



519: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

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# *Dating App Experiences*

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## RESEARCH TEAM

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study uses phenomenology methodology to explore the experiences of individuals who use mobile dating apps. It investigates the motivations for using the apps, perceptions of the apps, and the overall impact they have on users' dating lives. Seven participants partook in the study: five females and two males within the 25-35 age range who are heterosexual, Seattle-area locals. Two qualitative research methods were used: a focus group and a co-design workshop. Analysis of the data led to the finding of five themes amongst participants' experiences: expectations vs reality, cycle of use, vulnerability vs validation, multiple layers of exhaustion and the minimal effort downward spiral.

## **INTRODUCTION**

With the rise of technology and the increased usage of mobile apps in today's everyday world, dating apps have also seen a significant increase by users. With such popular apps as Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid easily downloadable for free, users can effortlessly have access to millions of potential matches within mere minutes. As such, more and more single individuals are turning to dating apps to experiment and explore, which in turn is leading to more and more couples meeting and forming as a result of the apps. The usage has become so popular that meeting someone through an app has almost become the norm, and society's former stigma around meeting a partner online has seemingly all but diminished. Whether they are used for casual encounters or for finding long-term partners there is so much potential and promise presented with dating apps and more and more users are being drawn to the apps in order to see those promises fulfilled.

It was this increased usage and popularity amongst dating apps that drew our research team to explore and observe them through our study. We wished to hear users' reasonings behind why they started using the apps as well as their stories that resulted from actually using the apps in order to gain more insight into people's overall experiences using dating apps. With this vision in mind, we formed the following research question for our study: What are people's experiences using dating apps? Guided by this overarching question we set about our study with sub-foci to identify exactly what motivated users to use the dating apps in the first place, what their emotions and perceptions of the apps were, and the overall impact that the apps had on their dating lives as a whole.

## **BACKGROUND**

Up until recent years, online dating was stigmatized and framed as a last resort for people who are incapable of meeting others in real life. The introduction of dating apps on mobile devices, such as Tinder, and the hook-up culture that became associated with them have helped with the normalization the concept of meeting others online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). However, wanting to meet other people online for romantic or sexual reasons is not a new idea. As early as the 1960's, people have seen potential in computers as a tool capable of helping them find a partner (Hendel, 2011). Using computers for matchmaking predates the internet. In the '60's people had to mail in physical copies of their "profile" and wait for a computer algorithm to determine the best possible matches (Couch, & Liamputtong, 2008). Today's technology has sped up the process dramatically. Mobile dating apps have made online dating more accessible than ever before. They have also implemented measures to prevent catfishing and increase the safety of their users (Cobb, & Kohno, 2017). As a result, the number of people using dating apps has skyrocketed in the last decade. A 2012 study conducted by eHarmony revealed that one third of marriages in the United States begin online (Cacioppo, J., Cacioppo, S., Gonzaga, Ogburn, & Vanderweele, 2013). The growing number of users on online dating apps has shed light on the social and psychological impact that the experiences can have on the users. A study conducted in 2016 attempted to identify the reasons why people find dating services appealing. People's motivations to use dating apps were narrowed down to the following six: love, casual sex, ease of communication, self-worth validation, thrill of excitement, and trendiness (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017). This research has provided a deeper understanding of the role of online dating services and concrete evidence against the argument that dating apps are solely used for casual sex. As the number of users on online dating apps continues to increase, it is essential to look beyond the stereotypes to grasp the

impact that these services have on individuals and society as a whole.

## METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

With the goal of our project being to understand people's experiences using dating apps, we chose phenomenology as a methodology to guide our research in order to focus on participants' behaviour, narratives, and impressions towards dating apps in order to paint their "lived experience." Based on this we chose focus group and co-design methods for our study as we believed they would provide powerful outlets for participants to share their unique perspectives.

Our sample was one of convenience, as we reached out to friends and peers to serve as participants in our research study, with the only requirements being that they were over the age of 18 and that they were either current or recent users of dating apps. Our resulting sample included five women and two men between the ages of 25-35, all living in the Seattle area.

Participant	Gender	Age	Dating Apps Used	Uses Dating Apps to Meet	Participation Method
P1	Female	25	OkCupid, Tinder, Bumble	Men	Focus Group
P2	Female	30	The League, OkCupid	Men	Focus Group
P3	Female	25	Coffee Meets Bagel	Men	Focus Group
P4	Female	25	Tinder, OkCupid, Bumble, Coffee Meets Bagel	Men	Focus Group
P5	Female	25	Bumble, Tinder	Men	Focus Group
P6	Male	35	Bumble	Women	Co-Design
P7	Male	26	OkCupid, Tinder, Bumble, Coffee Meets Bagel	Women	Co-Design

### Focus Group

Our focus group consisted of five female participants who were active and recent dating app users. It was a 90 minute session which was conducted on April 29, 2018 in a classroom at the University of Washington. The session was split into three sections, with each section facilitated by a different member of the research team. We collected data through notes in a standardized observation/interview guide that encouraged naturalistic responses and behaviors. In addition to field notes, the session was audio recorded for future data analysis purposes. We also ran a cue card activity where participants were asked to draw or write on a prompt: "I would love using dating apps if".

### Co-Design

Our two male participants contributed to our codesign session. This method allowed the participants to become part of the

design process by drawing their responses to prompts provided by a single moderator. It was a 60 minute session which was conducted on May 6, 2018 in a conference room at the University of Washington. This method focused on participants' experiences based on motivations (what got them started using dating apps) and goals (what did they aim to achieve). The participants were given two prompts: "Draw a story or memory that you experienced as a result from using your dating app(s)" and "Draw the dating story or experience that you initially hoped would result when you first decided to use the app." They were provided with blank papers and writing/drawing tools to express their views. The activity was followed by a semi-structured interview where the participants were asked to walk through their designs. During that process the participant were asked follow up questions such as. "Is there anything you wanted to include in your sketch but then decided to leave out? Tell me more about it." and "Does looking at your drawing bring to mind any other experiences you've had using a dating app?", etc.

## LIMITATIONS

Through the course of our study, we encountered several limitations that could have a potential impact on our findings. For instance, though we initially set out to recruit a diverse sample of participants to capture a wide range of experiences, our sample ended up consisting of all individuals that were of ages 25-35, heterosexual, and inhabitants of the greater Seattle area. Our participants also only represented one portion of the dating app experience in that we only interacted with current or fairly recent users of the apps. We did not speak with any participants that were former users of the apps and have since stopped using the apps due to either finding a match that led to a long-term relationship or from overall dissatisfaction with their experience. What's more, it unintentionally resulted that the participants who were willing to partake in our two data-collecting sessions were all female for our focus group and all male for our co-design. As such, this caused the perspectives represented in each method to be restricted to that of only one gender.

We did initially have a female participant lined up for our co-design session but unfortunately she had to backout the day of the session. This not only resulted in our co-design sample consisting of only males, it also caused last minute adjustments to our co-design study plan. Initially, we intended to have two researchers act as participants by contributing their own drawings and personal accounts as raw data to the session, but with the withdrawal of our fourth participant, our two researchers amended our plan so that only one of our researchers would act as a participant and the other as moderator.

## FINDINGS

### *Data Analysis*

After the conclusion of our focus group and co-design session, our research team began the process of analyzing the collected data. This data included the audio recording of the focus group and the researcher discussion that immediately followed the focus group, the video recording of the co-design session, the drawings generated in the co-design session, and the researcher observation notes from both. The two researchers who led the co-design session took on the task of analyzing the data pertaining to that session and the three researchers who led the focus group analyzed their corresponding data. All five researchers utilized generative and in vivo coding as they analyzed the data. We aimed to identify the ideas and themes which stood out to us as most relevant and important to answering the question of what people's experiences are with dating apps. Particular focus was placed on what motivates the participants, how utilizing these apps makes them feel, and what impact it has on their lives. In order to ensure that the coding process truly captured the layers of context held within the words of the participants, the coding process did not utilize transcripts, but rather watching and listening to the recordings. Once the coding process had been completed, our team came together to discuss each of the codes we had identified. We were able to map many of the codes we had each identified to each other, resulting in 10 codes. Our team was then able to combine and condense the codes into five identified themes: expectations vs. reality, cycle of use, vulnerability vs. validation, multiple layers of exhaustion, and the minimal effort downward spiral.

## Theme 1: Expectations vs. Reality

Our participants began using dating apps with certain upfront expectations, namely finding romantic partners. Participants expected to engage in lots of interesting conversations through the dating apps' native messaging features, hoping that

### Box 1: Expectations vs. Reality

"It's very exhausting when you get ghosted." -P1  
"I think we've been trained to say goodbye, but that's just not the culture of dating apps." -P3  
"I don't even expect him to buy me a cup of coffee, that's how low my expectations are." -P4  
"If you don't text me in 48 hours whatever it's over -- no hard feelings." -P5

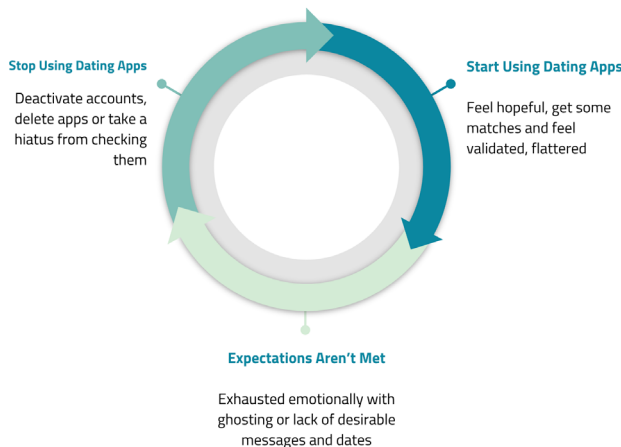
several of these would translate into in-person dates. They also felt hopeful that their dating experiences would evolve into long-term relationships. These expectations are partially based on the reputations and branding of the specific dating apps they use. Coffee Meets Bagel and Bumble empower female users, but were less preferred by some due to a lack of instant gratification (e.g. slower replies and

less "matches"). Tinder is understood to have the largest pool of users with the quickest replies. The League has a reputation for being elitist due to its Ivy League roots and waiting list of hopeful users. OKCupid is speculated to have a platform of users who truly want to connect with others. These expectations do not map to the reality of their experiences of using dating apps. Participants find the majority of messages non-engaging, have gone on few in-person dates and have not developed any relationships through the apps. "Ghosting" was a dominant theme that was discussed throughout the focus group: the act of seemingly ending contact or engagement by ceasing all forms of communication with no explanation. Participants found it shocking how prevalent ghosting is and lamented on the emotional toll of falling victim to ghosting.

## Theme 2: The Cycle of Use

The dichotomy of expectations vs. reality contributes greatly to participants' cyclical process of using of dating apps. Hope of finding a romantic partner initially motivates participants to use the apps. When participants start feeling as though their expectations of their dating app experience are not fulfilled, they either stop using the apps, deactivate their accounts or delete the apps for a temporary hiatus.

Disappointment fuels this decision, but after several days, weeks or sometimes months, participants will feel an emotional void -- for instance wanting attention and validation or feeling a renewed sense of hope that hope that there is still a chance they could meet a partner through the apps.



*Figure 1: The representation of participants cycle with circles through participant's journey with using the apps, expectations, and taking breaks from the apps.*

This reenergized optimism triggers participants to start actively using dating apps again. When they get "matches", they feel flattered and special, but again after some time, the cycle self-perpetuates. This cyclical process is similar to a gambling addiction metaphor, which our team used as a lens to better understand this theme.

## Box 2: Cycle of Use

“I’ll wait ‘til I get to a space where I’ve forgotten how bad it was... That’s what keeps me going back again: forgetting.” -P3  
“I’ll go on for a week or two and if there aren’t any interesting conversations... I’ll just delete it” -P2  
“I go on it every 5 months...and if I have at least 3 bad experiences, I stop going on it for a while” -P1

## Theme 3: Vulnerability vs. Validation

For our participants, vulnerability was a persistent element in their experiences using dating apps and one that was experienced in a variety of ways. They were made to feel vulnerable by putting themselves in situations that could lead to rejection, which

### Box 3 : Vulnerability vs. Validation

“I feel less attractive... I get not a lot of interest on dating apps... it’s skewed my self-perception a little bit.” -P4  
“I start thinking like maybe I should take better photos, or make a more interesting bio... becomes a thing where it just makes me feel bad.” -P2  
“I can reach out to like 50 women and none of them write back so it’s like well that’s kind of demoralizing. Why would I just reach out to people and not get a response?” -P6  
“Who really wants to be vulnerable when you can quantify that validation?” -P5  
“Wow, like I feel pretty good about myself now, I don’t even want to talk to those people.” -P3

would then affect their self-esteem and self-image. Participants in both the focus group and co-design discussed feeling demoralized when they didn’t hear back from someone they reached out to and there were several mentions of how a lack of attention or reciprocation would start to make them feel less attractive. Several participants also felt emotionally exposed repeatedly putting themselves out there with new potential partners. Using dating apps means they are communicating with and meeting a high number of people; with each person they are then sharing a part of themselves and putting themselves at risk of

being hurt (even if just superficially). Another type of vulnerability experienced was that of data vulnerability. Two participants in the focus group brought up their discomfort with sharing so much personal information in a public forum. On the flip side of vulnerability, participants did experience validation from the attention via messages and likes they would get on a dating app. This feeling of validation was also mentioned by several participants as a reason they would return to dating apps after a hiatus. That validation, however, would soon become eclipsed by vulnerability, once they actually began to engage with the people reaching out to them.

## Theme 4: Multiple Layers of Exhaustion

### Box 4 | Multiple Layers of Exhaustion

“Going on first dates can be very exhausting... exhausting keeping track of the different conversations... having the same getting to know you conversations.” -P4  
“It’s expensive and it takes up my time and if it doesn’t work out then it’s mildly exhausting.” -P1  
“I’m just tired of the dead end one word answers.” P4

The term exhaustion was one repeatedly brought up by participants in the focus group and was applied to nearly every aspect of the dating app experience. Every member of the focus group touched upon how “keeping conversations going” with each individual they were messaging or meeting with was an exhausting process for them. Core to this was a feeling that the

conversations were one-sided and that it was on them to be asking questions and engaging with the other person. It was also mentioned that the logistics tied into dating and communicating through the apps was time-consuming and tiring, and that when eventually things didn’t work out, it then felt like all of that energy had been wasted. In response to the prompt, “I’d love





What is Known	What this study adds
<p>People use dating apps for reasons beyond casual sex</p> <p>Experiences on dating apps can affect people's perceptions of themselves</p>	<p>The cyclical usage of dating apps</p> <p>Logistical interactions of dating apps can be exhausting for the users</p>

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Given more time for our study, there is much that we would like to amend and add to our research in order to strengthen our findings. We would strive to conduct more focus group and co-design sessions in order to obtain greater data saturation. We would also be interested in alternative research methods, such as autoethnography, in order to observe and understand our participants' daily usage and experiences with dating apps. Furthermore, we would aim for a more diverse sample with greater variety in participant age and sexuality, to speak with past users of the apps, and to include more genders in our data-collecting sessions so that we would not be limited to only one gender per session. We would target this diversity in order to ensure that we were capturing the broadest range of potential participant experiences and context in order to further enrich our data.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

### **Rigo Ordaz**

Rigo assisted in the recruitment of one of the participants of in the focus group. He also facilitated the co-design workshop and contributed to the data analysis of the data collected. Additionally he helped present the co-design workshop in the final presentation and focused on the background and existing research on the final paper.

### **Tucker Standlee**

Tucker assisted in recruiting one of our focus group participants and a co-design participant, though this participant unfortunately had to back out at the last minute. After contributing his own raw data to the co-design session by acting as a participant himself, Tucker conducted analysis of both of the co-design participants' data (including his own) and investigated the data to identify common themes amongst the two participants. Upon completion of the data analysis and the reporting of our study, Tucker focused on the limitations, transparency and future implications of our findings.

### **Christina Hussain**

Christina recruited one of the participants for the focus group, drafted the document for collecting background information from participants, and crafted the outline for the co-design process. She worked with the team to create the questions and structure for the focus group, co-facilitated the focus group, coded and analyzed focus group data, and helped with the thematic analysis process. She wrote up the data analysis and three of the themes in the final paper, and produced the word cloud image.

### **Sonam Hemant Samel**

Sonam facilitated and observed the focus group, analyzed the collected data and created codes. She reported the Research Question, and Focus group method in the final presentation. Additionally she focused on the Methodology and Methods section of the paper and was also responsible for designing the paper.

### **Lea Lonnberg-Hickling**

Lea recruited two participants and assisted with the research plan and observational data collection plan. She also facilitated the focus group with Christina and Sonam, analyzed the focus group data, helped consolidate our team's codes and reported half the findings/discussion content in the final presentation and paper.