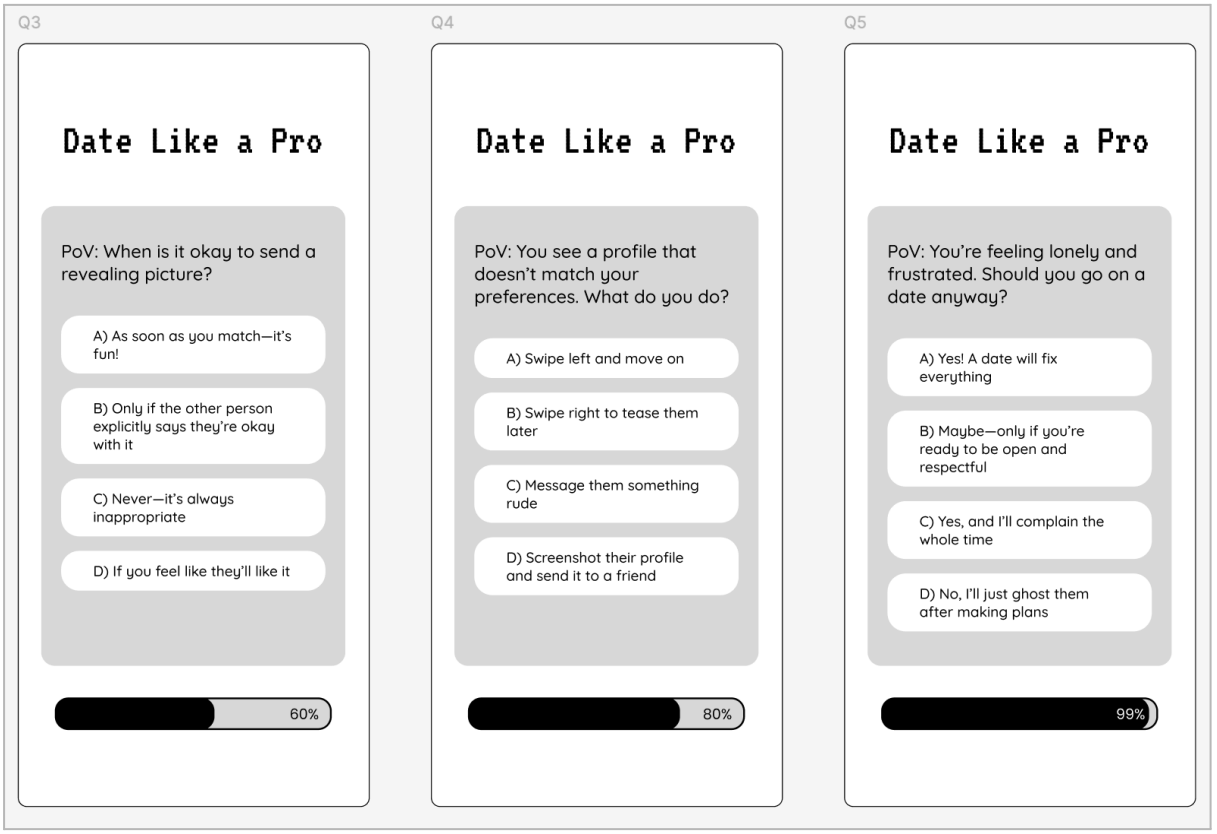
Onboarding Quiz (Intro, Questions 1&2)



Finally, visual and tonal consistency was maintained across the experience, ensuring alignment with the broader app interface and reinforcing familiarity. Collectively, these principles supported a respectful, inclusive, and user-friendly onboarding experience that communicates behavioural expectations without friction or confusion.

Figure 16

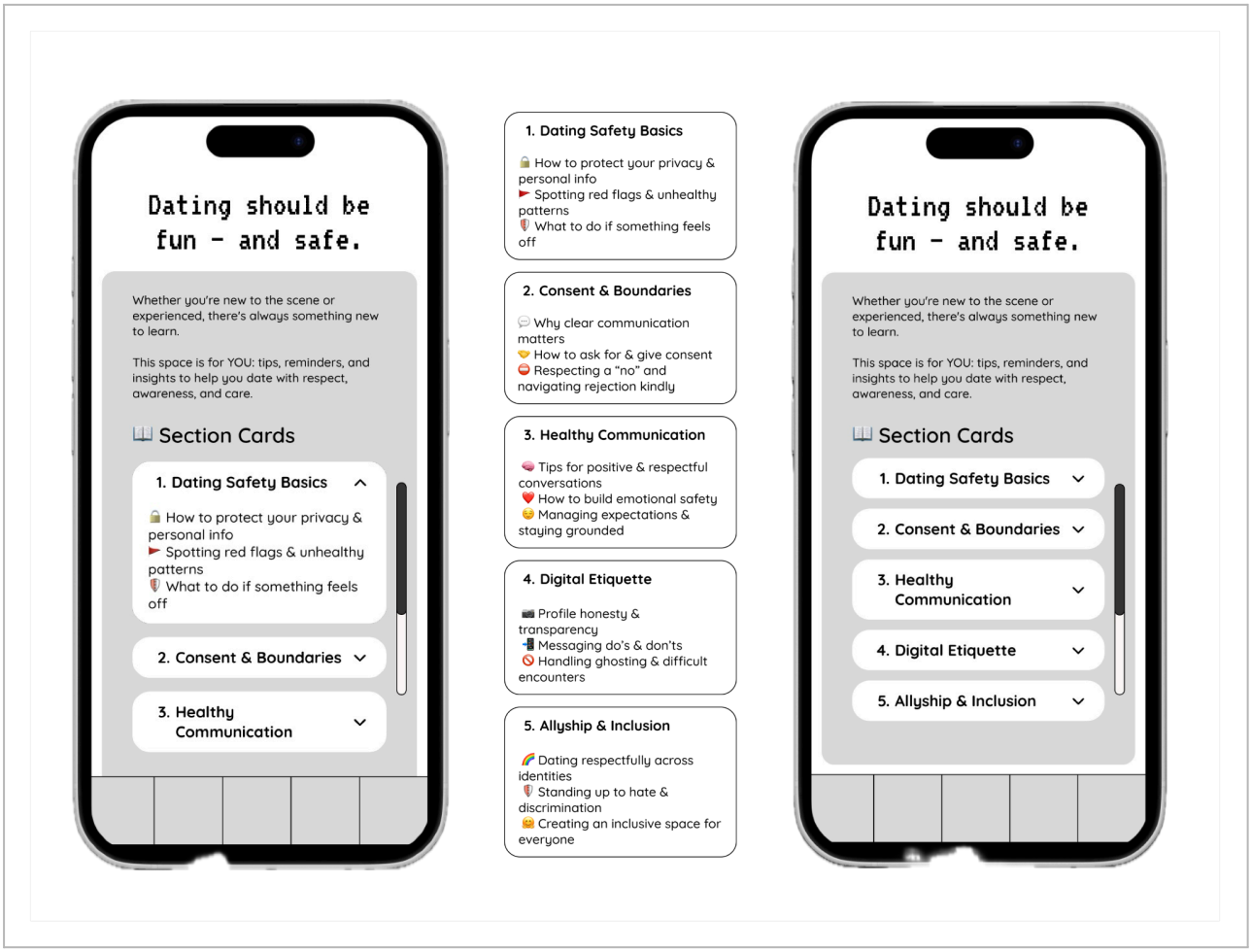
Onboarding Quiz (Questions 3,4&5)



This solution directly addresses key challenges identified during the user research phase, including the prevalence of unwanted behaviours such as unsolicited images, ghosting, and disrespectful communication. By encouraging values of empathy and accountability in the onboarding experience, the design seeks to shift platform culture from the outset. Upon completion, users receive a badge-linked title (e.g., Kind Conversationalist, Consent Champion) and are invited to display it on their profile. A short explanatory message emphasises that displaying the badge may nurture trust and lead to more thoughtful connections. By combining interaction design principles with ethical behavioural nudges, this solution supports user reflection while contributing to a safer and more respectful dating environment.

Figure 17

Wireframes "Date n Learn" - collapsed & non-collapsed sections ofeducational content



As an extension of the onboarding experience, the *"Date n Learn"* feature is designed to provide users with accessible, in-app education on safe and respectful dating practices.

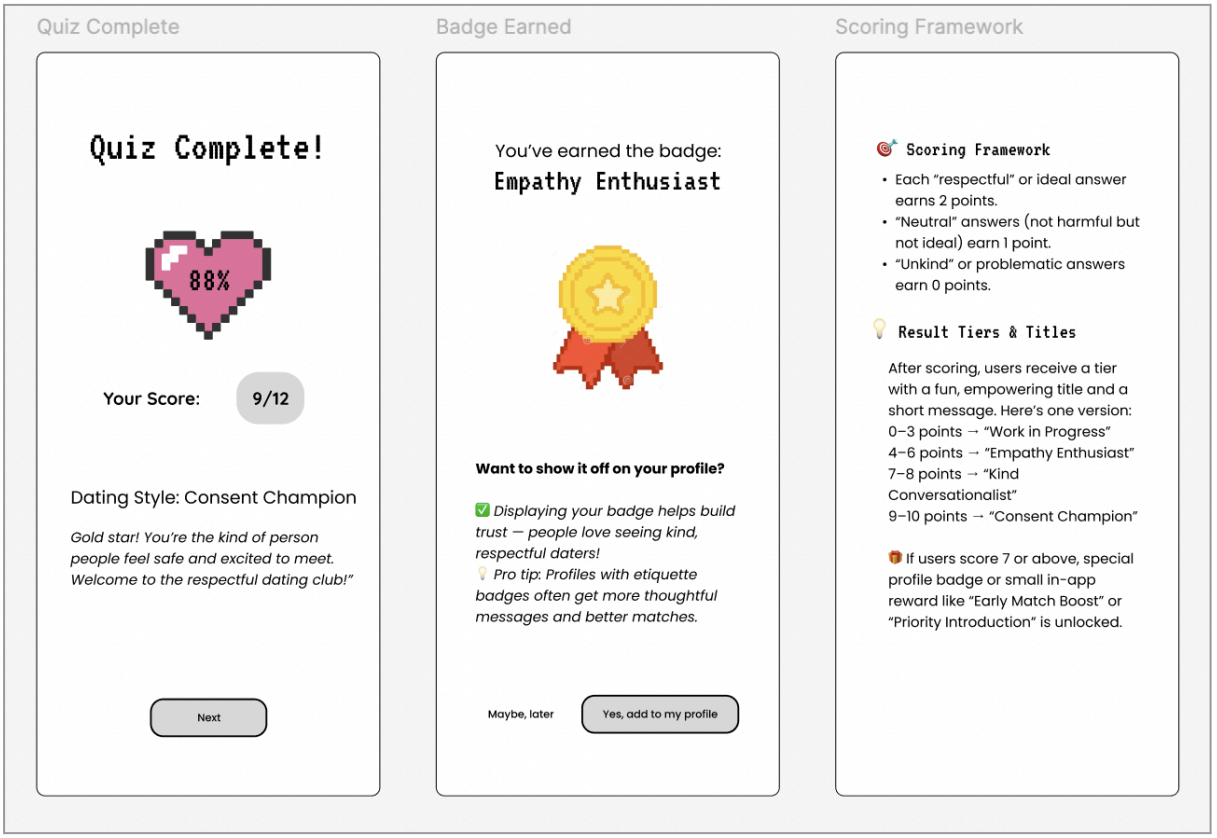
The section is introduced by a header that clearly communicates the purpose of the page: promoting awareness, safety, and inclusivity in dating.

The content is organised through a Table of Contents with collapsible chapters, allowing users to easily navigate between different topics and control their reading flow. Each chapter can be viewed in an expanded (non-collapsed) or collapsed state, supporting flexible interaction and preventing information overload. Topics covered include dating safety, consent and boundaries, healthy communication, digital etiquette, and allyship and inclusion.

To encourage engagement, the feature also integrates a light gamification element: as users complete sections, they can unlock badges (e.g., *"Consent Champion"*) that can optionally be displayed on their profile. This adds a positive reinforcement mechanism while signalling respectful behaviour to other users. The aim is to encourage a more mindful, informed, and supportive dating app community.

Figure 18

Wireframes Quiz Complete, Badge Earned, Scoring Framework



Following the *"Date Like a Pro"* quiz, users are presented with personalised feedback screens that reinforce positive behaviours and encourage self-reflection. The Quiz Complete screen displays the user's score and an accompanying "Dating Style" title (e.g. *Consent Champion*) to promote a sense of achievement.

If users score above a certain threshold, they are offered an optional badge (e.g. *Empathy Enthusiast*) which can be displayed on their profile to signal respectful intentions to others. The system is designed with a tiered scoring framework, providing different result categories and motivating users to improve.

This approach not only builds user trust but also adds light gamification to support learning, profile authenticity, and community norms, ultimately contributing to a safer and more transparent dating app environment.

7.2 Tackling the Algorithm Opacity

In addition to the onboarding redesign, this study proposes further UX enhancements to increase data transparency and user control on dating apps. Insights from the thematic analysis revealed that many users feel uncertain about what data is collected and how it influences their experience, contributing to mistrust and dissatisfaction. In line with human-centred design principles (Maguire, 2001), usability

heuristics (Nielsen, 1994), and data ethics literature (Farnden et al., 2015; Rosenfeld et al., 2019), the following features are proposed as part of a more transparent and trustworthy data experience. A summary Table of these potential features is presented below; prototyping and testing of these ideas is planned as part of future work.

Table 7

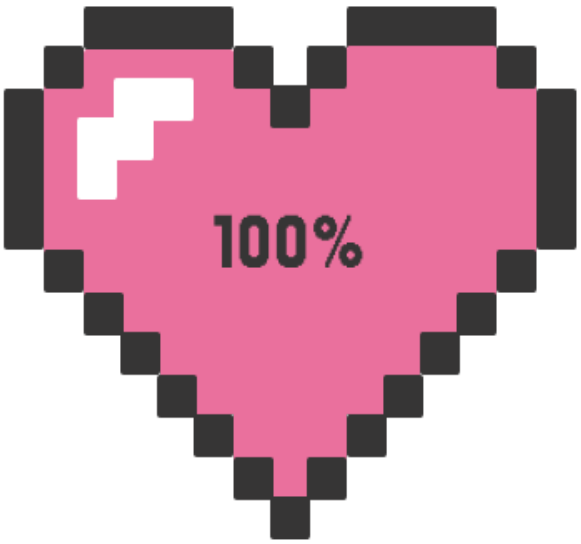
Proposed UX Features for Data Transparency and User Control

Feature / Mechanism	User Benefit	Supports UX Principle	Supports Trust & Transparency
1. Data Dashboard (clear overview of what data is collected and why)	Informs users about data flow and processing	Visibility, feedback (Norman, 2013); Maguire (2001)	Transparency, informed decision-making
2. Granular Consent Settings (opt-in/opt-out for specific data uses)	Enables control over personal data usage	User control, flexibility (Nielsen, 1994)	Informed consent, compliance (GDPR)
3. Explainable Algorithm pop-up (explains match suggestions in simple terms)	Reduces confusion, helps users understand system behavior	Visibility, feedback	Algorithmic transparency, fairness
4. Data History Log (record of profile changes and interaction history)	Builds user awareness and ownership of personal data	Feedback, accountability	Transparency, user rights (Rosenfeld et al., 2019)
5. Data export & full deletion option	Allows users to retrieve or permanently delete their data	User control, empowerment	Ethical data practices, privacy rights (Farnden et al., 2015)
6. Periodic Privacy Check-ins (regular prompts to review privacy settings)	Keeps users informed and engaged in their data choices	Engagement, feedback	Ongoing informed consent, ethical UX

These proposed features align with the study's overarching goal of introducing transparent, user-centred design in dating applications. By enhancing user agency and reducing ambiguity around data practices, they aim to support greater trust, satisfaction, and ethical engagement on dating platforms. Implementing such features would also respond directly to user concerns uncovered in this study regarding algorithmic opacity and privacy limitations, contributing to a more inclusive and empowering UX.

Chapter 8

Discussion & Conclusion



8 Discussion & Conclusion

This chapter reflects on the research findings and process, critically evaluating the chosen methods, theoretical frameworks, and positioning of the study. The thesis aimed to explore the UX of dating applications - specifically Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge - with attention to onboarding, personalisation, perceived algorithmic fairness, and users' emotional responses. While AI and data collection were acknowledged, the primary focus remained on UX and user behaviour.

8.1 Applying the Double Diamond Framework

The research was grounded in the Double Diamond framework (Design Council, 2005), which provided a clear structure through phases of divergence and convergence - from initial exploration to problem definition and conceptual design. This model supported an iterative, user-centred approach: starting with a literature review and survey (Discover), synthesising findings via thematic analysis (Define), and developing a design solution (Develop). The flexibility of the framework proved well suited to the human-centred nature of this study, balancing theoretical inquiry with actionable design outcomes. In addition, Norman's design principles (1999) - such as visibility, feedback, and affordance - informed both the analytical lens and design decisions, ensuring alignment with intuitive and ethical UX. Broader theories, such as Networked Learning and Affordance Theory, further contextualise dating apps as sociotechnical systems, helping to interpret user behaviours beyond isolated interface interactions.

8.2 Contributions of the Literature Review

The literature review was significant in identifying gaps, particularly the underexplored connection between algorithmic opacity, UX design, and emotional experience. While algorithmic matchmaking is widely studied, its experiential impact on trust, satisfaction, and emotional well-being remains less developed in existing work. This thesis contributes to filling that gap by showing how a lack of control and transparency in matching systems affects user perceptions. Additionally, survey findings reinforced these themes, revealing scepticism toward algorithmic fairness, desire for customisation, and emotional patterns such as frustration, hope, and disconnection. These insights directly informed the design concept - a playful, trust-building onboarding quiz with badge display - to address both user education and trust enhancement.

8.3 Reflections on Research Philosophy (Social Relativist)

This study was approached from a social relativist perspective, recognising that user experiences of dating apps are situated, subjective, and shaped by both individual interpretation and sociocultural context. Rather than seeking an objective "truth" about algorithms, the focus was on how users perceive and emotionally respond to algorithm-driven processes - a choice consistent with UX research's human-centred values. This philosophical lens also informed methodological decisions: prioritising mixed methods to capture both breadth (survey) and depth (interviews), and emphasising participant voices throughout analysis.

8.4 Limitations and Challenges

Several limitations must be acknowledged. While the survey exceeded expectations (130 full responses), the sample was skewed toward Millennial and Gen Z users, predominantly in Europe. Interview participants, though diverse in preferences, were mostly based in Denmark - a factor that may shape cultural interpretations of dating app use. The semi-structured interviews provided valuable insights, but some questions could have been more exploratory, potentially allowing richer emergent themes. Additionally, the study did not deconstruct proprietary algorithms due to both commercial confidentiality and scope. Instead, it focused on user perceptions, aligning with the project's UX-centred goal. Future research could combine this perspective with technical investigation to deepen understanding of algorithmic bias and fairness. Finally, while design prototyping was successfully initiated, formal usability testing will follow post-submission to validate the solution with users and further refine it based on feedback.

By applying an iterative, human-centred approach, this thesis demonstrates how dating apps shape - and are shaped by - users' experiences, expectations, and emotional journeys. The findings highlight both the potential for more transparent, ethical design and the ongoing challenges in aligning user mental models with opaque system architectures.

8.5 Conclusion

This thesis has explored dating applications from a socio-technological perspective, with a particular emphasis on user experience (UX) and the design decisions that shape users' trust, behaviour, and emotional engagement. The research was driven by the central problem statement:

How do UX and design choices in dating apps influence users' trust, decision-making, and overall experience? And how can design be used to create more inclusive, respectful, and transparent interactions on these platforms?

Rather than answering this problem statement directly, the thesis addressed it through three research questions, each tied to a core component of the research process. RQ1 was explored through the literature review, RQ2 through user research and analysis, and RQ3 through a proposed design solution. These are addressed below.

RQ1: *How do design and technical features in dating apps influence user interaction, personalisation, and visibility?*

The literature review revealed that while dating apps rely heavily on algorithmic decision-making to drive matchmaking, the underlying logic of these systems remains opaque to users. Scholars have raised concerns about personalisation, bias, and the ethical use of behavioural data. Existing research highlights that although AI may increase efficiency, its lack of transparency often undermines user trust and may contribute to feelings of disempowerment. These findings emphasise the importance of explainable AI and ethical interaction design in contexts of intimacy and emotional vulnerability.

RQ2: How do users experience and evaluate the UX of dating apps, particularly in relation to trust, control, and alignment with their dating goals?

Survey and interview results indicate that users often feel conflicted: while apps offer convenience and social access, they also elicit frustration, emotional fatigue, and doubts about fairness. Participants reported difficulty understanding how match suggestions are generated, which often led to perceptions of randomness or manipulation. These sentiments were especially strong around paid features and limited identity options. Overall, UX is not only about interface usability deeply shapes how users interpret others' intentions, assess their self-worth, and determine whether to continue using the app.

RQ3: How can UX design interventions, such as onboarding, ethical nudges, or transparency features-support inclusive and respectful user experiences in dating apps?

In response to these insights, a design solution was proposed: an onboarding quiz that introduces behavioural expectations in a playful, engaging format. Rooted in Norman's design principles and UX

best practices, the feature promotes respectful conduct while offering users the choice to display a badge on their profile. In addition to the onboarding quiz, an educational content section was also conceptualised, providing users with accessible resources on topics such as consent, safety, and respectful communication. Together, these interventions introduce a more informed and supportive dating environment. This design intervention addresses user concerns around community norms, emotional safety, and clarity, contributing to a more transparent and intentional dating experience. While only a conceptual prototype, it represents a user-centred response to the findings.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to ongoing conversations about ethical design in emotionally charged digital spaces. It highlights the importance of addressing not only what dating apps do, but also how users feel about what they do. By focusing on perceived transparency, emotional outcomes, and inclusive design patterns, this research advocates for a more responsible, thoughtful approach to UX in dating platforms. Future work could deepen this inquiry through technical audits of algorithmic systems, longitudinal studies on match satisfaction, or collaborative design with marginalised communities to co-create safer digital environments for connection.

8.6 Future Considerations

This thesis revealed key challenges and opportunities in the UX of dating apps, particularly in areas of trust, inclusivity, emotional impact, and perceived fairness. However, the rapidly evolving nature of these platforms presents ongoing questions and potential pathways for future research and design innovation.

One promising direction is deeper exploration of user interface (UI) patterns - specifically how visual hierarchies, interaction design, and micro-interactions shape user decision-making, engagement, and emotional outcomes. Future studies could also extend beyond in-app behaviour to examine user satisfaction after matches progress to real-life interactions. Understanding post-match outcomes would offer valuable insight into whether current UX and algorithmic designs truly support meaningful and lasting connections.

Additionally, focus groups could be employed to show richer, dialogic perspectives on user needs and frustrations across more diverse communities, especially underrepresented groups not fully reflected in this study’s sample. While this thesis touched on perceptions of algorithmic fairness, further work is needed to analyse the actual decision-making logic of matchmaking systems and their role in prioritising or excluding profiles. Pairing UX research with deeper technical investigations could help uncover the often invisible mechanisms shaping user experience, outcomes, and well-being.

As outlined in Chapter 7, there are also clear opportunities to enhance data transparency and user control in dating apps. While the present study did not prototype these features in depth, they

provide a strong foundation for future design iterations and usability testing, which could be pursued in post-submission development or collaborative industry contexts.

Ultimately, advancing more ethical, transparent, and emotionally supportive dating app experiences will require continued dialogue between users, designers, and researchers - ensuring that these global platforms evolve to better reflect and serve the diverse realities of digital intimacy.

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