

“How would I know what I would want from or with them?": Supporting A-Spec Approaches to Developing Relationships Through Online Platforms

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Abstract

Online platforms have become a key avenue for forming new relationships, especially for queer individuals. However, some individuals, such as those in asexual and aromantic communities (A-Spec), seek forms of relationships that trouble existing frameworks assumed by online platforms, such as dating apps. To investigate A-Spec needs, we conducted an 8-week ARC study with 38 A-Spec participants who have used online platforms for developing relationships. Participants described a mismatch between the design of dating apps and their approach to building relationships, suggesting platform design that combines affordances of dating apps and other social platforms. We thus outline a “process-oriented” paradigm for relationship-building platforms inspired by community design suggestions, supporting participants’ process of first establishing a low-stakes relationship and then co-constructing its properties. We also argue for a “pluralized” approach to defining identity and relationship in the design of online systems, upsetting default assumptions surrounding any given label.

CCS Concepts

- Human-centered computing → Social media; Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing.

Keywords

Asexual, Aromantic, Queer HCI, Non-Normative Relationships, Dating App Use, Asynchronous Remote Community Method

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1 Introduction

HCI scholars have frequently investigated the use and design of dating apps, platforms built to match users in the same locale seeking sex, romance, or even friendship (e.g., [18, 51, 71]). This has particular affordances for marginalized users such as queer users, who can find new queer connections with unprecedented ease [16, 18, 50]. However, their design has also been noted to encode norms that cause friction for marginalized users, such as how rural gay users did not fit into platforms’ “scripting of desire” [25] or how platforms fail to address the heightened safety concerns of marginalized users [4, 18]. Within this design space, and in HCI generally [56], the needs and experiences of the asexual (“ace”) and aromantic (“aro”) communities, which we refer to collectively here as the A-Spec (A-Spectrum) community, remain underexplored.

Members of the A-Spec community may feel little to no sexual attraction¹ toward others if they identify on the ace spectrum, and little to no romantic attraction² toward others if they identify on the aro spectrum. Their experiences put them in conflict with some of the core assumptions embedded within general and even LGBT-specific dating platforms. More specifically, intimacy in Europe and North America has centered around the nuclear family for over a century, in which the “the binary cisgender male–female (i.e., heterosexual) configuration has been idealized as the ultimate relational form” [23] and achieving married, monogamous relationships engaging in procreative sex is “internalized as a model of success” [15]. Conversely, A-Spec individuals may seek relationships that are excluded or deprioritized by this framework including romantic relationships without sex, close platonic partnerships that take on an importance usually reserved for a romantic partner,

¹The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) has defined sexual attraction as being drawn to people sexually and desiring to act on this attraction in a sexual way [6]. See 2.1 for further discussion of this definition.

²AVEN has defined romantic attraction as the desire to be romantically involved with another person [6].

long-term sexual but platonic partnerships, and strong and long-lasting support networks [17, 39, 57]. A-Spec individuals may find themselves at a loss for entering such relationships, which others may find disagreeable [17, 20, 21]. While some HCI work on queer dating platforms has mentioned A-Spec participants (e.g., [18, 50]), there is a crucial gap around how A-Spec needs differ from other queer users as they pursue non-normative relationship structures.

To address this gap, we conducted an eight-week Asynchronous Remote Community (ARC) study with 38 A-Spec participants in the United States, investigating their relationship wants, their experiences using online platforms to pursue new relationships, and their hopes for improved technology that can support their goals. Participants had diverse wants that challenge normative distinctions between friendships and romantic relationships, and they were overwhelmed on dating apps by profiles and systems that did not share their vision. Many wished to move away from “dating” toward low-stakes interactions that were more similar to how friendships are developed, and suggested ways for platforms to thoughtfully represent their needs and support their preferred process of building relationships.

Our findings point to how we can support A-Spec pursuits of relationship outside of the goal-oriented design philosophy of dating apps. Instead, their own process involved building relationships free from overbearing expectations for its trajectory, which might benefit from support that facilitates low-stakes interactions within carefully-constructed spaces. The trajectory of their relationships are then co-constructed as they deepen, which might benefit from support in challenging normative assumptions. We refer to this as a “process-oriented” paradigm of facilitating relationships via online platforms, which we propose for further consideration by the HCI community. We also argue that technologies supporting A-Spec users must accommodate a “pluralized” approach to defining relationship and identity, emphasizing personal interpretations of identity and desire in order to accommodate the A-Spec community’s departure from default relationship structures.

Thus, as first steps toward defining how HCI scholars can support A-Spec users, we highlight how the needs and cultural norms of this community intersect with technology and translate these insights into concrete implications for platform design. In particular, we identify how the A-Spec community’s position outside of normative approaches to relationship poses a particular problem for their use of dating apps, which calls for not just inclusive design but a change in how such platforms facilitate relationships. In doing so, we may learn from A-Spec users as those who “perform micro-actions of negotiation, making do, or fitting in” [25], presenting an opportunity to fundamentally re-imagine how online platforms can support slower or less normative approaches to relationship (romantic or otherwise).

2 Background

We contextualize this study by explaining the A-Spec community and its experiences, paying particular attention toward the diverse relationship needs of A-Spec people, which trouble dichotomies of romantic vs. platonic relationships. Then, we review related work in HCI on dating platforms and their future directions.

2.1 A-Spec Identity

While asexuality has been written of since the late 19th century, ace individuals were first able to congregate and define themselves in online forums [36], namely the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (“AVEN,” 2001) [6], which took an inclusive approach to identity labels that saw them as “not a box for us to fit in but a flag” [27] that congregated those with shared experiences. “Asexuality” thus strove to accommodate heterogeneity in the process of defining itself: for example, “sex-favorable” asexuals enjoyed having sex despite lacking sexual attraction,³ “sex-repulsed” asexuals had an aversion to having sex, and “sex-indifferent” asexuals had no strong feelings towards the act of having sex [5, 36]. AVEN members also coined the term “aromantic” to describe the lack of romantic attraction that some of them experienced. By 2010, the aro community considered itself its own community that included both “aromantic asexual” (“aroace”) people and aromantic people who were not asexual [36]. Thus, the aro community is generally considered to be distinct by members of both communities, although we investigate them together as the “A-Spec” community due to their close relationship.

Online spaces have since seen a proliferation of A-Spec identities, describing varying relationships to sex and/or romance. This includes, for instance, having faint or infrequent sexual attraction (graysexual), sexual attraction varying in intensity over time (aceflux), and feeling emotional attraction that cannot be called romantic nor platonic (e.g., alterous attraction) [49]. We thus use the term “A-Spec” in this paper, a term originating from the ace and aro communities, to encompass a diverse range of experiences beyond simply lacking attraction. We also use the term “allosexual” to describe those not on the aro spectrum and “alloromantic” to describe those not on the aro spectrum, consistent with a queer need to “index the normative” and “avoid reifying the non-normative status of asexuality” [49] and aromanticism.

2.2 A-Spec Relationships

We investigate the relationship needs of A-Spec people, construed broadly to include a diverse range of social relations. Some A-Spec individuals may desire romantic relationships with others [1, 8], while others may wish to remain permanently “single” [1, 21]. They may trouble normative modes of distinguishing between romantic and platonic relationships, desiring for example romantic relationships without sex or committed platonic relationships [1, 13, 20, 57]. The latter might entail “friends with benefits” treated seriously and thoughtfully, platonic co-parenting situations, or “queerplatonic relationships” (QPRs), intimate relationships meant to blur the lines between the romantic and platonic [13, 21, 57]. Others may explicitly refuse to give their relationships a label prescribing its properties and value [57], a framework referred to as relationship anarchy [15]. Due to the A-Spec community’s diverse needs, we emphasized a broad scope in our study and left the definition of “relationship” open to interpretation by participants.

³Many scholars acknowledge the fact that the ace community generally defines itself by a lack of sexual attraction [32, 36, 63, 64]. Some scholars, though, have critiqued this definition as translating poorly across cultural contexts [64] and being complicated by sex-related trauma or disability [32].

Prior work has investigated the experiences of ace individuals in romantic relationships. Some were able to identify and negotiate their needs in a highly communicative relationship with an allosexual partner, emphasizing honesty and creative compromise [17, 20]. For others, however, their asexuality was a dealbreaker [17], they were reluctant to tell their partner about their asexuality [17, 20], they were pathologized by their partner [21], they were unsure of their needs before discovering asexuality [21], or they felt pressured to agree to sexual activity despite reservations [21].

On the other hand, ace individuals may observe instability in long-term friendships. They may see their friends develop sexual interest toward them over time or, alternatively, de-prioritize the friendship after entering a romantic relationship with someone else [21]. We return to this in our findings, where participants emphasized a desire for long-lasting relationships.

Overall, A-Spec people can find it difficult to enact an alternative approach to relationships [17, 20, 21, 57] while potentially viewing it as unrealistic to find a compatible A-Spec partner [17, 20]. Building on this work, this study examines how exactly A-Spec individuals may pursue non-normative relationships, specifically when they need to make new connections to do so, and what role online platforms play in this process.

2.3 Dating Platform Design and Use

HCI scholars have become increasingly interested in the design of dating apps, highlighting numerous issues such as being unsafe for marginalized users [4, 33, 68], reinforcing discrimination [42, 47], poorly mediating sexual consent [30, 67–69, 72], and excluding or constraining queer identities [34, 62]. Particularly relevant to our study are discourses around the efficacy of dating apps. Some scholars discussed the homogeneity of dating apps: Olgado et al. [44] critiqued dating profiles as only providing commercial value to the platform without truly reflecting the user, while others advocated for more nuanced recommendations from dating apps, as users may have preferences that differ from the norm [14] or change over time [28]. Another common critique is that dating apps encourage quick physical contact over emotional connection. Grindr and SCRUFF saw themselves as connecting users to an endless supply of profiles, constructing an ever “desiring user” [25] while de-prioritizing conversation [41]. Dating apps may additionally encourage users to prioritize physicality by prompting users about the physical attractiveness of others [28] or their sexual preferences [65] while providing little reliable information for gauging other types of compatibility [70].

In response, some scholars have advocated to center community interactions over the typical pairwise interactions seen in dating apps [37]. Riggs [48] highlights how Lex “queers” dating app design by prompting users to post “personal ads” to the community, while Wang et al. [61] documents how Chinese gay men may look for relationships on a Q&A platform, where the public setting is free from the sexual intent implied in pairwise interactions or location-based matching. Further, they note how the general-purpose platform revealed how potential partners behaved outside of a dating context [61]. Some examples leveraged a combination of human mediation and group interactions, including Soul, which

creates “rooms” for users facilitated by an employee “host” and ultimately enabled repeated interactions between users who like to join the same room [52]. Similarly, Chinese Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) users found partners through human DHH matchmakers while using WeChat group chats for community-building [10].

Despite their shortcomings, “dating” app users may use the platforms not only for sexual or romantic aims but to find platonic relationships [3, 16, 18, 31, 50, 71], which is known to help queer users access queer community [16, 18, 50]. Dating apps lack affordances that differentiate between users’ varying goals, though, leading them to communicate their intentions through the open-ended text field in a potentially oblique manner [71]. Meanwhile, users open to platonic relationships may still be constrained by the romantic connotations of dating apps, as shown by how certain sapheic dating app users felt pressured to “hastily push relationships forward” in a romantic way to avoid being “ghosted” [45].

Building on prior work that notes the scarcity of dating apps catered towards A-Spec people [50] and a dissatisfaction with romance- and sex-focused dating apps [18], we explore how A-Spec use (or non-use) intersects with embedded norms in dating app design. For example, the 2022 Ace Community Survey [8] reported that approximately half of respondents were not “looking” for a relationship but would be open to one, which hints at how A-Spec attitudes may resist a “scripting of desire” [25]. To investigate this further, we elicited design ideas from participants regarding online platforms generally, whether or not they fit into the existing frame of dating apps.

3 Methods

We conducted an 8-week asynchronous remote community (ARC) study where we asked participants to engage with prompts related to their experiences with asexuality and aromanticism in relation to their relationships, society, and technology, specifically online social platforms for meeting people. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at both Northeastern University and the University of Minnesota. In the remainder of this section, we will describe our recruitment methods, participant demographics, study procedure, and analysis method.

3.1 Recruitment and Participants

Participants needed to be at least 18 years old, be based in the United States, self-identify as being on the ace and/or aro spectrum, and have strongly considered using, currently use, or have used online platforms to find or build new relationships. We recruited participants using a variety of channels, including online forms (AVEN and Arocalypse), authors’ university mailing lists, local queer and A-Spec spaces in the Boston metro area, the authors’ personal networks, and past participants of the author’s research groups who had consented to be notified of future study opportunities. We also employed snowball sampling. We consciously decided not to recruit from Reddit communities due to known issues with online surveys on Reddit being inundated with “bot” responses [40]. Notably, though, many of our survey respondents indicated they were part of A-Spec communities on Reddit.

Demographic Variables		Phase 1	Phase 2	Demographic Variables		Phase 1	Phase 2
Age				Sexuality			
18-24	9	7		Asexual	26	17	
25-34	13	6		Grey-Asexual/Asexual Spectrum*	5	3	
35-44	9	7		Demisexual	3	2	
45+	2	1		Prefer not to answer	1	0	
Gender				Romanticism			
Woman	13	8		Aromantic	10	5	
Non-Binary/Genderqueer/“Queer”	11	9		Grey-Aromantic/Aromantic Spectrum*	8	8	
Agender	4	2		Demiromantic	7	7	
Man	3	2		Biromantic	4	2	
Genderfluid	1	0		Panromantic	3	3	
Prefer not to answer	2	1		Polyromantic	1	1	
Transgender Identity				Gay	1	1	
No	21	13		Lesbian	1	1	
Yes	9	7		Queer	1	0	
Prefer not to answer	3	1		Heteroromantic	1	1	
Region				Alloromantic	5	3	
Urban	20	14		Prefer not to answer	9	3	
Suburban	10	6					
Rural	3	1					
Race				Education			
White	23	13		Bachelor	17	11	
Asian	9	7		Some college, no degree	6	4	
Mixed	3	3		Masters	5	4	
Black	3	1		Doctorate	4	2	
Latin	2	2		Associate	1	0	
Middle Eastern	1	0					

Table 1: Aggregated demographic information of participants. Phase 1 refers to participants who completed phase 1 (33) and phase 2 refers to participants who completed phase 2 (21). Note that we collected open-ended self-identification of gender, and sexual and romantic identities; participants may identify with multiple identities at once, and thus the totals in the table may not always add to the number of participants. We also placed less common labels on the ace spectrum or aro spectrum (respectively) in the same category, denoted with an asterisk. For the ace spectrum, this included proculseual, acespike (not present in phase 2), cupiosexual, and aceflux. For the aro spectrum, this included nebularomantic and platoniroomantic/quasiromantic.

We had 86 eligible respondents to recruitment materials, which we sampled using a statistically non-representative stratified sampling method [59]. This sampling method prioritizes participants with demographics likely to be underrepresented in existing research, uncovering new and varied insights. We prioritized respondents underrepresented in at least one area, including those that were older, non-white, non-cis, non-female [58], were from rural areas [25], identify as aromantic, and reported having below a bachelor’s degree. This reflected how work on aromanticism is rare relative to asexuality, while past work on asexuality had predominantly young, white, cisgender, female, and well-educated participants [22]. We additionally selected underrepresented respondents based on other intersectional identities that influenced their A-Spec experience, which they could self-disclose. This included information about relationship structure, disability, and religious background. We eventually invited 76 out of the 86 respondents to the study.

Our findings ultimately contain data from 38 participants. 33 of these participants completed phase 1 of the ARC (before the holiday break), as the remaining 5 answered study prompts initially but later became unresponsive, albeit without withdrawing their data.

Then, 21 of the 33 participants from phase 1 also completed phase 2 of the ARC.

Our demographics (see Table 1) were unsurprising compared to prior work [22] and surveys of the ace [8] and aro [1] communities, with notable exceptions. Our participants (range: 18 to 47 years old) skewed older than past surveys, with one-third being older than 34. Additionally, approximately one-third of our sample was non-white. We had high representation of non-binary and transgender participants, which is consistent with community survey data [1, 8] but underrepresented in prior scholarship [22]. Finally, over half of our participants were on the aro spectrum. We were unable to recruit aro participants who did not identify as on the ace spectrum, though, which was a notable limitation of this study.

3.2 Procedures

We employed the ARC method as our primary elicitation technique, using a private Slack group to engage participants with twice-weekly prompts they could respond to asynchronously and in discussion with other participants [35, 60]. We selected Slack due to its access control features, threaded conversations to organize

discussions, and modes of interaction such as replies and emotion reactions, which support its use for facilitating collaborative, self-paced discussion [46].

In designing the ARC, we were inspired by participatory design studies such as Hardy et al.’s [24] LGBTQ Futures workshops, which sought to democratize the design process by involving rural queer communities in how they define and envision solutions to community-based problems. In particular, we hoped to involve participants in the process of reconciling the tradeoffs inherent to their designs, as prior ARCs have begun to incorporate [18]. In line with the exploratory nature of this study, however, we did not focus on ending the ARC with functional design prototypes and did not offer our own insights to participants’ designs. While we do not claim a full participatory design approach, we did incorporate best practices from participatory design with marginalized populations: we explored the full context of how design solutions might be “considered successful by community metrics” [26] and designed our prompts acknowledging and prompting discussion about the practical barriers that may obstruct their “blue sky” ideas [26].

The ARC study lasted for 8 weeks, from December 2024 to January 2025, during which there was a 2-week break for winter holidays common in the United States (marking the division between phases 1 and 2). Participants were asked to respond asynchronously to research prompts, generally within a three- to four-day response window. Phase 1 constituted prompts 1 through 5, which elicited participants’ past experiences, struggles, and hopes regarding relationship-building on online platforms, and Phase 2 constituted prompts 6 through 10, which had participants discuss design ideas to address their needs. This included prompts that had participants create at-home prototypes to communicate their ideas, which were allotted a full week to complete instead of the three to four days. Because our approach was informed by constructivist grounded theory [11, 12], we wrote tentative prompts in advance of the study, but modified them as the study went on in order to conduct theoretical sampling. Specifically, the first four authors discussed emerging concepts as we conducted the study in order to investigate emergent leads from previous prompts [11, 12]. The full text of the final prompts given to participants is in Appendix A, and we highlight the core questions asked in each prompt in Table 2 alongside their investigatory purpose.

Participants were compensated with a \$20 Amazon digital gift card if they responded to at least 2/3 of the research prompts up to the end of each phase, totaling \$40 if they completed both phases. The first four authors were responsible for conducting the ARC, which entailed moderation of the code of conduct shared at the beginning of the study (see Appendix B) and clarifying participant responses with follow-up questions, if applicable.

3.3 Analysis

We employed constructivist grounded theory [11, 12] for the analysis of this study. While the study was being conducted, we read through the data and discussed emerging concepts together in order to inform theoretical sampling, adjusting upcoming prompts accordingly. Then, in analyzing the prompts after the ARC concluded, we derived the open codes and, ultimately, the overarching themes from the data.

Coding and memoing of the data was done by the first four authors separately, a process by which concepts surfacing from the prompts are labeled in open coding [38] and then categorized into axial codes [38]. The authors discussed their codes in regular discussions to compare and distill emerging themes, until a consensus about the major themes of the findings was reached. Re-coding was then done by the first author to refine the analysis accordingly.

3.4 Positionality Statement

We had active-member-researchers of the A-Spec community and active-member-researchers of the broader LGBTQIA+ community as part of the research team [2]. Most authors are active members of either A-Spec or LGBTQIA+ communities or have prior experience researching LGBTQIA+ spaces. A team comprised of those active in or familiar with A-Spec and LGBTQIA+ spaces is vital as it allows for an understanding of the experiences of people in these communities. Further, when investigating marginalized identities, having team members familiar with the community allows for the informed design of the study to help alleviate concerns of perpetuating societal stigma. As such, all authors were involved in the design and refinements of the study, while the first four authors were responsible for the implementation.

3.5 Limitations

We were missing aro participants who were not on the ace spectrum, a key intersectional experience that may have generated additional insights on how A-Spec users can be supported. Future work should recruit for this population specifically, who may have been missing from our participant pool either because they were a minority in the A-Spec spaces we recruited from, or because they interpreted their desires as outside the scope of the term “relationship.” Our participant pool also could have included more representation of other intersectional experiences. We made a decision to recruit participants based in the United States, which enabled participant discussions within a shared context but largely excluded A-Spec perspectives from other cultural contexts. Our participants were also predominantly highly-educated and either urban or suburban, and we had few male participants; future work should further investigate the experiences of less educated, rural, or male A-Spec individuals.

Finally, the length of the ARC could have impacted the makeup of the participant pool, as it required great time investment from participants (8 weeks of asynchronous work) and some expressed difficulty with the design-related prompts. In particular, we saw a noticeable drop in participants midway through the study, which may have been due to phase 2’s focus on design and/or phase 2’s timing as directly following our holiday break.

4 Results

Participants expressed an almost ubiquitous desire for in-person relationships and in-person support, which led many to try dating apps for their purposes. However, they felt a deep mismatch with dating apps, which were “exhausting” (P19) or “hopeless” (P10). The first section of our findings focuses on how dating apps did not adequately support participants’ non-normative aspirations, and how they could be changed to thoughtfully represent A-Spec needs.

Prompt	Core Questions	Purpose
Prompt 1 (Phase 1)	How do you see yourself as on the asexual and/or aromantic spectrum? What do terms like “relationship,” “companionship,” “partnership,” and “connection” mean for you, and how would you describe what you are/were looking for online?	Has participants elaborate on their identities and desires, in their own words.
Prompt 2 (Phase 1)	Think of a relationship and a community important to you. What was important for finding and building these, and what was difficult? Were your A-Spec (or other) identities relevant here?	Has participants explain their positive experiences in the past (including community, mentioned in prompt 1).
Prompt 3 (Phase 1)	Please tell us about a time or times you’ve used online platform(s) to find or build meaningful connection with a person or group of people. How did these experiences go and why? What was missing if anything?	Has participants describe their past experiences using online platforms for their goals.
Prompt 4 (Phase 1)	What aspirations do you have for how your relationships with other people could be different? Have you done anything to try to make these aspirations come to fruition? How did the social platforms you use impact this?	Explores participants’ goals for building up existing relationships, as prompt 3 focused on new relationships.
Prompt 5 (Phase 1)	What would it look like for the A-Spec community to be in the best position it could be in, in a parallel universe? What would it look like for the A-Spec community to realistically achieve a better position in 10 years, and what are the paths or barriers to this future (including those shaped by social platforms)?	Explores sociotechnical barriers for the A-Spec community as a whole.
Prompt 6 (Phase 2)	What to you would be the most meaningful new technology to come into existence to better find or build the types of relationships you want? To communicate your ideas, we would like everyone to respond with an unpolished visual “prototype” of your idea, alongside an explanation of your idea.	Has participants reflect on their wants and needs and what ideal tool would help.
Prompt 7 (Phase 2)	What kinds of barriers do you anticipate would affect the ideas you proposed?	Has participants voice the reservations they have about their (or others’) ideas.
Prompt 8 (Phase 2)	How would you adjust your prototypes to account for the barriers discussed in the previous prompt?	Elicits how participants would work through tradeoffs.
Prompt 9 (Phase 2)	Imagine that you have 1,000,000 tokens representing resources that you would allocate towards making your technology resilient in the face of systemic and social pressures over time. How would you “spend” these tokens and why?	Elicits how participants would work through tradeoffs that are more than technical.
Prompt 10 (Phase 2)	How would you update your prototype based on the barriers and other considerations we’ve been discussing? Do you have any other reflections to share?	Concretizes the choices participants would make, especially as this was unclear in prompt 8.

Table 2: Summary of ARC prompts and the motivations for including them. See Appendix A for the full text of each prompt.

Moreover, we share participants’ existing processes for articulating non-normative relationships and how they might be supported. The second section describes how participants’ had an acute need for low-stakes interactions that accommodated the uncertainty their A-Spec identities brought to the table, motivating designs beyond contemporary dating apps. Participants’ needs could still be extremely difficult to meet through serendipitous low-stakes interactions, however, which necessitated designs that accommodate both their preferred mode of building relationships and their need for compatibility.

4.1 Articulating Non-Normative Relationship Aspirations

The aspirations that participants had for their relationships were diverse, emphasizing a non-normative interpretation of romantic relationships, friendships, sexual and play partners ⁴, and community relationships, calling into question their assumed level of commitment, emotional intimacy, and expected behaviors. Dating

⁴A play partner refers to a partner in practicing kink.

platforms only reinforced default understandings of pursuing relationships, however, making it difficult for many participants to see a path toward fulfilling their aspirations. In contrast, some participants highlighted how they challenged, or wanted to challenge, normative conceptions of a relationship and instead co-construct its trajectory with another. Participant prototypes pointed to how online platforms might ease this process, setting norms that elicit non-normative wants.

4.1.1 Unpacking Participants’ Aspirations. Participants expressed a variety of needs that contrasted with normative expectations of romantic and platonic relationships. Some participants described wanting *romantic* relationships with a “high degree of emotional intimacy” (P34), that constituted “companionship for the rest of [their] life without having to do anything sexual” (P31). Others expressed how they wanted to have a close relationship that was explicitly *non-romantic*, which involved different characteristics for different participants. This could entail “working towards a common goal” (P39), being “there for me and we potentially live together and share life together” (P15), “cuddl[ing] and having a bestie” (P23), or someone “for whom I am considered a priority, the way that a significant other or spouse is, without the relationship necessarily having a romantic or sexual component” (P16). Some details could be desired by one participant and a dealbreaker for another; for example, while some participants wanted to share a living space with a partner, P13 expressed, “now that I’m older and have been living on my own for a while, I’ve found I’ve gotten unexpectedly territorial about personal space/time and do not know if I can ever live with other people again.”

Aside from romantic or platonic aspirations, some participants were looking for sexual partners or play partners, contrary to how a surface-level familiarity with asexuality would assume a distaste for sex or kink. Because of this seeming contradiction, participants might choose not to disclose either their asexuality or their desire for a sexual or play partner, and thus some “feel like I’m being used, and sometimes I feel like I’m using people” (P37). They were highly aware of “the conflation of kink with inherently sexual or romantic feelings” (P23), which discouraged them from expressing their wants outside of explicitly understanding spaces.

Finally, some participants instead described a desire for community, emphasizing that they did not seek a partner—or even multiple partners—but “feel most happy and supported with a variety of different people in my life that I can feel safe with” (P2). These participants articulated an intimate definition of community that served as an “interpersonal networking of support” (P2), often explicitly connected to relationship anarchy⁵.

Importantly, participants consistently emphasized “community and/or partnerships that aren’t intended to be temporary” (P1), reflecting the harm felt from how “the world is kind of built for couples, & platonic relationships will inevitably take the back burner” (P12). Participants were keenly aware that even close platonic relationships will likely fade when “it’s with an allosexual person who does not share my long-term goals of having a life-long platonic partnership” (P21), or “they move on to different stages

⁵As discussed in Section 2.2, relationship anarchy refers to the questioning of predetermined categories of relationships where some are assumed to be inherently more important than others [15, 57]

of their lives, getting married, having kids, [while] I kind of get left blowing in the wind” (P36). Similarly, participants could feel frustrated by an assumed superficiality to certain relationships: P32’s “aro a-spec version of fwb [friends with benefits] is just not how allo people use it,” because of an emphasis on being genuine friends, while P15 described that “a monthly check in is the most socially acceptable with people I am friends with, but I want to hang out more often than once a month.” This highlighted the tangible impact of social expectations on participants, which made the non-normative structures they sought seem inaccessible.

4.1.2 Representing A-Spec People in the System. Participants emphasized how A-Spec identities lacked representation and/or legitimacy within technological systems. One issue was a lack of A-Spec filters on mainstream dating platforms, which some participant prototypes added. When each participant explained their own personal relationship to their identity label(s), though, some defined the same label differently, while others disliked labels altogether, as they felt too restrictive to “describe how I view myself and how I understand the world” (P25). They acknowledged how this can be difficult for a technical system, as “there’s so many different sub labels⁶, it’d be pretty impossible to filter and find people that way” (P10). In response, participants emphasized solutions that prioritized inclusiveness: filters could accommodate broader terms (e.g., asexual, aromantic, demisexual, demiromantic) while letting users elaborate on this in their profile through either dedicated space on their bio or “write in labels” (P10), which could be incorporated into the system design “after X number of profiles have written in Y option” (P28).

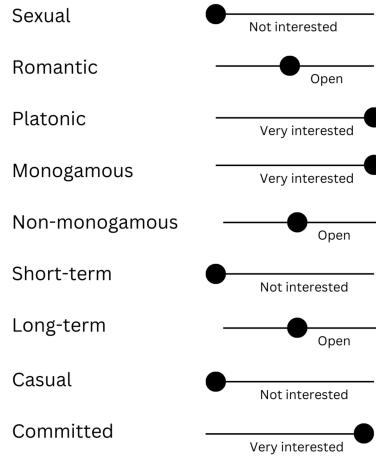
Aside from a lack of A-Spec filters, participants also struggled with platforms’ choice of language. (P33) noted they “d[id]n’t really see a clear distinction for myself between who is a partner and who is a friend,” which meant that they saw themselves as neither “single” nor “partnered” when platforms prompted them to choose. Additionally, participants’ hopes for an ideal future consistently included that “people would no longer assume things like that sexual and romantic attraction are one in the same, or that everyone experiences both” (P5), but this was conflated on dating apps. Some participants thus suggested changes to address these mismatches, such as how (P21) added “relationship type” questions to Hinge’s interface that included separate “sexual,” “romantic,” and “platonic” sliders, while they converted “sexual orientation” into “sexual/romantic orientation,” with checkboxes to account for multiple identity labels (see Figure 1).

Participants saw their suggestions as not only improving the usability of the platform but also heightening the profile of the A-Spec community, which they hoped could be more accepted and understood in the future. Such visibility can “help move society towards more expansive ideas about sexual orientations and relationship structures” (P33), which participants hoped to leverage as intentional education features. To this end, participants suggested an “‘education’ section of the app that includes a glossary of LGBTQ+ terms” (P5), or “question marks” (P21) (see Figure 1) next to LGBTQ+ terms that would lead users to “brief, digestible

⁶As discussed in Section 2.1, online spaces have seen a proliferation of A-Spec identities that elaborate on their experience of attraction [49].

Hinge 2.0

Dating/Relationship Type
Rate your level of openness to each kind of relationship.



Hinge 2.0

Sexual/Romantic Orientation
Select all that apply.

- Heterosexual ?
- Gay ?
- Lesbian ?
- Bisexual ?
- Pansexual ?
- Asexual ?
- Allosexual ?
- Demisexual ?
- Aromantic ?
- Demiromantic ?
- Heteroromantic ?
- Homoromantic ?
- Demisexual ?
- Queer ?
- Questioning ?

etc...



What is asexuality?

Hear more about asexuality from people who are on the asexual spectrum.

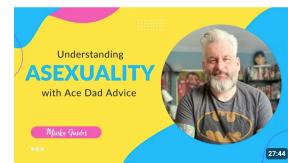


Figure 1: P21's prototype was an adjustment to Hinge's profile creation interface, which did not accommodate for A-Spec experiences. They converted Hinge's questions about intention, which was a checklist asking only about monogamy or non-monogamy and short-term vs. long-term relationship, into a more extensive list including sexual, romantic, platonic, monogamous, non-monogamous, short-term, long-term, casual, and committed goals. Each of these had a separate slider that allowed a user to indicate if they were open to a certain kind of relationship (left). Then, they turned Hinge's multiple choice options on identity into checkboxes, reflecting how they identified with multiple labels and wanted each of them to be seen (center). These would have question marks displayed next to each label, which P21 hoped would direct users to multiple perspectives in the community on that label (right).

info about what the word means from people who hold those identities" (P21). In order to grapple with contested or changing definitions, however, "these definitions/materials would be updated on a regular basis to ensure they are current, and they would show multiple definitions/perspectives from various people who are defining the term for themselves" (P21). Alternatively, participants were also keen on identity fields that encouraged extended description of "what I'm looking for" as "someone who resists labels" (P8), which they hoped would simultaneously help other users understand diverse perspectives.

4.1.3 Countering Default Assumptions about Relationships. Participants repeatedly referenced an intentional practice of disclosing their relationship aspirations to challenge assumptions, "chip[ping] away at the idea that there's one default kind of relationship people are looking for" (P37). This might mean "starting an open conversation on being ace, what it means for me, & what physical intimacy tends to look like for me" (P12) after having a couple dates with someone, "bringing up queerplatonic and nontraditional relationships" (P17) to close friends, or prompting for the "rich details" (P25) of one's desires when they meet someone who erroneously expects romance from them. This reflected how participants' ideal worlds would see "fewer assumptions made about what

certain types of relationships should be like and more communication about the specific things people want in relationships" (P16), which was motivated by how their wants, needs, and limits differed from others' assumptions.

Engaging in such conversations can be difficult, however. On one hand, initiating them can be uncomfortable when they go against implicit social norms, as "it just doesn't fit the script on what most people think or talk about" (P17). On the other hand, even after initiating such conversations, participants can be worn down by the repeated effort and potential for rejection: "when people match with me [on dating apps], ask me what a QPR is, and then ghost me or unmatch when I tell them what it means to me, it can feel discouraging—especially when this happens repeatedly" (P21). Similarly, P7 "used to be a very affectionate person... but then constantly being accused of putting out 'the wrong signal' has led me to diminish that part of myself," discouraging them from attempting to introduce physical affection to their current friendships. As P23 explained, "it's hard to know if people are chill dating an aroace person without asking outright," but it could "mak[e] things awkward" (P23) and ultimately make participants vulnerable.

Participants highlighted how platforms could help shift norms in this area. P37 wanted dating platforms to require users to fill out

“their hopes, never (off limit things/actions) and curiosities when it comes to romantic relationships versus when it comes to sexual relationships,” teasing out more detailed information about their wants and needs. Although other participants shared nervousness “at the thought of sharing that so openly” (P28), this general idea could be imagined in a more private setting, such as structuring disclosure within the context of trusted relationships.

Alternatively, P1 built on social media platforms to create a design that would help them convey a specific want in a less vulnerable way: a desire to spend more time with others. “A problem I run into a lot when I want to build friendships is not knowing whether they have the time or desire to spend time with me” (P1), which can be a particular point of sensitivity from an A-Spec perspective when friendships are normatively considered less important than romantic relationships (see Section 4.1.1). They addressed this with a prototype that shared their availability with certain social media connections as a way to gauge mutual intent to invest in the relationship.

4.2 Moving Away From a Dating Paradigm

Participants expressed a consistent need to build relationships gradually and flexibly, which was particularly pronounced due to their A-Spec identities. Some might only develop clarity on their relationship aspirations (e.g., whether they would like to pursue a romantic relationship) after getting to know someone for a long time, while others did not fit into normative models of relationship but engaged in case-by-case considerations of how they would like to relate to someone, co-constructing the form of the relationship rather than deciding it *a priori*. Accordingly, many participant designs were focused on building a new relationship in low-stakes settings, contrasting with the expectations placed upon them in dating apps and “dating” in general. These participants employed strategies to move away from dating, then, while leveraging technology to encounter people they would find compatible.

4.2.1 Turning Toward Low-Stakes Interactions. Participants’ A-Spec identities often made them uncomfortable with the fast-paced norms of dating. For example, those who identified as demisexual or demiromantic⁷ explained how it could take “a very long time for me to establish a connection and even longer to trust that connection” (P28). Dating norms might make them “feel guilty not immediately knowing what I’d want out of any given relationship,” but “if I don’t know the person, what their life looks like, or how we’d communicate, how would I know what I would want from or with them?” (P1). Accordingly, participants might deliberately look for “an open minded person to start as friends and see if romantic feelings would develop from there” (P37). This sentiment was echoed by participants who lacked distinctions between romantic and platonic feelings (sometimes labeled as platoniromantic or quasiromantic by participants) or feeling romantic attraction only in rare, fleeting moments (labeled as arospike). This meant that “the most important aspect of trying to find that special someone is how open and accepting they are” (P22).

Other participants disliked “forc[ing] one ideal for relationships” (P25) and sought “people who want to get to know me simply

because they want to get to know me, not because they see me as a means to an end (whether that end be sex, marriage, committed partnership, whatever)” (P16). They may even see delight in the uncertainty of an unfolding relationship:

“Are we opening a taco food truck together? Are we going to be book buddies? Hiking pals? Fandom friends? Are we the perfect gossip and vent friends?? Are we going to set up a queer commune??? The exploration and possibilities are wonderful.” (P32)

In each of these cases, participants wanted to build relationships where the format of the relationship was mutually accepted to be secondary or undecided. This was also familiar to them, as participants could describe how they previously formed close relationships serendipitously through a shared context with regular opportunities to meet, bonding over years of time. It “felt fairly natural as we were engaging about things we had in common” (P1), whereas “in dating apps you have to basically small talk and that sucks” (P14). Dating apps seemed to reinforce the high-pressure connotations of dating by forcing users to “immediately jump into one-on-one communication” (P20) with strangers, setting the assumption “that they are going to find romance with me, which they will not” (P25).

In response, participant prototypes emphasized low-stakes interactions between users, especially emulating their past experiences on forums and social media where they could “feel somebody out more so in a group setting first” (P20). In fact, many designs supported space for users to spend time together in community, where participants’ motivations were two-fold: it did serve as a reliable way to meet new people in a low-pressure environment, but community was also valuable in itself, particularly for A-Spec people as “it comes from a place of wanting broader community with more connections that don’t just prioritise a romantic relationship” (P12). This aligns with some participants’ ideal futures, where they hoped to gain access to (in-person) A-Spec community for connection, support, and collective action.

Their designs, then, drew from other types of platforms to create online space. P24 reflected, “I started with something more like a dating app, but the more we progressed the more I was thinking of more of a community app with personal messaging,” where “dating-focused users could absolutely form a community in an app like this and then move to private messaging if they chose” (See Figure 2). Even participant prototypes modeled after dating apps hoped to create community, hosting virtual and in-person events for users to socialize based on shared interests.

4.2.2 Addressing Compatibility. While participants had positive experiences developing friendships from online and offline spaces, they still struggled to form ties that met their needs for in-person, long-lasting, non-normative relationships (see Section 4.1.1). This called for the affordances that dating apps provided, where users could search their locale for particular kinds of people. However, these platforms were poorly matched to their needs. In addition to compatible long-term goals, Participants needed information about other users’ values and personality, which was elicited poorly on dating profiles. This was especially relevant when participants “so often don’t have a distinct yes or no gut reaction to the person

⁷Developing attraction only after connecting deeply enough with someone else on an emotional level [7].

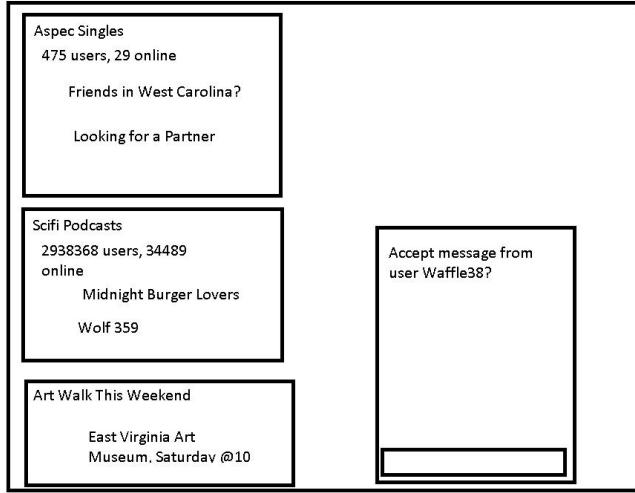


Figure 2: P24’s prototype displayed a “community app” that focused on meeting new people. Its structure resembled online communities on social media platforms, but centered the process of finding in-person events, addressing a need that current social media platforms did not meet.

base[d] on their profile” (P19), which often centered physical attractiveness. P1 captured this dynamic well:

“I’ve seen conversations that my allosexual + alloromantic friends had before going on dates and I’ve been so confused. ‘How did you get to the point of going out? Their profile AND their conversation were so boring.’ But of course they had the impetus of attraction to continue the conversation.” (P1)

Thus, participants were frustrated when they were forced to “choose right now and swipe left or right or whatever, based on this scant information” (P16), and suggested features that addressed what compatibility meant to them.

Shared Values. Participants repeatedly expressed how they were “looking for someone who shared certain values and political beliefs” (P37), or looking for community that was “most strongly a sharing of values” (P2). In fact, one participant lamented how the “guesswork” of determining another user’s values was “where I put the most labor into” (P15). While past work has found a similar need for shared values (e.g., [18]), participants identified how their values were in fact closely tied to their overall approach to relationships. For example, P32 highlighted that “people who immediately ask ‘pics please / why don’t you have a photo of you / can you send a pic of yourself’ are people who I (as an overall pattern) don’t have a lasting connection with. We just don’t share values?” while P36, as a relationship anarchist, said “wanting to build strong, emotionally resilient relationships with mutual support resonates very very strongly with me. I would say its part of my core values.” Here, a mismatch in values constituted incompatibility because a relationship is in itself an expression of one’s values and related philosophies.

Accordingly, some participants included “values” tags in their designs in order to filter for users with shared values (see Figure 3). They also suggested questionnaires to provide more information about users and reveal hints of their worldviews. Here, multiple participants noted how one dating app, OKCupid, used to have questionnaires that helped them make friends “just finding similar world views” (P17), and wanted to bring back this older design.

A special case of shared values involved an acceptance of A-Spec identity and goals. Some participants shared that they now “question (sexual) motives and don’t trust many when they say they know what Asexual is and respect it” (P39), which arose not only in mainstream dating spaces, but in gay or sapphic spaces as well. Participants felt like they needed to guess at allosexual/alloromantic intentions toward them, such as how P33 explained that they “filter out people who seem to exhibit romantic interest or otherwise treat me differently than I’d expect them to.” A particularly common event was when other users would indicate interest based on their images rather than their bio, offending participants. “Like did you actually fully read the novella I wrote about myself before you messaged or swiped on me? Which is absolutely a form of gauging intent for me” (P28). This led some participant prototypes to include a questionnaire to “weed out the kind of people who just ‘swipe right’ on everyone, or who only judge from photos” (P5), which users could optionally answer after they indicate interest in someone (see Figure 3). They imagined that “someone who did check the box (or boxes) gets placed at the top of your review queue and you can see what their responses were” (P28), increasing the visibility of compatible users.

Such a mismatch could motivate participants to specifically seek out A-Spec users, who were assumed to share certain values or expectations. P32 described “a particular sense of comfort and ease” in play partner negotiations “by knowing that they are aro like me,” while P31 “only dated girls on the asexuality-spectrum since I didn’t have to worry about that part of the relationship [pressure to have sex].” However, some asexual dating apps already exist, which were surprisingly not useful for participants. They were “often not very active, or (like the couple of Facebook groups I’ve been in) they’re full of people nowhere near me (or if they are close by, we don’t have much in common)” (P24). This was more pronounced for participants in rural areas, but even in urban A-Spec groups, “often being ace is the only thing we have in common, and then it can feel awkward” (P21). Indeed, “having the same identities is not necessary for the desired connection” (P25) and can be too limiting when compatible users are relatively scarce. These shortcomings made participants suggest A-Spec-focused platforms that centered A-Spec values and norms while being open to non-A-Spec users. Allosexual/alloromantic users could join if they “would be interested in a relationship without sex, or without much” (P24), “openly questioning whether or not they’re A-Spec” (P13), or were invited to the platform, where “invitations would be generated primarily by the A-Spec members” (P36).

Personality. Participants also wanted to learn more about someone as a person, lamenting,

“People present a sanitized version of themselves. They show you what they think is appealing about themselves & often hide things that are more polarizing.

Show me people who value...

<input type="checkbox"/> Caring
<input type="checkbox"/> Challenge
<input type="checkbox"/> Cooperation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Creativity
<input type="checkbox"/> Economic Security
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Health

Creativity

Health

Bob's Questionnaire

Bob has asked you to answer a few questions to help him get to know you better! You may skip this step, but you'll be less likely to match with him.

Do you want to answer Bob's questions now?

✓ Yes ✗ No → Later

- What did I say was my favorite animal?
○ Dogs ○ Cats
○ Capybaras ○ Ducks
- What is YOUR favorite animal, and why?
[Text Input Field] 0/500
- First date ideas?
[Text Input Field] 0/500

✓ Submit ✗ Skip

Figure 3: The above prototype was recreated by the authors for legibility purposes. P5’s prototype included multiple avenues of evaluating other users’ values. They included a list of values for users to associate with themselves, which would be used for filtering (left). P5 additionally incorporated a customizable questionnaire for those who indicate interest in a user’s profile, which is meant to assist users in finding potential matches whose approach to relationships aligned with their own, namely, that they focus on getting to know others (middle and right).

This dynamic makes it really hard to find any of these people interesting.” (P1)

This issue motivated participants to imagine open-ended and expressive profiles that reflected their creators. “If someone wants to spend a chunk of their profile talking about how much they love cats, or what kind of hookup they want, or anarchist literature, or they write ‘idk’ for fields—that’s all information” (P32), a sentiment that was reflected in the variety of information fields P32 added to their final prototype (see Figure 4). This contrasted with current dating apps, as “Bumble only lets you add so much to your bio, which was one of my gripes with the app” (P5).

Some participants additionally advocated for multimedia profiles, despite frustration with how others would ignore their bio text in favor of their images. “Sometimes we decide we’re interested in people based on smaller things—how someone talks about their dog, their kids, how they talk about what makes them passionate, their smile looks kind or their laugh is infectious, they share things that made them sad or what they want to change” (P17), which led P17 to suggest recorded introduction videos to profiles. Multimedia profiles can provide useful information about a person’s personality if used for that purpose, motivating some designs to have photos “interspersed throughout the profile instead of all in one place” (P35) to shift norms of how multimedia content is used.

4.2.3 Creating Opportunity for Low-Stakes Interactions with Compatible Users. Combining how participants preferred to build relationship and how they struggled to find compatible users, some participants took steps to address both of these needs. One participant proposed a dating platform specifically for ace gamers, where matching with someone meant “you would then be playing games with them as usual. If you think you wanna meet up with this person for a date, you can” (P31). In addition to providing a clear structure for interaction, playing games “as usual” would combat the pressure participants felt to make a decision quickly.

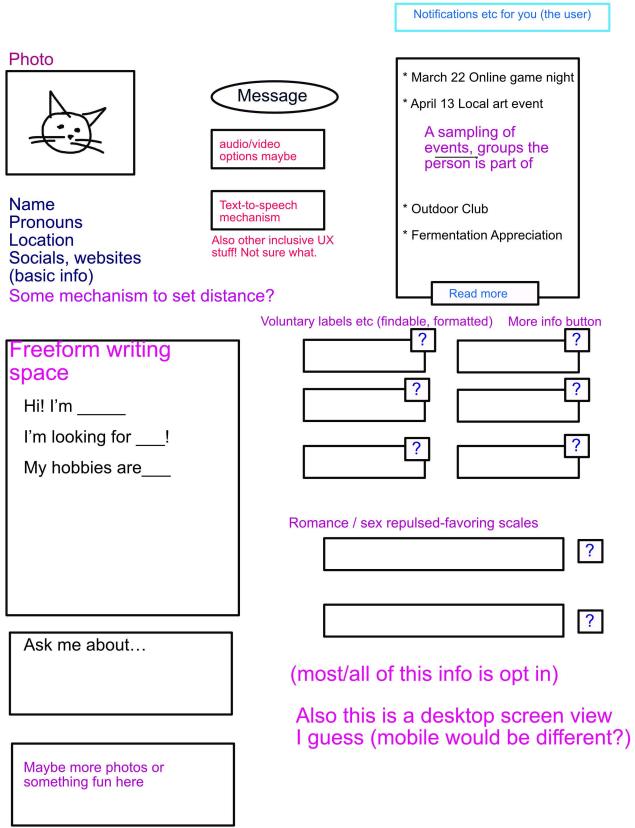
On the other hand, P36 was at a loss for how to develop “really close besties” unless they had “some sort of algorithm to connect specific people in addition to a platform having broader group conversations.” P32 already employed this strategy by using online

platforms in two parts: Lex as “a community-based chaotic arena” where they can find local connections, events, and Discords, and Discord for “community building or follow up after meeting people at events.” Similarly, P13 took it upon themselves to build a hand-curated community space after using OKCupid to find connections:

“I used OKCupid to find people who 1) I found aesthetically attractive, 2) had profiles that said they were ethically non-monogamous, 3) had nerdy interests similar to mine, and 4) that I thought would get along with the others, and I started planning monthly beer-and-boardgame nights, [which] started with around 25-30 people and the events were an instant hit.” (P13)

They used Eventbrite at first to organize the events, but moved to a Facebook group “so anyone in the group could post events” (P13), after which the community ultimately grew too large to keep its unique element of mutual chemistry. This hints at a benefit of smaller, more specific spaces, similar to how P14 wished there was “an ace space where people looking for QPRs talked about historical fiction books or cats.”

Other participants connected to existing smaller spaces, often in-person, which would require some work to discover. They might use online community calendars or dedicated applications (e.g., Meetup) to navigate the landscape of local, in-person spaces, and so they discussed how such platforms could be improved. P8 hoped to use “a more comprehensive Meetup style app” to filter local events by properties such as distance, length of activity, information about the location and its accessibility (e.g., whether there are stairs or ramps, what food is on site with which ingredients, etc.), cost, and need for volunteers. P16, similarly, discussed the properties of groups they would like to know in advance, including the type of group (e.g., social, networking, hobbies, sports, etc.), meeting pattern, size, general demographics of group members, and “overall vibe” (e.g., “lively,” “relaxed,” “nerdy,” etc.). This addressed their unpredictable experiences with Meetup: “unless a group is attended regularly by the same people, you’re meeting different people at every event, which can be fun but also makes it difficult to really get to know people over time” (P16).



Further down or on a separate page or something

Split Model attraction charts and fill ins

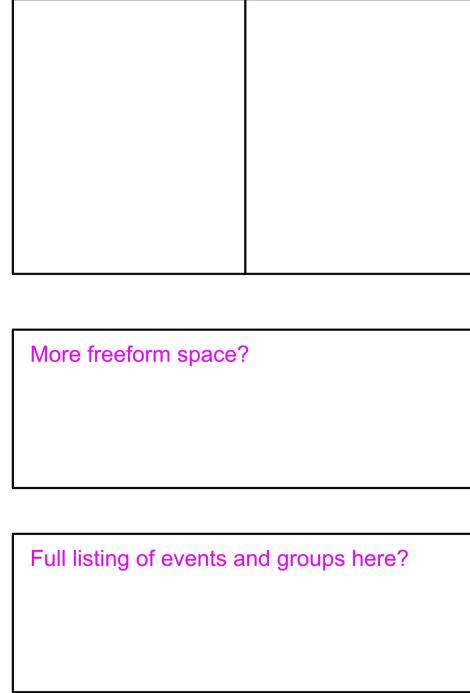


Figure 4: P32's prototype showed how they wanted to add many forms of information to dating profiles, including labels they identify with, multimodal ways of expressing themselves, communities or events they are part of, how they feel about romance or sex, how they would break down their wants in a relationship, how they would describe themselves, and what they want to be asked about. This contrasted strongly with the streamlined profiles allowed by standard dating apps, which limit freeform writing space and tend to center images.

Finally, P25 highlighted that “the community calendars that are in my area are terrible at encoding [their] information in a useful manner,” and emphasized the desire to search events (past or current) by keyword or topic. Community calendars may have represented local spaces that aligned with P25’s values or followed certain desirable norms. This context, though, surfaced a need for a “freely available webpage plugin” to ensure use of a consistent inter-operable framework across community groups, who may not be willing or able to use a paid tool.

5 Discussion

Participants described a process of relationship-building that first established low-stakes relationships with compatible individuals, and then elaborated on and co-constructed the properties of these relationships. This stood in contrast with the design of dating platforms and the culture of dating they uphold, prompting us to look toward new online structures for facilitating relationship. Below, we first discuss alternative platform structures in a “process-oriented paradigm” that would support an A-Spec relationship-building process,

inspired by participants’ designs. Then, we discuss how participants’ experiences pointed to an need for a “pluralized” approach to definitions in systems built for relationship-building, rather than definitions put forward by an epistemic authority. In this way, we may consider how systems can emphasize personal meaning and challenge the assumptions underlying any given label.

5.1 A Process-Oriented Paradigm For Building Relationships Through Online Platforms

A-Spec users in our study struggled to build the types of relationships they desired on dating apps, building on work that has highlighted embedded norms within standard dating apps that discourage slower, deeper connection (e.g., [25, 41, 70]). More than just encoding sexual intent, however, dating apps seemed to reflect idealized beliefs about romance, such as how “love can strike at first sight,” and “love is the highest goal of the relationship” [29]. A-Spec users may not be particularly drawn to another user at first glance, and they may need to escape default assumptions about their goals. Thus, dating platforms failed to represent the aspirations of A-Spec

users while, more fundamentally, they seemed to exclude how A-Spec users may see the format of a relationship as secondary or undecided.

We argue that dating apps generally reflect a **goal-oriented** paradigm of searching for relationships, in which systems presume that users seek a consistent “ideal” end-goal as they pursue new relationships and attempt to move them efficiently toward fulfilling that singular goal. This is reinforced technologically by how users are only allowed intimate pairwise interactions [61] and are forced to make immediate decisions about other users (Section 4.2.2), echoing prior work that found applications determine the bounds within which sexuality is practiced [25].

A-Spec users seemed to prefer a different approach to relationships that aligns more with prior work on friendship formation [53, 66], building close bonds gradually in stages. Yet, participants still wanted to use technological solutions that matched them with other users: prior work has highlighted the role of matchmaking apps in connecting individuals to queer community [16, 18, 24, 50] and, moreover, the “goal-less” status quo of friendship formation made it difficult for participants to find users with compatible relationship aspirations (Section 4.1.1). While they attempted to adapt to these platforms, A-Spec users only had a surface-level ability to emphasize their own norms (e.g., in their bio or in private messages with other users), similar to how other queer identities are marginalized from being ignored at the data schema, algorithmic, and ideological layers of dating apps [62]. This impacted how participants were able to navigate these systems to suit their purposes, resulting in dissatisfying or even excruciating experiences.

We thus propose a **process-oriented** paradigm of technology for finding new relationships, where platforms emphasize a process of *gradually building* relationships and subsequently *co-constructing* the goals and structure of relationships. A process-oriented approach would involve a paradigm shift in which platforms recognize the value of relationships even when they do not quickly fulfill preset goals. This embraces Sharma et al.’s provocation to design for relations that suspend assumptions about “the type of relationship they have—or will develop” [51], speaking to increasing interest in the role of uncertainty in HCI [54].

This philosophy may be beneficial even outside of A-Spec design, which warrants future inquiry. Prior work on queer dating apps described how some users preferred to get to know someone through “a chat with little purpose” [65], while others operated under the assumption that “as their connections deepened, their relationships would become more clear” [45], at least when they first became a dating app user. Even for romantic purposes, then, some users may prefer to build authentic relationships that may serendipitously result in love. Future work may also investigate whether other critiques of dating apps, such as their lack of safety [4, 33, 68] and their negative impact on self-esteem [28], could become less intense if they prioritize lower-stakes connection first.

As a first step towards realizing this paradigm shift, we outline two design spaces for a process-oriented approach inspired by our findings, which future work should consider as a core design goal.

5.1.1 Building Relationships Through Compatible Spaces. Participants adopted creative practices to resolve a tension between slow

relationship-building and an acute need for compatibility, leveraging community-building spaces with members that were likely to be compatible. This idea builds on prior calls for adopting slowness [48] or community-building features in dating apps [10, 18, 37, 61]. However, our findings highlighted how the particularities of a space were critical: participants curated who showed up in these spaces, recommended different spaces that were appropriate for certain needs, or sought out spaces fitting a certain “vibe,” purpose, demographic, or shared values. The desire for an A-Spec-focused space is a special case of this, carrying the caveat that other types of compatibility were just as important as sharing A-Spec values.

To support a process-oriented paradigm, we might imagine how online platforms could help users discover compatible spaces, building on Meetup-like apps. Platforms directing users toward local groups or events could elicit and incorporate filters for information about the structural properties (e.g., meeting pattern), purpose, and values of a space, potentially asking groups to respond to questionnaires like how participants wanted to elicit shared values in Section 4.2.2. Platforms may even encourage users to recommending appropriate spaces to each other for their needs.

Alternatively, we might iterate on the design of dating apps to “match” compatible users and subsequently facilitate repeatable, low-stakes interactions between two or more users. Some existing dating platforms leverage online spaces for this purpose, such as Lex, which allows users to post “personal ads” in a shared space [48], or Soul, which hosts “rooms” for users to converse in and further offers interest-based group chats [52]. These are good examples of design that allows for low-stakes interactions, but it may still be difficult for an A-Spec user to find someone with the same non-normative aspirations as well as similar values and mutual chemistry. Lex is a platform intended only for sapphic users, which could be too restrictive or too broad depending on an A-Spec user’s circumstances, while “rooms” on Soul have undefined demographics. Instead, we may consider designs that allow for the creation of ephemeral, user-defined spaces, which could adapt to the user’s needs by allowing them to list criteria or, alternatively, manually select individuals to include in the space. This flexible approach would let someone find other A-Spec users, for example, but also experiment with defining a space differently if an A-Spec-only space is not useful.

5.1.2 Enabling Co-Construction of Relationship Properties. There is also a design space for supporting users in the construction of a non-normative relationship. A-Spec users needed to redefine the norms and boundaries of a relationship as it grows, which could be particularly difficult when their hopes exist outside of the mainstream (e.g., serious, lifelong friendship or a queerplatonic relationship). Communicating specific aspirations for a given relationship would expend significant effort while constantly leaving them vulnerable to rejection.

We might imagine, then, designs that help users break down their aspirations and communicate them more easily in online structures. Specifically, while similar strategies exist in some communication—such as the “relationship anarchy smorgasbord” developed by the polyamorous and relationship anarchist communities to structure discussions about the possibilities for a relationship [9]—participants highlighted a need for such measures to be integrated into the tools they use to search for new relationships, which is dominated by

normative definitions of relationship. Systems for finding new relationships could prompt reflection on and therefore normalize questions about a user's wants and limits relating to different types of intimacy, such as emotional or sexual intimacy. Even if these responses may not be entirely suitable for public disclosure, such a system might allow users to adjust the visibility of their responses or perhaps use them to inform the matching process. In line with a process-oriented philosophy, users could also be given prompts to communicate their thinking with respect to a given user as they get to know them. This expands on prior calls for dating apps to accommodate different user goals [18, 71], acknowledging that users' goals may not necessarily fit into normative categories of platonic, romantic, and sexual relationships.

5.2 Pluralized Definitions of Relationship and Identity

We observed A-Spec users interrogate the meaning of different relationship labels, expressing aspirations which did not fit cleanly into established divisions of relationships (Section 4.1.1). As such, although the distinctions between "romantic," "sexual," and "platonic" intentions remained important, A-Spec users also preferred to break down what these relationships would entail instead of leaving them to be assumed (Section 4.1.3). We saw a similar complexity to participants' A-Spec identities; our participants seemed to embrace how identity labels were contested, suggesting that educational features emphasize multiple definitions of a label or, alternatively, that each user explain their own definition (Section 4.1.2). This contrasts with past work that has suggested implementing educational features to explain LGBTQIA+ labels [18], but implied that definitions would come from an epistemic authority on LGBTQIA+ labels, which may be "enforcing overly prescriptive systems of meaning" [55] when the A-Spec community uses labels to counter hegemonic constructions of sexuality [49].

Systems supporting A-Spec users must follow this example and embrace a "**pluralized**" approach to definitions, where definitions may be uncategorizable, conflicting, and highly personal. One's intimate relationship to their own identity and wants cannot be accurately defined by an outside authority; instead, we as designers need to consider how to make visible users' personal definitions of their identity and wants. This may be particularly relevant in a relational context, where users would benefit from opening up a dialectic about what they and others are looking for rather than being fit into a "casting mold" dictated by the platform [44]. Riggs [48] highlights how Lex encourages users to do this through open-ended "personal ads," enabling "queer relationalities" where users slow down and reflect on what it is they desire. This would reflect our participants' needs to richly express their aspirations and identity. Particularly outside of queer spaces, though, A-Spec users may need more than just the freedom to express themselves; they may need assistance in challenging what is assumed to be a shared definition, such as the definition of a "relationship." Similar to suggestions from our participants, systems could link identity or relationship labels to "glossary" pages that host a variety of contrasting perspectives from individuals defining the label for themselves (Section 4.1.2).

Following Weathington et al. [62]'s analysis of queer identity exclusion in the design of dating apps, though, users' heterogeneity

needs to be understood not only at a cosmetic "profile" level but also in how a system utilizes their data. Our participants landed on using broad identity labels—and perhaps even sub-labels that occur frequently enough—for the purpose of filtering, and then describing themselves in detail at the profile level. A more radical approach could allow for a proliferation of user-defined tags, similar to the plurality exhibited by The Archive of Our Own, which hosts fanworks that can be found through an extensive tagging and filtering system [19]. This system allows creators to use user-defined tags, retaining complete control over how they describe their works, while "tag wranglers" from within the community determine which tags are treated in the same way by the system when it processes a search query [43]. While potential solutions would need to address how to supply the effort required to manage freeform tags, such an approach in the context of building new relationships could center the user themselves as an epistemic authority, whose rich definitions would become part of the system.

6 Conclusion

We investigated A-Spec perspectives in an 8-week ARC study, where A-Spec individuals discussed their experiences trying to use online platforms to find or build relationships, as well as how their needs can be better supported. These discussions surfaced a strained relationship with dating platforms, which allowed them to access relationships that are difficult to find organically but had a deep mismatch with A-Spec needs. Participants were constrained by the hegemonic framework dating apps assume, where they had limited ability to challenge default assumptions about romantic and platonic relationships. Participants also highlighted a need for the trajectory of the relationship to be secondary or undecided at first, motivating a focus on low-stakes interactions within carefully-constructed spaces.

Inspired by participant ideas, we then propose two design implications to support A-Spec relationship-building. First, we propose a "process-oriented" trajectory for facilitating relationships through online platforms, in which online platforms might support low-stakes interactions between compatible users and create opportunity to articulate non-normative relationship aspirations. Second, we argue for a "pluralized" approach to defining identity and relationships in online systems that emphasizes specific and highly personal definitions of labels, rather than defaulting to an epistemic authority. We call for future work exploring process-oriented and pluralized paradigms of relationship-building platforms, which may not only benefit A-Spec users but, as participants hoped for, lead to a future abundant in diverse and meaningful relationships.

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A Study Prompts

A.1 Prompt 1

We have participants from a range of different backgrounds, with potentially different relationships with asexuality/aromanticism. Please introduce yourself to the group with:

- (1) How you see yourself as on the asexual and/or aromantic spectrum and how your understanding of asexuality/ aromanticism and your relationship to these terms might have changed and evolved over time. If it's useful, feel free to use visuals to help illustrate how you think about asexuality/aromanticism, such as sharing a physical or digital drawing, making a diagram, or even creating a meme that gets your point across. Please share screenshots or image files instead of external links.
- (2) What do terms like "relationship," "companionship," "partnership," and "connection" mean for you? Do they share the same meanings? You can also consider making a diagram to illustrate your thinking. How would you describe what you are/were looking for online? (can be one of the aforementioned terms or something else we haven't mentioned)
- (3) Anything else you think others should know about you as you participate together in this study! Please keep in mind that you should avoid disclosing any identifying information about yourself.

A.2 Prompt 2

Thank you everyone for your thoughtful responses and discussions with each other over the past few days! We saw in the last prompt that we have a diverse group of perspectives/experiences. Some appreciated specific definitions of asexuality/aromanticism/ relationship-adjacent terms while others had more uncertain or purposefully-loose definitions of these terms. We have some who are interested in a romantic relationship without sex some interested in sharing life with a committed non-romantic partner and some interested in community instead of prioritizing relations with a particular individual. Additionally while some are interested in seeking these out directly others need these to develop organically in order to happen at all.

Next to inform our future discussions about designing for aspec connection with other people and/or communities we would like to ask you to reflect on your relationship with at least one important person in your life and one community you enjoy being in if applicable. What was important for finding those building those relationships and feeling part of those communities? On the other hand what was difficult about this process? And if applicable how did your aspec (or other) identities color your experiences here?

A.3 Prompt 3

Thank you everyone for your responses to the last prompt—it's been lovely getting to read about all the different kinds of support networks you've built and what made them work. This time we want to bring in your experiences with online platforms. Please tell us about a time or times you've used online platform(s) (e.g. Social media forums dating apps video conferencing apps etc.) to find or build meaningful connection with a person or group of people. How

did these experiences go and what characteristics of these platforms (e.g. platform features community norms etc.) contributed to those outcomes? What was missing if anything?

You don't need to repeat anything you might have discussed in the last prompt unless you have more to say on how it relates to the online platform!

A.4 Prompt 4

Thank you everyone for sharing your experiences with online platforms—a lot of interesting challenges about dating apps are starting to emerge such as how they might not give us time to slow down and get to know someone as well as some ways that online communities/interactions can be both helpful and limited on their own. It's also great to learn how some of you may combine or use these platforms in creative ways to make their features work for you. The last prompt was mostly about the current state of things so this time we would like to start exploring what we'd want to change.

- (1) As an Aspec person what aspirations do you have for how your relationships with other people(both on and offline) could be different? This could mean developing the types of relationships you mentioned in the 1st prompt but it could also mean other aspirations about the types of relationships you already have.
- (2) Have you done anything to try to make these aspirations come to fruition? If so what did you do and how did it go? If not why not?
- (3) How did the social platforms you use and their features help shape your aspirations? How did they affect the ways you may have tried to make them come true?

Feel free to use visuals to help you respond to this if it's helpful for example by creating a collage of images that illustrate your thinking or drawing what might be on your screen when you're using platforms.

A.5 Prompt 5

Hi everyone thank you so much for your responses this past week—it seems like many of us hope for more long-lasting mutually-prioritized and/or consistent relations with others although there may be some difficult barriers to achieving these while others discussed how expectations for a relationship can be wrongly assumed or uncomfortable being honest about and still others felt generally satisfied with where they are now. It could also be difficult to find certain types of people that would work for a specific need for connection.

Zooming out a bit our last prompt for y'all before our holiday break is focused on your aspirations for the aspec community as a whole. We'll first talk about an "ideal" future and then something that feels more realistic.

- (1) Imagine that in a parallel universe the aspec community is in in your eyes the best position it could be in in relation to broader society. What does that look like for you? You might for example discuss matters of community visibility attitudes toward the community lessons learned from the community etc.

- (2) Imagine that it is 10 years later and the aspec community has achieved in your eyes a realistic better position for itself in broader society. What does this look like for you?
- (3) What paths do you see to get closer to this more realistic future and what barriers still exist? Finally how are these paths and barriers shaped by the social platforms you use and their features if at all?

A.6 Prompt 6

Happy new year everyone! We're excited to be back and really looking forward to seeing what comes out of this next phase of the study. We'll use the rest of our time to brainstorm and refine ideas together for how technology can best support aspec communities' abilities to form the kinds of relationships we wish for. While technology isn't everything I believe it is one of many important ways in which our interactions with each other are structured and mediated. We hope that this study can serve as a space to really explore what it would mean for technologies to support aspec goals and desires. We're starting off with a really open prompt. Thinking about what we've discussed so far **what to you would be the most meaningful new technology to come into existence for you to better find or build the types of relationships you want?** In other words if you were able to magically make a piece of technology instantly appear right now to make your life easier in this regard—what would it look like? This could be a new online platform but it could also be an extension or modification of existing platforms or something that isn't an online platform at all such as a physical device.

We will spend a full week on this prompt to give you time to really think about it and reflect on what would be meaningful to you.

To communicate your ideas please refer to the “prototyping introduction” message in [reproduced in Section A.11] for details on how to respond to this prompt which will be the format we will use for the rest of the prompts in this study!

A.7 Prompt 7

Thank you so much for all of your engagement with the last prompt—we loved hearing all the creative ways you would design technology to be meaningful to your lives!

Some of you acknowledged barriers that might get in the way if these designs were deployed in real life and we want to dig into these barriers more. For this prompt we will brainstorm possible barriers that would affect our ideas and we'll later iterate on our designs in the second half of the week to try to mitigate these barriers.

What kinds of barriers do you anticipate would affect the ideas you proposed? Some ideas to get you started:

- Thinking back to the (in)visibility stigma stereotyping and structural disadvantages aspec people face that you all discussed previously how would you anticipate this prototype interacting with a broader allo world?.
- What barriers did you observe from the platforms that currently exist which could come up here?

- What kinds of people would be drawn to use your prototype and what abilities routines or expectations are they coming in with?
- What barriers would prevent your prototype from staying functional/useful long-term?

We would again love for you to build off of each other's ideas and to make this easier we wanted to highlight which of you seemed to be going in a similar direction and could therefore be in conversation with each other [participant identifiers corresponding to each category are redacted]:

- Having more casual interactions before “dating”:
- Better identification of compatibility:
- Support for having conversation and/or dating:
- Establishing intent:
- Providing other ways to express yourself on dating apps and/or de-emphasizing photos:
- Getting rid of “swiping”:
- Adding Aspec identities and/or intentions:
- Searching for communities:
- Togetherness when we're far away from each other:
- Coordinating time together:

A.8 Prompt 8

Now that everyone has shared barriers they see affecting their prototypes we would like y'all to think about how you could potentially adjust for these barriers and iterate on your prototypes accordingly.

Your lived experiences will of course be a great guide for what would and wouldn't work; to help you with this step we have also summarized below the barriers y'all mentioned and some possible solutions mentioned by other participants that could provide inspiration. Some of these may be in opposition with each other as well—if it seems like you are making a trade-off in your re-design of your prototype please share your thinking on that and why you landed on your final choice.

- **Barrier: keeping the platform culture and expectations useful to aspec users not getting taken over by allo priorities.**
 - Possible solution: integrating moderation into the design (how to do this sustainably?).
 - Possible solution: incorporating educational features for allo users (e.g. informational workshops linking educational resources in the app or having a space to explain your own interpretation of your identity).
 - Possible solution: restricting the app to only aspec users.
- **Barrier: preventing harassment discrimination and deception using the feature.**
 - Possible solution: preventing your profile from being seen by certain kinds of people (how does this play into discrimination itself?).
 - Possible solution: integrating moderation into the design (how to do this sustainably?).
- **Barrier: making users comfortable enough to use the feature when it can make you uncomfortably vulnerable (such as expressing your honest desires or interacting with a lot of strangers).**

- **Barrier: forgetting about the feature struggling with checking the app regularly and/or having inconsistent access to the internet.**
 - Possible solution: designing with the expectation of less frequent interaction like once a day or once a week.
 - Possible solution: including a variety of notification options to opt in to (such as Duolingo's notifications).
- **Barrier: difficulty getting people to use the feature the feature being effort-intensive.**
 - Possible solution: creating incentivizes for feature use such as increasing the visibility of their post/profile.
 - Possible solution: designing with the expectation that the feature won't always be used.
- **Barrier: not gaining enough traction having too few people (especially aspec people).**
 - Possible solution: making accessibility considerations to ensure more people can use the app (e.g. accounting for disability low tech literacy etc.).
 - Possible solution: creating a plug-in/extension that works with existing platforms.
 - Possible solution: accommodating for/appealing to allos with similar needs on top of aspec users.
- **Barrier: accommodating the variety of aspec labels and categories and properties of groups which are subjective and can evolve and change over time.**
 - Possible solution: having users write in their own labels instead of sticking to a pre-defined list (how would this information be used in a way that is resilient against empty or unintelligible answers?).
 - Possible solution: continually getting feedback on and updating the design over time.

A.9 Prompt 9

Thank you all for your thoughtful reflections this past week on the potential barriers that your ideas could run into if implemented.

For this prompt we want to tease out more about what is important to you to preserve the spirit of your idea. Imagine that you have 1000000 tokens representing resources that you would allocate towards making your technology resilient in the face of systemic and social pressures over time. How would you "spend" these tokens and why? To focus on what we want to see in the world you can assume that your idea already exists has a substantial user base and lacks responsibilities to funders.

If you're unsure how this question applies to your idea you can think back to the original desires you had that prompted your idea and the barriers you anticipated for the technology.

A.10 Prompt 10

We've done a lot of reflecting on what technologies would be meaningful to us what barriers we anticipate would complicate their creation and what aspects are most essential to prioritize for its success over time. Before that we had a lot of great discussion on what is and isn't working in the current tech landscape for our relationship-related goals.

For this last prompt we would like you to take the time to update your prototype based on the new ideas barriers and other considerations you've talked about—we would like to see your visual prototype again here!—and share any reflections you have at the end of this study considering the thoughts you and others shared from the beginning up until now! If you find you prefer someone else's prototype over your own at this point you may share your version of that idea instead.

A.11 Prototyping Instructions

Prototyping Instructions. To communicate your ideas, we would like everyone to respond with an unpolished visual "prototype" of your idea, alongside a description of the prototype that further explains your idea. This will serve solely to help communicate what your idea is—it needs to be understandable, but it can and should be rough! You're free to use whatever medium is comfortable, including photoshop, drawing, arts & crafts, etc. Attached are some examples.

Your idea doesn't have to be limited to an app or website—other formats could include...

- An extension for (or modification of) existing platforms such as dating apps, social media, forums, messaging platforms, games, etc.
- An "extension" of real-world relationship finding or analog forms of communication
- A physical device
- A virtual reality or augmented reality application

For the sake of this study, we would like this idea to fall under the umbrella of technology, but we acknowledge that these challenges might not always need to be addressed with technology. If you have other thoughts to add about addressing this prompt, we would still love to hear them, and I'm sure others here would appreciate them as well!

Giving Feedback. We would also love for y'all to share your thoughts on others' ideas too. To focus on constructive feedback, we would like this to take the form of either:

- "yes, and" - I like what's here, but I want to improve on it or add something crucial
- "I'm concerned about" - I like some of this, but I worry it will do X accidentally, or open us up to the possibility of Y

Examples.

- https://www.researchgate.net/figure/PROTEUS-with-a-low-fidelity-prototype-view_fig2_236678650
- https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https://conceptboard.com/wp-content/uploads/Blog_Header_Prototype.png&tbnid=oa0zRifjNPGA-M&vet=1&imgrefurl=https://conceptboard.com/blog/low-fidelity-prototyping-tool-conceptboard/&did=kGwC0CBPOwYW_M&w=1200&h=840&source=sh/x/m/m1/1&kgs=ae83147c6bd1d61e

B Code of Conduct

All posts and interactions in the research Slack must adhere to the following code of conduct. Violations of this code of conduct will be dealt with according to our moderation guidelines, which are

located at the end of the code of conduct and may result in you being withdrawn from the study with repeated or severe offenses.

You Know You, I Know Me - Try not to make assumptions about others. When speaking, please try to use "I" statements and avoid making generalizations or applying your own ideals to others.

What Happens Here, Stays Here - Though you are welcome to share your own experiences and feelings about the study with others, **you must refrain from repeating other participants' stories, names, likenesses, etc., outside of the group. Doing so will cause you to be withdrawn immediately from the study without any further compensation.** We want to ensure that this space is as safe an environment as possible. Please help us protect everyone's privacy and keep the contents and members of the research group confidential.

Challenge the Idea, Not the Person - People have a lot of different opinions - and that's great! Disagreement about different priorities is good, and some of what we are trying to learn about here is how different people want to balance those priorities. However, we want to keep the discussion centered on those opinions, not the people that have them. If you disagree with an opinion, say so - but don't insult the opinion, and don't attack the person.

Don't Yuck My Yum - Folks here have different tastes and preferences, so avoid antagonizing language like "I hate that" or "ew." Likewise, folks have different traumas and triggers, so avoid language that belittles or trivializes their experiences.

When you send messages, you should refrain from posting content or language that you feel is not appropriate to be shared with the study audience; however, readers should recognize that others' thoughts and experiences may contain content or language which is upsetting to them, and take breaks as needed.

Talk It Out - If something offensive, problematic, or hurtful is said or done in the group, we want to be able to maturely talk it out. If this situation arises and you feel emotionally well-regulated, we suggest creating a thread to directly discuss your reaction with the other participant and reach an understanding. Otherwise, we suggest taking a step back from the conversation before engaging again. If you have a strong reaction to another participant's messages and need a space to process this, you may also DM one of the study team members to talk through it and figure out how to best approach the situation.

Harassment - We are dedicated to providing a harassment-free experience for everyone. **We do not tolerate harassment of participants in any form, nor any abuse directed towards the research team members. Participants violating these rules may be removed from the study at the discretion of the study staff.** If you feel harassed by another participant and are comfortable identifying yourself, DM one of the study team members. If you wish to report anonymously, use the form in the #help channel, which will send an anonymous report to our moderators. Harassment includes, but is not limited to: Comments that target other participants based on characteristics such as gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, ability status, physical appearance, body size, or religion. Deliberate intimidation, stalking, or following Unwelcome personal attention Persistent, unwanted attempts to contact another study member Advocating for or encouraging any of the above behavior

Do Not DM Participants - Feel free to direct message the study staff with any concerns at any point, but refrain from direct messaging your fellow participants or encouraging them to do so. This is because we want to ensure that the research environment is civil and safe for everyone, and we will not be able to moderate DMs. DMing, especially without prior permission, will be considered harassment.

Keep Your Information Private - This is a project where you will talk to many people, but it's crucial you keep your personal information safe when doing so. **Don't post anything that would help others identify your home or work neighborhood, your bank account, or driver's license, or that of another participant.** This includes not revealing your full name in the research Slack, either in discussions or when filling out your profile. Similarly, do not provide details regarding your phone number, job title, or any other contact information in your profile. Do not upload photos of yourself for your profile picture – keep it abstract, or use one of the images we provide.