Online Romantic Relationships: A Mixed-Method Exploration of Meaning-Making and Lived Experience

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Thesis submitted to the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Science & Engineering, in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Maynooth University,

October 2025

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Summary of Thesis

Technology now plays a central role in modern romantic relationships. From seeking romantic partners to maintaining closeness across distance, digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities to transcend physical and temporal boundaries. Yet, despite its growing use, public and academic discourses often focus on what is lost, highlighting superficiality, emotional disconnection, and risk. This contradiction, marked by increased dependence on and resistance to technology, underscores the importance of understanding how the phenomenon is experienced from the person's perspective. This thesis aims to explore how individuals experience and make sense of their online relationships within broader sociocultural contexts. Adopting a critical, sociocultural framework, it presents three empirical studies.

Study 1 uses a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of thirteen individuals whose close relationships are primarily conducted online. Drawing on a dialogical framework, it identifies key tensions in meaning-making across different types of relationships. Participants describe simultaneously feeling a strong connection and a sense of distance, perceiving their relationships as both deep and less real, and reflecting on the ambivalence surrounding technology's role in relationships. The study further shows that the meanings assigned to technology shift across relational stages, from empowering and enabling in the early stages to limiting or even obstructive in later phases. It also reveals that relationships initiated through different media can carry distinct meanings.

Study 2 combines a quantitative media content analysis of articles on online dating with a qualitative analysis of advice texts to examine media discourses

surrounding online dating in three mainstream Irish newspapers (the Irish Examiner, Irish Independent, and Irish Times) between 2000 and 2024 (N = 846). The quantitative analysis maps thematic prevalence, evaluative tone, and the visibility of different populations over time, while the qualitative analysis explores the normative guidance offered to readers. The longitudinal analysis shows an increasing negativity in tone, even as online dating becomes more normalized and widely used. Reports often emphasize crime, risk, and inauthenticity over the relational possibilities afforded by dating apps. Since the media plays an important role in shaping and reflecting public perceptions, this study highlights how public discourse can reinforce stigma, influence personal expectations, and contribute to the ambivalence many individuals feel towards online dating.

Study 3 addresses the contradiction between the prevailing negative representations of online dating and the widespread use and relational benefits associated with these technologies. Using a story completion, comparative between-groups experimental design (N = 537), the study investigates implicit associations between various modes of romantic initiation, including dating apps, online communities, and face-to-face meetings, and the perceived quality and longevity of resulting relationships. Notably, relationships initiated in online writing groups were associated with more negative outcomes, suggesting the persistence of implicit biases toward certain forms of online media.

These studies demonstrate that technological mediation is experienced as a dynamic process shaped by personal agency, social discourses, and technological affordances. Building on this insight, the thesis concludes by proposing a conceptual model that situates individuals, their relationships, the technologies they use, and the broader sociocultural-historical context within a dynamic three-wave model. Rather than treating these as stable levels, the model shows how their relative salience shifts

across relationship stages and historical moments, and how points of intersection between them shape relational experience.

The findings highlight the pervasiveness of a negativity bias in public discourse and in individuals' representations, while also showing that lived experiences are more complex and often more positive than dominant cultural narratives suggest. They therefore caution against allowing this bias to shape how online dating is experienced, interpreted, or studied. Rather than being affected by stigma or negative representations, engagement with dating apps can align with users' relational goals and values. The findings also highlight the need for more balanced public discourse and indicate that research should move beyond technology–centered and problem–oriented framings towards approaches that address both the pitfalls and the opportunities arising from online dating.

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Acknowledgements

The moment I've envisioned for so long – writing these acknowledgments – fills me with emotion, humility, and, above all, a deep sense of gratitude toward those who helped me reach this stage.

First, I want to thank my brilliant supervisor, Constance, for your exceptional guidance and support. From your academic expertise to your encouragement through difficult times, your work and belief in me have made the realization of this thesis possible. Your character, values, immense knowledge, and creativity will continue to inspire me. I could not imagine a better supervisor, personally or academically. I am deeply grateful.

I want to thank my parents, whose support made this work possible. To my father, for your generosity and help, and to my mother, for showing me the beauty of knowledge, education, and learning, thank you both.

To my loving friends who stood by me through the ups and downs, reminding me that I can do this, thank you. A special thank you to Donal and Carl for their constant encouragement from the very beginning.

I am also grateful to the Department of Psychology at Maynooth University for welcoming me as a PhD student and to the departmental staff for their knowledge, guidance, and support throughout this journey. I would also like to thank my postgraduate colleagues, especially Jennifer Dean-King, for your encouragement and for reminding us women to believe in ourselves. Thank you for your book *Born Free*, which helped me imagine life after the thesis. I also appreciate the advice and inspiring conversations I have had with other academics, particularly Vlad Glăveanu and Brady Wagoner, for their valuable feedback and ideas.

Thank you to my wonderful examiners, Dr. Rebecca Maguire and Dr. Darragh McCashin, for such a positive viva experience and for their thoughtful engagement with my work.

Thank you to my participants for devoting their time and sharing their personal experiences, which shaped and informed this work.

And last, but certainly not least, thank you to my cat, James, who has been an immense source of comfort and companionship through both the easy and not-so-easy times.

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
FtF	Face-to-Face
IRC	Intercoder Reliability
SMS	Short Massaging System
SNS	Social Networking Site
STD	Sexually-Transmitted Disease

Chapter 1:

Introduction

In recent decades, the ways of initiating romantic relationships have significantly changed. Historically, individuals relied primarily on physical proximity and familial and friendship connections to meet a potential partner (Ramirez et al., 2015). With the development of communication technologies, particularly the Internet, people's ways of finding romantic, sexual, and platonic connections have expanded. Increasingly, first encounters, early interactions, and even relationship development occur in online environments rather than face-to-face contexts, raising questions about the nature of modern relationships and how they are experienced and understood.

Within this broader transformation, online dating has emerged as a central mode of relationship initiation. Online dating can be defined as the process of initiating a romantic or sexual relationship through social media technologies designed for these purposes (Sammons & Cross, 2017). In less than a decade, it has become the most common way to search for partners, surpassing all other methods (Rosenfield, 2019). Today, there are more than 384.15 million online dating users globally (Statista, 2025), underscoring its prevalence and normalization across cultures and regions. In this thesis, the term online dating refers to platform-based practices of relationship initiation, while the broader term online romantic relationships (or technology-mediated relationships) is used to capture relational processes that extend beyond the dating platform itself and the initial stages of a relationship.

This expansion of online dating also raises a broader analytical question concerning the relationship between online and offline contexts. Some relationship scholars (i.e., Lieberman & Schroeder, 2020) argue that it is more useful to treat online and offline as interconnected elements of the same relational system, with communication features such as cue richness, synchronicity, and permanence functioning as situational affordances, rather than as fundamentally different spheres of relational experience, as many relationships now follow a 'permanently online,

permanently connected' pattern (Vorderer et al., 2017). In this work, we recognize the fluidity of relational experiences across contexts but also acknowledge the value of analytical and theoretical clarity gained by giving due attention to the unique affordances of computer-mediated communication (CMC), including users' choices and the meanings they assign to it.

This chapter organizes existing research into four interrelated layers. First, it traces the sociohistorical development of mediated communication to situate online dating within a longer trajectory of technological development, rather than treating it as an entirely novel and distinctive medium. Second, it focuses on the material characteristics of the medium, drawing on frameworks of computer-mediated communication to understand the technical nature of these environments. Third, it examines the practices and uses through which dating apps are taken up in everyday life. Fourth, it considers the social and academic representations through which online dating is interpreted, as these experiences do not occur in social isolation but are embedded in wider cultural meanings. Taken together, these layers position online dating as a sociotechnical system in which technological features, user practices, and sociocultural meanings are mutually constitutive.

1.1 A Sociohistorical Context of Mediated Communication

When considering mediated communication and relationships, recent technologies, such as the internet and social media, often come to mind first. However, the history shows that there are at least five 'new technologies' that have driven its development: writing, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, and mobile phone text messaging (Burke, 1991; Ong, 1986; Standage, 1999), with notable similarities between older and newer forms of mediated communication.

Writing was the first form of communication that, to our knowledge, enabled interaction without the physical co-presence of interlocutors. In the context of

interpersonal relationships, it became a central medium through personal letters, spreading quickly across continents and cultures and becoming integral to maintaining long-distance relationships between family members and friends. At the same time, writing introduced a paradoxical experience of simultaneous presence and absence, captured in early correspondence in which writers expressed both the enjoyment of connection and the pain of separation, while at the social level, it was often associated with weakening the human mind and interpersonal relationships (Ong, 1982).

Subsequent technologies mediated communication and relationships in different ways. The **telegraph** enabled messages to travel at unprecedented speed, revolutionizing long-distance communication and connecting societies on a global scale (Standage, 1998). It has also resulted in the development of new communities of telegraph workers, and romance and flirting among telegraph workers who had never met in person before was also common (Standage, 1998).

With the development of the **telephone** in 1876 (Fischer, 1992), mediated communication became embodied for the first time. Although the telephone lacked visual and physical presence, the voice carried emotional signals, provided instant feedback, and required an active presence (Standage, 1998). As the telephone became widely used in contemporary homes, primarily for socializing, communicating, and flirting (Joinson, 2003), societal criticism about its influence grew, addressing issues such as moral decline, inappropriate communication, and loose conduct in wooing and courting (Fischer, 1992).

As the first **radio** was developed in the early 1900s (Spiker, 2002), mediated communication has extended from one-to-one to mass communication, bringing a national voice and a world beyond people’s local communities into their homes (Barnard, 2000), creating an experience like the Internet today. With this change,

technological panics resurfaced around the risks of eroding traditional forms of communication and relationships between families and communities (Hilmes, 1997).

The technological innovation of the **mobile telephone** began in the 1940s, but it was not until the 1990s that mobile phones became more widely adopted by the public, in part due to the introduction of Short Message Service (SMS), or text messaging. This communication format quickly gained popularity as a flexible, private, and cost-effective alternative to voice calls, particularly among young people (Rodríguez, 2002). Textual messages today are ubiquitous in different communication media, and their adaptability and accessibility make them a particularly intimate form of communication. Like with other technologies, the use of texting and mobile phones was accompanied by warnings about the dangers of negative impacts on isolation and loss of social norms (Joinson, 2003).

These technological developments were characterized by several recurring patterns. First, many communication technologies were initially designed for instrumental or institutional purposes but were quickly repurposed for personal communication, reflecting users' efforts to overcome the constraints of time and space in maintaining close relationships. Second, the medium has also changed communication as users creatively adapted to material and economic constraints, developing new linguistic forms and relationship norms. This demonstrates a bidirectional orientation of mediation, in which technological affordances shape interaction while users simultaneously appropriate and transform the medium. Finally, even though each new technology provoked societal anxieties about the erosion of authentic relationships, social norms, and social cohesion, these concerns were rarely borne out as initially anticipated and often coexisted with the emergence of new forms of social connection.

1.2 The Internet and Social Networking Sites

The **internet** - the latest in a long line of technological developments - emerged in the 1960s as part of a physics research project. Like many earlier technologies, it was not initially designed for interpersonal communication, but rather to link computers and machines (Klein, 2006). Following technological advancements in the 1980s and the development of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, the Internet quickly brought millions of people online, primarily for communication, and rapidly evolved into a widely used social tool. Every 12-15 months, the number of users doubled and reached over 50 million by the mid-90s (Parks & Roberts, 1998), 600 million in 2002 (The Media Leader, 2002), and today the number of internet users is 5.56 billion – almost 68% of the global population (Kemp, 2025).

Early forms of web communication were primarily text-based and asynchronous, but with the development of **Web 2.0 technologies**, the second generation of the internet, characterized by interactive, user-generated content and participatory platforms, the role of users shifted from passive recipients of information into active producers of content (Darwish & Lakhtaria, 2011). A key development in this era was the emergence of **social media**, defined as a platform that enables users to create, share, and consume content (Bayer et al., 2020). An important subcategory of social media in terms of communication and networking is **social networking sites (SNS)**, commonly described through four key elements: the profile created by the individual, typically through photos and status updates; the network, usually in the form of friends or followers; the stream, which includes news, posts, and recent activity, and the messaging system that allows users to communicate directly through private texts (Bayer et al., 2020; Ellison & boyd, 2013; Ellison & Vitak, 2015). Together, these features reorganized how social relationships are initiated and maintained across broad

and specific audiences worldwide. Today, SNS use now reaches nearly 65% of the global population and averages 2 hours and 21 minutes per day (Chaffey, 2025).

1.3 Theories of Computer-Mediated Communication

Having outlined the history of mediated communication and social media technologies, the next step is to briefly consider how the communication medium shapes interaction. Theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC) offer concepts for understanding the features, possibilities, and constraints of mediated contact and relationships, particularly in the early stages, when much of the contact occurs on digital platforms.

Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) and Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) are among the earliest and most influential theories of mediated communication. Media Richness Theory highlights the medium's ability to transmit information, while the Social Presence Theory emphasizes the perceived level to which the presence of another is experienced through each medium. Both link the quality of interaction to a medium's capacity to convey social and informational cues, such as the immediacy of feedback, synchronicity, language variety, and the number of available channels, thereby distinguishing between "rich" and "lean" media (Ishii et al., 2019). Leaner media with fewer cues have traditionally been linked to the formation of superficial, less meaningful, or short-term relationships, a concept known as the cues-filtered-out approach (Culnan & Markus, 1987; Kiesler et al., 1984).

However, the lived experiences of individuals and their online relationships did not support these theories. Even early studies, such as Parks and Roberts' (1998), found that users form close and satisfying relationships online. In response to these, Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 1992; 2015) was developed to explain how users adapt to the constraints of the medium and can form relationships online, though at a slower pace. Individuals use language, emojis, and other communication strategies

to express strong emotions or show interest in another person (Walther, 2017). Building on this observation, the Hyperpersonal Model (Walther, 2015, 2017) explains how characteristics of online communication, such as editability, asynchronicity, and limited visibility, give people more control over their interactions and allow them to present themselves more favorably, leading to increased liking and positive bonds.

For the purposes of this thesis, theories of computer-mediated communication are not employed to explain relational outcomes in a deterministic manner, but to highlight how the characteristics of digital media structure the environments in which interaction takes place. At the same time, an exclusive focus on technological constraints risks reducing relational experience to what media technically allow, overlooking how individuals dynamically experience, interpret, and negotiate interactions over time.

1.4 The Emergence and Evolution of Online Dating

Online dating, in its more contemporary form, gained popularity in the mid-1990s as people used emerging technologies to expand their pool of potential partners beyond their immediate social circles. Early platforms like Match, JDate, and eHarmony were created as specialized online tools for finding romantic connections (Matthews, 2018) and were mainly computer-based. With the rise of smartphones and their widespread use, dating apps like Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, and other geolocation apps became the dominant way to meet (Castro & Degen, 2020).

Tinder, one of the earliest dating apps, was launched in 2012 and has since dominated the market. Today, it has over 6 million monthly downloads, followed by Bumble with more than 3 million downloads (Statista, 2024b). Other platforms, such as Litmatch and Badoo, each with over 2 million monthly downloads, rank third and fourth in popularity (Vogels & McClain, 2023). In addition to mainstream apps, many platforms exist to connect different user groups. For the LGBTQ+ community,

specialized apps like Grindr and Her account for about 6% and 3% of users, respectively. Other niche dating apps cater to individuals with disabilities, specific religious groups, and those with specific interests (Vogels & McClain, 2023).

While the dating market has diversified, Tinder remains the dominant reference point, with many newer platforms defining their user experience and relational orientation in relation to its model. Bumble, for example, was explicitly designed to counter the heteronormative interaction patterns and forms of toxic masculinity associated with Tinder by requiring women to initiate contact in heterosexual matches (Pruchniewska, 2020). Hinge similarly brands its app as “designed to be deleted,” promoting profiles with more personal information and interactions through prompts, aiming to position itself as a space for building long-term, meaningful relationships (Hawkins & DeLuca Bishop, 2025). Tinder continues to be the leading app, not only in scale but in meaning, as competing apps position themselves against its perceived hookup culture, simultaneously challenging and stabilizing that image.

In a short period, online dating has become one of the most common ways to seek a romantic partner (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). According to a 2023 Pew Research Center survey (Vogels & McClain), nearly 30% of U.S. adults have used an online dating site or app. While the U.S. leads in usage, the trend is worldwide. In Europe, for example, there were about 80 million users in 2023 (Statista, 2023b), with growth expected to continue. The highest growth rates were recorded in the United Kingdom (19.1%), Belgium (12.7%), and France (12.7%), while other countries hover around 10% (Statista, 2023b). Ireland, while it has a relatively small population compared to other countries, has also seen constant growth in the dating market in recent years, with penetration rising from 3.4% in 2017 to a projected 5% by 2030 (Statista, 2025). This widespread adoption indicates that many people have turned to online dating at some point in their lives, whether for convenience, curiosity, or necessity.

The popularity of online dating varies by age group. Younger adults are the most active users, with about 53% of those under 30 reporting they have used a dating site or app, compared to 37% of those aged 30 to 49, 20% of those aged 50 to 64, and just 13% of those 65 and older (Vogels & McClain, 2023). Platforms also reflect these different demographics. Tinder, for example, is more popular among younger adults, while older users are more likely to favor sites like Match.com.

1.5 Working of Online Dating

The process of online dating usually starts with choosing a dating app, which is shaped by a combination of relationship goals, personal needs and interests, and broader societal representations about specific dating platforms and online dating broadly. People may choose an app based on recommendations and experiences from their friends, as well as shared ideas about an app's purpose and its intended use. For example, Tinder is known as an app for casual encounters among heterosexual users (LeFebvre, 2018), while among gay men, it is linked to committed relationships. Conversely, Grindr has a reputation for hypersexual and promiscuous behavior (McKee, 2016).

After selecting an app, users create a personal profile, a moment where online dating significantly differs from traditional, face-to-face dating (Finkel et al., 2012). Profiles typically include demographic details, interests, photos, and a bio. Following this, users browse and assess other profiles, and express interest by swiping, sending messages, responding to prompts, or using similar computer-mediated communication gestures. Suggested profiles are organized by platform algorithms that consider age, location, interests, recent activity, and user-specified criteria (Vitak & Ellison, 2018). These algorithms are often marketed as scientifically based and well-informed, relying on data, but in reality, users and researchers do not know exactly how they work, and companies keep their methods proprietary (Sharabi, 2021).

Once interest is mutual and a match is made, users can continue to communicate and exchange private messages. Some apps allow users to send a message before there is a 'match', while in the most popular ones, like Tinder and Bumble, people can get in contact when they reciprocally like each other (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2022). How users proceed can depend on their goals, but typically, meeting in person is a desired outcome for many users, including for app purposes (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017), and serves as a checkpoint where users evaluate compatibility and chemistry to decide whether to pursue a relationship. Studies suggest that most users aim to move from dating apps to in-person meetings within one week to a month (Rosen et al., 2008). Some return to the app and repeat the cycle, engaging with new individuals or reactivating their profiles after breaks.

1.6 Dating Apps in Context: Not as New or Narrow as They Seem

While features like constructed profiles, algorithmic matching, and many available users signaling what type of relationship they want are unique to dating platforms, the broader practice of matchmaking through mediated forms is not new. Historically, human matchmakers, marriage brokers, and other intermediaries have helped facilitate romantic connections within religious and social communities (Finkel et al., 2012). This tradition evolved from personal ads in newspapers (Corr, 2004) to internet-based ads, and eventually to the rise of specialized dating sites and apps. Despite this continuity, online dating is often perceived as distinct from traditional dating, which has led to social stigma in its early days and, more recently, to stereotypes about the superficial and casual nature of the relationships it fosters.

In terms of design, dating apps share key characteristics with other social media platforms, including profile creation, networking, text messaging, video chats, and overall user engagement. However, dating apps usually lack the content stream typical of social media platforms and are primarily designed to enable one-on-one

communication, making them a unique type of social media platform. Some platforms explicitly blur the lines between dating and other forms of connection; for example, Grindr has positioned itself as a community space beyond hookup culture (Katz, 2023), while Bumble's 'Best-friends mode' promotes friendships (Bumble, 2023).

Therefore, viewing dating apps more inclusively alongside other social media platforms and the various relationships they can create can better reflect their overlapping features with similar apps, social implications, and the fluidity of users' intentions and uses. Likewise, from an individual's perspective, the process of forming one-on-one relationships online often follows similar patterns in both romantic and non-romantic contexts.

1.7 Who Dates Online, How, and Why

Gender. Studies generally show that men are more likely to use online dating platforms than women (Weiser et al., 2018), while others have found no difference in the number of male and female users (Sumter et al., 2017), and that women seem to use them more effectively and selectively (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018). Generally, women tend to accumulate matches more quickly, while men gain them more slowly and spend more time on the apps each day (Tyson et al., 2016). Other notable differences include practices like the unsolicited sending of men's genitals images, which is relatively common. Women generally react negatively to these images, whereas gay and bisexual men are more likely to evaluate them positively (Marcotte et al., 2020).

Sexual orientation. Research shows that homosexual and bisexual individuals, especially men, are more likely to use dating apps compared to heterosexuals (Johnson et al., 2017). Dating apps provide a more accessible space for meeting people from sexual minorities, especially in the case of structural or social barriers that might prevent them from expressing their identities (Lemke & Weber, 2017). Apps were

offering a sense of community and a safe environment for exploring and expressing queer intimacies without the need to assume or conceal one's identity in other spaces (Byron et al., 2021).

Age. While most research has focused on younger adults, especially those aged 18 to 24, studies show that the average age of dating app users is around 31 (Shapiro et al., 2017). However, older users are also showing a growing interest in dating online, especially following life changes, as new ways to socialize and form relationships (Stephure et al., 2009).

Dispositional factors. Despite some unique patterns in how dating apps are used, research found more similarities than differences between online daters and non-users (Aretz et al., 2010; Steffek & Loving, 2009), undermining stereotypes that portray users as a homogenous or niche group. A variety of people turn to dating apps for different reasons and stages of life, as they offer distinct benefits and affordances, which also explains their increasing specialization.

Motivation for Using Dating Apps. Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) identify eight main reasons for online dating: socializing, social pressure, social approval, entertainment, passing time, seeking relationships, seeking information, and seeking sex. Sumter et al. (2017) report that many people use online dating to boost self-esteem, cope with loneliness, alleviate boredom, and manage social anxiety (Holtzhausen, 2020). A Pew Research Center survey (Vogels & McClain, 2023) found that 22% of dating app users named 'making new friends' as a main reason for using the apps, especially for women and gay men. The range of motivations behind dating app use suggests that these platforms occupy a broader role in individuals' relational lives than is often acknowledged and overlap with a range of social relationships.

Relationship initiation beyond dating apps. Social networking platforms, online forums, gaming communities, and social networking sites have a long history of

fostering romantic relationships online (Baker, 2008; Gibbs et al., 2006; Hall, 2014; Parks & Roberts, 1998). The development of relationships is often described by the users as a more gradual process, grounded in shared interests, humor, or mutual support, leading to connections that feel more organic and less goal-directed than those facilitated by traditional dating apps (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). Some users describe them as more authentic than dating apps, with lower pressure to perform and present oneself in a desirable way (Hobbs et al., 2017).

Together, these findings suggest that online romantic relationships are not confined to specialized dating platforms but can develop across digital environments in different and meaningful ways. Nevertheless, with the rise of dating apps, scholarship increasingly narrowed its focus to these platforms, often treating them as distinct domains. This distinction implies a separation between social, sexual, and communicative practices, whereas in reality, these processes are highly interconnected, serving broader relational and social purposes (Byron et al., 2021).

1.8 Affordances of Dating Apps

Initially introduced by Gibson (1979), the term affordances describes the possibilities for action that an object or environment offers while also imposing constraints. For example, a chair invites sitting but limits movement, while a highway allows fast, uninterrupted travel but restricts interaction with the surrounding environment. Similarly, digital communication tools provide affordances such as easy contact across distance, while removing aspects of face-to-face interaction, such as nonverbal cues and physical presence (Joinson, 2001). Understanding affordances as technological features that simultaneously enable and restrict action highlights the inherently opposing workings of technology and the multiple directions it can take (Arnold, 2003).

When it comes to online relating, dating, and courting, some affordances overlap with general CMC characteristics, such as immediacy and mobility. In contrast, others are more specific to dating apps, including ***authenticity*** through connecting with a Facebook or other social media profile, visual dominance due to the frequent use of pictures, and proximity, especially since the most current mobile-based dating apps connect people who are geographically close (Chan, 2017).

Proximity and partner selection are key features of dating apps. These apps help people meet nearby, combining the benefits of online chatting with the advantages of being physically close. Users can start contacting multiple individuals who share their interests or relationship goals, giving them more choices and control over whom they want to connect with (Hobbs et al., 2017).

Synchronicity refers to whether communication happens in real time (synchronous) or with a delay (asynchronous) (Culnan & Markus, 1987), and it is a key feature of online communication. Most dating apps rely on asynchronous, textual modes of communication. Synchronous communication, such as a phone or video call in real time, improves conversational flow and feelings of presence, while asynchronous methods like messaging reduce pressure to respond immediately, giving users more time to reply thoughtfully. ***Editability*** is closely connected to synchronicity. It lets users write, revise, and reshape their messages before sending without worrying about revealing nonverbal signals or involuntary cues. Together, these features provide greater control and enhance self-presentation, disclosure, and relationship development (Ellison et al., 2006).

Although most modern dating apps require registration and identification, typically via email, linked social media, and photo verification, there are still elements of ***anonymity*** present. These are connected to a lack of complete ***visibility*** during early communication and the absence of broader social accountability, as exchanges typically

occur privately between two individuals (Ramirez et al., 2002). Likewise, anonymity can lead to increased self-disclosure, but it may also create opportunities for inappropriate or hostile behavior (Suler, 2004). These features of limited visibility give users greater control over self-presentation, while also shaping how trust and authenticity are negotiated in early interaction.

In online dating, where first impressions, early communication, and decisions about relational progression occur almost entirely through the medium, medium affordances help us understand how users present themselves, interpret others, and manage uncertainty. However, this approach also risks reducing experience to its more functional or utilitarian aspects, without adequately addressing how individuals dynamically experience and give meaning to these interactions.

1.9 The Mediated Self: Identity, Performance, Authenticity

Beyond platform features, online dating also reorganizes identity work. Drawing on constructivist concepts of the Self, such as those of William James (1890) and George Herbert Mead (1934), the Self can be understood as relational and developing, shaped by interactions with others, platform affordances, and sociocultural expectations. Digital platforms make this process more explicit because profiles and messages require selective self-description tailored to a real, perceived, or imagined audience (Turkle, 1995). As people imagine and construct alternative versions of themselves or their lives, their sense of identity and relationships may evolve into a practice. The Self, from this perspective, is constantly evolving through engagement with technological tools and through interaction among present, past, and imagined future selves.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach helps us understand how people manage impressions in such contexts. Using a theatrical metaphor, Goffman described social actors as moving between frontstage, where they are aware of being observed, and backstage, a private area where individuals can relax and let go of their

performance. Social interaction, therefore, is inherently performative, influenced by situational demands that shape how individuals embody the desired qualities. An important component of Goffman's theory is the distinction between impressions that are given, which are deliberate and controlled by the person, and those that are given off, which include unintended cues, such as inconsistencies in tone, nonverbal signs, or behaviors that might reveal other aspects of the Self. This distinction becomes particularly interesting online, where users have more control over their self-presentation but may still reveal unintended elements of their identity. These can include small details, such as spelling errors and inconsistencies in mannerisms and reactions to others, which can alter the image a person is trying to present.

Increased control over one's online self-presentation and expression has raised persistent questions about authenticity in online environments. In this context, authenticity is understood as the consistency between inner states and outward expression (McKenna et al., 2002; Haimson et al., 2021), implicitly assuming a stable core identity. In contrast, dialogical perspectives conceptualize the Self as a multiplicity of voices emerging in relation to others and sociocultural contexts and constantly changing (Bakhtin, 1984; Hermans, 2012). From this perspective, authenticity is not the expression of a single unified identity but a situated, negotiated experience of coherence across contexts (Sedikides et al., 2017). Identity thus becomes an ongoing process of becoming, shaped by the interplay among individual positions, technological mediation, and social discourses.

1.10 Core Relational Processes in Online Dating

The following section focuses on the core relational processes that unfold in online dating interactions. These processes are not independent of the medium but unfold through the dynamic interplay between affordances and users' agency, shaping

how individuals present themselves, disclose personal information, negotiate the transition to face-to-face contact, and develop relationships.

Self-presentation. Self-presentation is crucial in how people attract interest online. Unlike face-to-face interactions or even other SNSs, where impressions and interactions form naturally through observation or subtle cues, dating apps rely on quick judgments of dating profiles to determine whether to initiate communication. Pressured to attract interest, users are motivated to present the best version of themselves by using carefully chosen photos, positive bios, and self-descriptions to stand out from other profiles, while also wanting to be liked for who they truly are, leading to a tension between appearance and authenticity. (Ellison et al., 2006; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Ward, 2017).

Self-Disclosure. If self-presentation is about attracting interest, self-disclosure is about building relationships through mutual sharing and the exchange of more personal information (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Gabrielle & Titus, 2018). Research on self-disclosure has shown that online environments often enhance personal sharing, especially in the early stages of relationships (Sumter et al., 2017; Walther, 1996). The asynchronous and lower-cue nature of mediated communication can reduce immediate social risks, allowing individuals to disclose more openly and earlier than they might in face-to-face contexts (Caplan, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Transitioning from Online to Face-to-Face Interaction. A face-to-face meeting is typically expected to move the relationship toward emotional connection, physical experiences, or long-term commitment (Baker, 2002). This step allows individuals to assess their compatibility in person and serves as a test of relational intentions and attraction (Finkel et al., 2012; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017). Several studies have identified factors that increase the likelihood of a successful face-to-face

transition, including an honest profile, responsiveness and availability, and an intriguing yet not too keen demeanor (Ramirez et al., 2015; Toma & Hancock, 2010).

Intimacy in Online Relationships. Even though often seen as inferior to offline relationships, those formed online can be very close, rewarding, and meaningful. The benefits of dating online can have a lasting impact on relationship quality and commitment. Cacioppo et al. (2013) found that couples who met online reported slightly higher satisfaction and lower separation rates than those who met offline. However, some research shows the opposite. Paul (2014) found that online-formed couples had higher breakup rates, and Hu and colleagues (2024) discovered that married couples who met online were less satisfied. These adverse effects are often a result of societal disapproval of dating apps, stigma, and marginalization against individuals who form online relationships, which negatively affect the longevity and stability of these relationships (Sharabi & Dorrance-Hall, 2024).

1.11 Risks and Dangers Associated with Online Relationships

As with earlier communication technologies, dating apps have been accompanied by concerns about risks, some grounded in more realistic threats, others sensationalized and framed pessimistically. Features that make apps appealing, such as immediacy of contact, ease of meeting strangers, asynchronous communication, and the ability to edit or curate messages and one's self-presentation, can also be associated with misrepresentation, manipulation, and mismatched relational expectations.

Emotional and Psychological Risks. Emotional risks can be especially pronounced in online dating, where users often judge compatibility and attractiveness quickly, based on appearance, communication style, and easily accessible information. If someone doesn't meet the criteria or the relationship doesn't develop as hoped, it's relatively simple to move on to another candidate, which can give a sense of control and choice. Many users report positive emotions around the novelty and possibilities that

dating apps afford, while also describing feelings of disappointment, sadness, and emotional exhaustion (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2022, 2025). Repeated experiences of rejection may intensify negative feelings, and some describe the process as frustrating and unpleasant (Thomas et al., 2023).

Sexual and Behavioral Risks. Perhaps because of their reputation for promoting a hook-up culture, online dating has also been linked to riskier sexual behaviors. It has been argued that app users are more likely to have unprotected sex with casual partners and use recreational drugs during sex (Choi et al., 2017). Other studies report associations with multiple sexual partners and inconsistent protection use (Dai, 2023; Mignault et al., 2022), attributing this to lower disinhibition due to the immediacy and accessibility of dating apps (Jung et al., 2019). However, other studies found no relationship between dating app use and protection, and some even suggest that dating app users are more likely to practice safe sex (Luo et al., 2019). These contradictory findings point to the complexity of relational and behavioural processes and highlight the limitations of reducing technology–outcome relationships to linear or deterministic explanations.

Deception and Fraud. Deception presents significant psychological, emotional, and relational risks in dating relationships. The structure of the online environment – including access to many individuals, a lack of a shared network, and features that give people more control over relationship building – can make users wary of being deceived. However, contrary to popular portrayals of catfishing or romance scams, most deceptive online practices are harmless and involve minor exaggerations of personal qualities (Toma et al., 2008; Whitty & Joinson, 2009) or more elaborate lies about circumstances and relationship goals (Solis & Wong, 2019). As a result, even if many users never experience serious deception, the mere possibility influences how online dating is discussed and experienced.

Personal Safety and Violence. Concerns about personal safety remain central to societal discussions and user experiences of online dating. The most serious dangers involve threats of physical violence and sexual harassment, which are disproportionately experienced by young heterosexual women (Anderson et al., 2020; Chan, 2018). One possible explanation for this connection is structural, where the likelihood of encountering sexual predators and violent individuals is higher due to the large number of users (Choi et al., 2017). Also, unlike in everyday offline meetings, where potential partners are more likely to share social networks and interact in public spaces, online meetings can feel more private and less socially monitored, reducing the risk of being caught or judged.

Structural and Discriminatory Risks. Dating apps can also reinforce existing inequalities through user behavior and biases related to ethnicity, sexuality, and gender online, as well as from the structural inequality embedded in platform design (Callander et al., 2016). Hegemonic masculinity dominates self-presentation (García-Gómez, 2020), while other groups with non-white backgrounds, gay men, and women face marginalization. Even apps that claim to promote feminism and gender equality, like Bumble, can still marginalize users who do not fit into binary gender and heteronormative categories (Bivens & Hoque, 2018). At the same time, users actively navigate these inequalities. Many women, for example, adopt strategies to reduce harassment, utilizing platform features to manage exposure and control interactions (Duguay et al., 2020; Pruchniewska, 2020).

Dark Design Patterns. The term ‘dark design’ (Brignull, 2013) refers to how technology features are strategically designed to prioritize profit over users’ best interests.

These strategies may include a lack of transparency, ambiguous interfaces, misleading prompts, or other methods that lead users to take actions they might avoid if fully

informed (Narayanan et al., 2020). In the context of dating apps, typical examples include making it difficult to delete the account, hidden fees, sending nudges that play with users' emotions and needs, and increasing engagement through streaks and badges (Alexopoulos et al., 2020a; Pettersen & Karlsen, 2023). Additionally, platforms prioritize active users, as they are more likely to appear in search results, while users are also encouraged to purchase a priority placement in search results. In some cases, these practices can be even more deceptive. For instance, Match.com has been accused of generating fake profiles and sending messages to users to increase engagement and encourage subscription to paid services (Narayanan et al., 2020). Although these tactics can be subtle, users and society are largely aware of them, which may also help explain why dating apps are often linked to negative feelings like burnout, addiction, and frustration, despite their potential for creating meaningful connections.

1.12 Social and Academic Representation of Online Dating and Online Relationships

Public and academic discourses often focus on the negative impact of the medium on individuals, relationships, intimacy, and risks. Many of these concerns, as we discussed earlier, tend to resurface with each wave of technological innovation, framing new technology as harmful, but also empowering by the new opportunities it introduces. This section examines how online dating and online relationships are represented in both public discourse and academic research, focusing on three recurring themes: stigma and superficiality, risk and wellbeing, and concerns about loneliness and social skills.

1.12.1 Stigma and Superficial Relationships

The social stigma around online relationships dates to the days of writing, the telephone, and personal ads, and it has carried over to online dating. Early research on

attitudes toward dating platforms found that people believe users are socially awkward, desperate, failures, or lack traditional romantic skills (Goodwin, 1990; Orr, 2004). Even more recent studies show that people tend to stigmatize and hold negative views of those seeking partners online (Johanis et al., 2024). Selterman and Gideon's (2022) study showed that despite 40% of their participants having formed meaningful relationships on dating apps, many still expressed ambivalence and less favorable attitudes about online dating than toward other avenues of meeting partners. Similarly, Langlais et al. (2024) found that the quality of relationships formed online was comparable to that formed offline, yet participants still preferred meeting partners face-to-face, suggesting enduring negativity towards online dating. In a contemporary Irish context, McCarthy and Jackson (2022) found that participants often described feeling embarrassed or mortified by having to turn to online dating, framing platform use as a reluctant choice associated with personal failure rather than opportunity. Together, these findings illustrate how negative social meanings attached to online dating continue to shape users' experiences, even as the practice itself has become normalized.

The bias surrounding online dating extends to perceptions of the quality of relationships these apps forge. Contemporary discourse continues to link platforms like Tinder with casual sex and emotional superficiality (LeFebvre, 2018), despite evidence to the contrary. Pew data (Vogels & McClain, 2023) indicate that only 24% of users seek casual sex, while 44% report using dating platforms to find long-term relationships, and many use casual sex as a strategy to gauge relational compatibility (Menon, 2024). However, even if sexual gratification is the main reason for going online, there is a presumption that such activity is more likely to result in risk, such as being murdered, raped, or contracting a disease (Rosenwarne, 2016). This association reveals how society still holds biases toward the medium and casual relationships, blames the victim, and entertains a fear of losing commitment.

Another related and recurrent fear is that relationships formed online are less lasting and satisfying. Headlines in the media, such as ‘Relationships that begin online are less stable – I’ve seen it time and time again’ (Jo Sales, 2023), and ‘Why are couples who meet online more likely to fall out of love?’ (Calver, 2025) report on issues with choice, addictive nature of dating apps, and ease of cheating as the leading causes of lower relationship quality. Furthermore, the article's author claimed that these adverse effects are not a result of stigma or societal marginalization, despite the specific study from which the main finding was drawn (Sharabi & Dorrance-Hall, 2024) reported that external pressures, such as marginalization, were the primary contributors to this effect.

Academic research has also sought to answer questions about how the quality of relationships and commitment have deteriorated due to online dating. A supporter of the idea that technology weakens intimacy is Bauman's (2003) concept of ‘liquid love’, which holds that stability and security once offered by partnerships have been diminished by technological advances. People’s relationships are now filled with uncertainty about whether they made the right choice, and individuals are less likely to stay in stable romantic relationships because they have many other options online. Wu and Trottier (2022) note that many studies on dating apps were conducted in response to the proposition of liquid love, with limited empirical support for these negative claims. For example, Hobbs et al. (2017) found that dating app users still value commitment and intimacy, concluding that pessimistic narratives tend to dominate and overlook the positives.

Many still seek evidence that dating apps promote quick, casual, and disposable relationships rather than deep and meaningful connections. Bandinelli and Gandini (2021) use the metaphor of ‘relationship shopping’ to suggest that dating apps foster a consumer-like attitude toward relationships, treating potential partners as disposable. Conversely, individuals are less confident in their chosen partner and are less willing to

stay in a relationship (Apostolou et al., 2024). In response to these propositions, Alexopoulos and colleagues (2020b) found that the number of potential and available partners was associated with perceptions of dating apps' success and, inversely, with the intention to commit infidelity. Taken together, this body of work indicates that recurring concerns about superficiality continue to shape research agendas and direct attention toward negative consequences, despite limited and often inconsistent empirical support. Diesen et al. (2025), in their scoping review of qualitative research on pursuing romantic relationships online, found that research often centers on problem-oriented topics and risks, while other areas remain unexplored.

1.12.2 Risks and Wellbeing

Roughly half of U.S. adults still consider it dangerous to meet someone through an online dating platform (Anderson et al., 2020), reflecting not only real risks but also the persistence of negativity biases surrounding these technologies. Many of these risks mirror longstanding challenges in romantic and close relationships, such as rejection, minor deviations from the truth, and harassment. Still, they take on new meaning or take on greater emphasis on dating apps. Other occurrences, such as deception, murder, scams, or catfishing, while very rare in reality, are very much present in social representations.

Cultural narratives of danger and sensationalized media reports reinforce these perceptions, making online dating seem riskier than it is. Rosenwarne (2016), in an analysis of popular media portrayals, highlighted recurring objectification and the depiction of online daters as murderers, psychos, or perverts, often tied to broader fears of catfishing, human trafficking, or cybercrime. The author concludes that our cyberphobia, fear, and amusement of emerging technologies feed these narratives. Everyday experiences of online dating, by contrast, are usually uneventful, involving either the development of some relationship or a loss of interest. In this sense, the risks

of violence are not only statistical but representational, whereby they shape how people approach online interactions, whether with caution, stigma, or heightened awareness. Severe deception or violence are rare, yet the salience of such cases makes them stand out prominently in societal representations of dating apps.

Many articles make links between negative emotional and psychological experiences, such as anxiety and negativity, mental health problems, and the use of dating apps. Pieces such as 'Dating apps might be messing with your mental health (Chesler, 2025) talk about addiction to dating apps and the transactional nature of their design. As a result, the author says, people experience deeper levels of anxiety and depression the more they are engaged with the apps. Another piece warns that dating apps make users unhappy about their bodies and lead to lower self-esteem (Ueberbach, 2025).

A positive association between the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and the use of dating apps is also worth noting. Albury et al. (2020) analyzed media discourses on STDs and found a persistent tendency to blame the app for the spread of STDs, which in turn influences public opinion and policies. However, no single epidemiological study has confirmed this causal link. Instead, correlational data are often mistaken for causation, with the simultaneous rise of dating app use and STD rates presented as evidence of a connection. It is interesting that despite how liberal and permissive Western culture has become, we are still quite concerned about casual sexual arrangements and associate them with the loss of commitment or the prevalence of disease.

In academic research, a substantial number of articles also explore the negative impacts of dating apps on users' mental, relational, and sexual health, as well as the dangers they present (Diesen et al., 2025). Holtzhausen et al. (2020), in a cross-sectional survey, found connections between online dating and psychological distress, depression,

and lower well-being. Similarly, Bowman et al. (2025), in a review, reported that nearly half of the studies they examined found harmful relationships between dating app use and mental health, including higher levels of depression and anxiety, and negative effects on body image, especially among sexual minority men (Rodgers et al., 2020). However, common concerns across these studies include not only the persistence of negative framing and a tendency to look for negatives, but also that most are correlational and use diverse samples, which weaken their conclusions and continue to contribute to negative representations.

1.12.3 Loneliness and Loss of Social Skills

The Daily Illini article from 2023 discusses the positive and negative effects of dating apps on communication and social skills. Among other issues, the article states that people use dating apps as a substitute for in-person interactions, resulting in a decline in fundamental social skills. Similarly, Melanie Gowan (2022) provides a list of social skills lost due to online dating, including communication skills, self-confidence, and social confidence. The authors argue that we cannot maintain eye contact, read emotions and social cues, or engage in conversation with strangers because we are hiding behind the screen.

These critiques echo broader discourses around digital technologies. Appel et al. (2020) discussed how different social discourses represent technology as a threat to human connection, as a leading cause of loneliness, social disintegration, and a loss of genuine relationships. Headlines such as 'How Technology Created a Recipe for Loneliness' (The New York Times, 2024) and 'Technology Isolates People and Makes Them Lonely' (The Telegraph, 2024) illustrate deep and global concerns surrounding online communication.

The idea that technology is weakening our social lives is also a common starting point in academic research. As discussed earlier in this chapter, early studies on CMC

were influenced by a deficit-based view according to which the number of cues available online is linked to a lack of intimacy, while time spent online risks replacing higher-quality in-person relationships, leading to isolation, loneliness, and community decline (i.e., Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001). Although research has largely moved beyond impoverished media models, their influence continues to shape the field, despite contrary evidence. A small body of more methodologically complex research, such as observational or longitudinal studies, generally found little support for negative social impacts, and what seems to be replaced by time spent online is household chores, mundane activities, or general procrastination (Hall et al., 2019). Some studies found that online communication is associated with richer social lives in general. For example, Dienlin et al. (2017) reported that SNS users are more likely to engage in face-to-face interactions, and Requena and Ayuso (2018) found a positive association between communicating on Facebook and through other means, such as face-to-face and phone.

1.13 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that online dating is not an isolated or entirely novel phenomenon, but part of a longer trajectory of mediated communication for initiating new relationships and sustaining existing ones. Examining dating apps through computer-mediated communication and affordance frameworks demonstrates how the material characteristics of the medium structure the environment in which interaction unfolds, while research on relational processes highlights how these environments shape identities and relationship formation. At the same time, social and academic representations continue to frame online dating as risky, deficit-producing, and technologically driven, often with limited empirical support.

Taken together, online dating is a sociotechnical system in which technological features, user practices, relational dynamics, and cultural meanings are mutually constitutive. This review, therefore, points to the need for an approach that moves

beyond outcome-oriented and medium-centric explanations and instead examines how individuals experience, interpret, and make meaning of their relationships within these dynamic conditions. The following chapter develops this person-centered and temporally oriented framework.

Chapter 2:

Methodological Approach and Research Design

2.1 Conceptual Synthesis

This work aims to understand how people make meaning of their online relationships and dating, and how these evolve and exist within broader sociocultural contexts. In the previous chapter, we outlined the key characteristics of communication technologies, their core affordances, and how relational processes are mediated by these environments. We also examined broader societal representations, norms, and values surrounding these technologies and how they reflect on users' experiences. We aimed to demonstrate that technologies are not simply neutral instruments but are designed within and shaped by wider social, ethical, and organizational contexts. What is still needed, however, is a framework that can bring these elements together into a single analytical perspective.

Approaches to online dating have often focused either on individual-level behavioral dimensions, as is common in parts of cyberpsychology, or on processes distributed across relatively stable contextual levels, as in socio-ecological models. While these perspectives have generated important insights into patterns of use, individual characteristics, and environmental influences, they tend to place relational experience in separate analytic units rather than examining it as an emergent, relational process.

A framework that allows these dimensions to be considered as part of a single, dynamic process is Lievrouw's (2014) model of mediated communication, which conceptualizes media as the interaction of three interconnected elements: (a) artefacts or technological platforms with specific material and symbolic characteristics, (b) practices through which people use and adapt these tools in everyday life, and (c) social arrangements, or the broader institutional and cultural contexts that shape, and are shaped by, artefacts and practices. These components exist in continual flux, shaping and responding to one another over time. While these elements account for much of the

material and structural context, they leave less room for the lived, felt, and interpreted aspects of relational experience.

To address this, we place the analytical focus on the person. We are especially interested in how individuals interpret, feel, and assign meaning to their online relationships, and how these experiences are shaped through engagement with technological environments and broader social discourses. Drawing from sociocultural and critical approaches, we explore how online dating is lived through stories, emotions, and meaning-making processes. This perspective understands online dating as relational and temporally unfolding, existing in irreversible time in which technologies, practices, and meanings are continuously reconfigured.

To achieve this, we draw on concepts from phenomenology, post-phenomenology, sociocultural theories of agency and meaning-making, developmental perspectives, as well as semiotics and dialogism. In the first part of this chapter, we explain how these principles relate to the focus of this thesis. The second part provides an overview of the methodology and the steps taken to address the research questions and the thesis's objectives.

2.2. Phenomenology and Meaning-Making of the Lived Experience

Given our aim of understanding how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences, a phenomenological perspective is particularly suited. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of lived experience and seeks to understand the nature, meaning, and experience of a phenomenon as it is lived (Husserl, 1931). It rejects a Cartesian separation between subject and object and instead understands them as an interconnected unity in an irreducible relationship to one another (Heidegger, 1927). Human beings and their world thus cannot be studied or conceived separately from one another but only as co-existing elements of experience (Verbeek, 2005; 2015).

Drawing on classical phenomenology (Heidegger, 1927; Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1945) and post-phenomenological work on technological mediation (Ihde, 1990), this perspective views relationships and technology as mutually constitutive, allowing us to move beyond treating online relationships as discrete outcomes or behaviors and to consider them as lived, felt, socially embedded, and continuously becoming. Online relationships are thus not merely facilitated by what digital tools enable or constrain, but also by the meanings they evoke. Phenomenology provides access to the richness of lived experience, while sociocultural principles of meaning-making allow us to examine how that experience becomes meaningful through interaction, narration, and cultural resources.

2.3 Post-Phenomenology and Everyday Technology Experience

Post-phenomenology extends the phenomenological perspective by examining how technologies shape everyday human experience and people's relations with the world (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2015). Rather than treating technologies as external instruments, it analyses the different relations through which human – technology – world configurations are formed.

Ihde (1990) identifies four such relations. In embodiment relations, technology is a transparent extension of the body, as when glasses become part of seeing (human-technology→ world). In hermeneutic relations, technology merges with the world and translates it into readable signs, like a thermometer that displays the environment's temperature (human → technology – world). Third, alterity relations concern how we interact with technology, where technology becomes a quasi-other, as when we use an ATM or a robot (human→technology/world). And fourth are background relations, where technology subtly frames the environment, like the lighting of the room or the sound of the phone, where technology is a context rather than actively experienced (human (technology/world)).

A complementary analytical perspective is provided by Dorrestijn's (2012) notion of points of contact, which enables examination of how technological mediation operates across different experiential dimensions. Dorrestijn identifies four points of contact: 'to the hand (bodily interaction with technology; like holding or hearing the voice through the phone), 'before the eye' (cognitive engagement and interpreting information given by technology; like stopping at the red traffic light), 'behind the back' (the infrastructural conditions that enable or constrain experience; like having a good broadband network, or available apps), and 'above the head' (cultural imaginaries and broader narratives about technology's role in society; like utopian or dystopian thinking of the impact of technology). These contacts reveal how technology actively configures the types of relationships we have with the world, sometimes merging with the body and the person and directing attention to the world. At other times, technology connects to the external world, as with algorithms that define who appears as a potential match on a dating app.

These approaches help us understand tools as mediators that take on different meanings at different moments in relationships and that dynamically position the individual in relation to the world and to others. Technology's role is therefore not static or monolithic. It is reconfigured across situations and stages of relational development, at times becoming transparent and embodied in interaction, at other times operating in the background as infrastructure, and shaping how the world and others are perceived. In this way, technological mediation brings certain aspects of experience to the foreground while others recede, changing what can be perceived, felt, and done, and how these experiences become meaningful over time.

2.4 Mediation and Human Development

According to theorists such as Vygotsky (1978), Luria (1976), and Wertsch (1997), all human psychological functioning is fundamentally mediated by social,

cultural, and historical factors (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). The key premise of mediation is that individuals engage with the world, themselves, and others through cultural tools that can be material (e.g., technologies, artifacts) or ideational (e.g., language, symbols, rituals). These tools, appropriated through social interaction and dialogue, drive individual development, communication, and behavior.

As such, the artefacts and mediation are social, not only in their application but also in their origins and dynamics of change. As Vygotsky's (1978) law of development suggests, every higher psychological function initially appears on the social plane before being internalized at the individual level. In this view, culture is not outside the individual but is woven into the very structure of thought, self, and relationships.

Wertsch (1997) highlighted the genetic aspect in Vygotsky, emphasizing the importance of tracing historical development to understand current phenomena. This perspective links biology, evolutionary theory, and psychology in considering multiple levels of human development: phylogenesis (natural evolution of humans), cultural history (social activity of humans), ontogenesis (individual lifespan), and microgenetic (immediate events). Therefore, the fundamental assumption is that to understand human development, we need to focus on the process rather than the product of development and understand the social relationships in which the individual exists (Wertsch, 1997).

These insights offer several important implications for this work. First, from a developmental and mediational perspective, human interaction with tools and technologies is shaped not only by present conditions but also by history and memory, including past knowledge, norms, and experiences associated with those tools and activities they enable (Rosa & Valsiner, 2017). Thus, engagement with online dating is not ahistorical, but it carries memories of prior tools, relational norms, and broader cultural narratives of courtship and relationships.

Second, this perspective enables us to situate online relationships within a broader social and historical context. On a macro level, it helps us trace how social representations of online relationships evolve, including stigma, authenticity concerns, or moral panic. On a micro level, it allows us to attend to how individuals make sense of their relationships across stages, from initial contact to emotional connection and eventual transition (or not) to face-to-face (FtF) context and further.

2.5 Agency

Broadly, agency can be defined as a sense of control over one's actions and, in turn, events in the outside world (Haggard & Chambon, 2012). Human agency, however, cannot be understood in isolation from the social, cultural, and technological contexts in which individuals act. As Vygotsky (1978) emphasized, activity is always mediated and exists in an irreducible tension between mediating means and the individuals using them. Agency, therefore, must be seen as emerging through the interaction between individuals and the tools they engage with. The tools, however, can empower or constrain human action, shaping how individuals act in their environment (Wertsch, 1997).

From this perspective, agency is not the opposite of structure or technology; instead, it arises through interaction with them. Technologies are not neutral or all-powerful forces. As the social shaping of technology tradition argues (Bijker et al., 1987), technologies gain meaning through use, and users often adapt, subvert, or reconfigure them in ways that differ from the designers' intentions (Orlikowski, 1992). This defines agency as the appropriation of tools and emphasizes the creative ways people interact with technology in their lives.

In online relationships, this perspective allows us to view users not as passive recipients of app design and algorithms, but as **active participants** who bring intention, emotion, and reflexivity to their interactions. While the medium structures what is

possible by expanding, constraining, or guiding, the users' agency must be recognized. As discussed in the previous chapter, people find ways to navigate limitations, whether by expressing emotion through punctuation, emojis, or brackets, or by resisting platform ideologies.

Despite this autonomy, many public and scholarly discourses on online relationships overlook agency, framing digital intimacy as shallow, addictive, or structurally determined. These views echo a form of technological determinism that asymmetrically focuses on what technology does to people. As Fischer (1992) noted decades ago, people often appropriate technologies for social connection, regardless of original intent. A pattern continues in how dating apps and other networking platforms are used to build relationships and communities.

In this work, we treat agency as a relational and situated concept. It is not only about what people do, but also about what those actions mean to them, how they interpret, justify, and reflect on their digital relationships in the context of cultural expectations, technological possibilities, and personal histories.

2.6 Semiotics

One key mediator of our relationship with the world is the concept of meaning. To understand how meaning is constructed and negotiated, semiotics provides a valuable lens.

Humans are compelled to actively construct meanings about their environment, others, and themselves, and apply these understandings in everyday life (Valsiner, 2014). As McCarthy and Wright (2004) note, individuals bring their histories, feelings, and intentions into every interaction, just as much as a designer, producer, or friend does. Meaning is not inherent in objects or technologies; it is subjective and distributed between individual interpretation and broader sociocultural context.

The central premise of the semiotic approach – that we live in a world of signs, symbols, and meanings – underlines how all objects have meaning, from a chair or computer to a piece of clothing, each carrying socially and culturally constructed significance. Klein and Kleinman (2002) explains this by using an example of a car, which is not only a mode of transport but also an expression of status, values, success, personal interests, and hobbies. Similarly, a telephone is not just a tool for accomplishing tasks or communication, but it is a personally meaningful device that carries values, ideas, and stores messages and emotions important to users (McCarthy & Wright, 2004). Thus, when we engage with our world, we engage with semiotic signs and take part in the meaning-making processes, which, in a way, are never complete.

In the context of digital technologies, these processes become particularly pronounced. Engaging with a dating app or social media platform means navigating its functions as well as ideological and symbolic meanings. Ahman and Hedman (2019) argue that through these interactions, users participate in cultural and symbolic processes that extend far beyond the screen, revealing technologies as active avenues of identity negotiation. Turkle (1995) referred to these online identities as 'second selves' which emerge and unfold through an individual's interaction with a technological tool and its affordances. A person writes themselves into a being when interacting with a medium. These selves are also constructed by cultural scripts and norms that shift over time. For instance, carrying a mobile phone once might have signaled modernity and social status, whereas today, constant connectivity may evoke concerns about dependence or social disconnection.

In this view, online relationships are not only shaped by interface design or communication style, but by the semiotic systems through which people make sense of themselves, others, and their digital interactions. The sociocultural environment

provides the resources, symbols, norms, and expectations that individuals use to stabilize and interpret their relational experiences.

2.7 Meaning-Making Through Time: A Developmental Semiotic Perspective

Identity, experience, and meanings are not static. Instead, they present ongoing processes bound by time and the interplay between memory of what was in the past, the present moment, and anticipating the future (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2013; de Saint-Laurent, 2017). In this way, human development is never detached from cultural and historical trajectories.

Rather than unfolding as a fixed sequence of normative stages, experiences and meanings evolve through shifts in perspective, driven by internal and external changes. These changes, also known as ruptures, emerge when 'the obvious suddenly comes into question' (Zittoun, 2006a, p. 6), and if the new meaning is produced, they can lead to transitions, which can be understood as reconfigurations of a person's semiotic prism. A semiotic prism incorporates the classical psychosocial triangle in which interaction takes place between the person, other, and an object of interaction (Moscovici, 1984), and a semiotic triangle in which the meaning or idea at two different times is always mediated by a sign (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, a semiotic prism consists of the *person*, a sociocultural *object*, an *other* person, and the *meaning* that this object has for the person.

The process of prism reconfiguration occurs in irreversible time (Valsiner, 2014), a perspective further developed by de Saint-Laurent (2017), who explores the dimension of self-other and its evolution over time in studying trajectories of memory and discourses on history. This model studies remembering as an action that involves the person and her developmental history, occurring in interaction with others, and mediated by cultural tools. Discourses evolve over time as they develop from past recall triangles and the actions they subsequently enable, acknowledging the action-oriented

nature. Notably, this model extends not only over time but also across social and cultural dimensions, including novel information, perspectives, and new narrative frames.

In our work, the person's meaning and stories of their relationships reflect not only static states or normative stages (i.e., initiation, bonding, resolution) but also subjectively meaningful ruptures that have the potential to lead to new trajectories where the new meaning of the Self and relationship is constructed. Hence, this meaning is woven into memory, imagination, and the cultural tools available and expands across both temporal and social dimensions. When faced with new relational or technological contexts, individuals revisit and reinterpret past experiences while constructing anticipatory meanings that guide future actions. As they do so, they use sociocultural resources, like movies, songs, or books, that help them to regulate their experience and construct the meaning from a given situation. They also do this in a dialogue with others, through which they appropriate the technological tool as well as the meaning that others hold of that tool and the action it allows.

2.8 Dialogical Perspective

As we have discussed, drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1978), all human activity is mediated by tools and signs, which exist within a dynamic triangular relationship among the Self, others, and cultural artifacts (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). This process is fundamentally dialogical, shaped by real and imagined responses, and inseparable from cultural interaction (Bakhtin, 1984; Linell, 2003). As Bakhtin argued, all meaning is achieved dialogically through the interplay of voices, perspectives, norms, and tensions between the Self and others.

In this perspective, the Self is dialogical and functions as a dynamic exchange of internalized voices of significant others and social roles (Hermans, 2012). These roles interact with each other, taking turns to present different and sometimes opposing

perspectives. When we look at meaning-making in online dating, we can see the interaction and dialogue between various voices, including those internalized from friends, family, media, past experiences, experts, and broader social environments. These voices may carry different levels of importance at various times, but much of the experience involves responses to the other's perspective. This dialogical complexity can also be increased by numerous voices associated with technological systems, such as app designers, tech companies, the imagined public, and algorithmic processes, among others. Users need to interpret, negotiate, or challenge these voices as they navigate their experiences. People also share their experiences with friends and engage with broader discourses about what relationships *should* be. In this way, meaning-making is always dialogical, social, and cultural.

2.9 Narratives

Human beings make sense of the world through narrative. As scholars such as Bruner (1986, 1990), Polkinghorne (1998), and Sarbin (1986) have proposed, narrative is not just a way of recounting events, but a fundamental way of constructing experience. Through narrative, humans give meaning to the Self, interpret, and organize their emotions and experiences.

The origin and nature of narratives can be found in cultural resources. As Zittoun (2006b) highlights, personal stories are constructed using shared cultural and symbolic tools, including metaphors, stories, arts, and so on. These resources may come from media, literature, everyday conversations, cultural scripts and norms, helping individuals to make meaning of new and everyday situations. Illouz (1997) illustrates, for example, how cultural narratives about romance, shaped by television, film, and advertising, frame people's experiences of love and desire.

Technologies, too, become part of this narrative system. As we have argued, tools are never purely experienced as functional. Instead, technology, with its inherent

values, tensions, and emotions, becomes part of the Self and relationship story. That is, individuals narrate their relationships with technology and dating in ways that they can resist it, embrace it, or consider it ethically problematic.

In this work, we draw on narratives and their cultural origin to understand the implicit meanings individuals hold about online relationships, to understand, not only what they do, but also how they explain, justify, and situate relationships forged through the medium.

2.10 Aims and Objectives of the Thesis

In the first chapter, we explored the wide range of known constructs involved in online dating, including the characteristics of technology, benefits, risks, developing relationships online, and the social representations surrounding the phenomenon. What is less known, however, is how these relationships are experienced from the perspective of the person who lived the phenomena.

Given the growing prevalence of online dating alongside widespread concerns about the adverse effects of this social media technology on people's relationships, this highlights the need to understand how this phenomenon and its discrepancies are experienced from the perspective of the person. put the person at the center of analysis

Therefore, this collection of studies aims to explore and describe:

1. How users interpret, experience, and assign meaning to their online relationships.
2. How these meanings and experiences develop over time, and how contradictions and tensions shape this process.
3. How sociocultural discourses and resources influence, reflect, or diverge from personal experiences of online dating.

2.11 Research Questions

To address these aims, this thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do individuals make meaning of their online relationships? How do these meaning-making processes evolve and change over time and in different social contexts?
2. What assumptions and social representations about online dating are reflected in media discourse? How might these shape public and personal understandings of digitally mediated relationships?
3. What implicit associations do individuals hold about online dating?

2.12 Research Design and Methodology

2.12.1 Mixed-Methods Research Design

This thesis adopts an **exploratory sequential mixed-methods design** (Gillespie et al., 2024), combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore meaning making of online dating on three interconnected levels of analysis: lived experience, sociocultural discourse, and implicit associations. This sequence follows the sociotechnical position developed in the previous chapter, which holds that online dating and relationships are best understood as emerging from a dynamic interaction among the person, the medium, and broader social representations. Rather than treating them as separate domains, this design allows each study to inform the others and to capture how meanings arise or evolve across the individual, social, and representational layers.

The exploratory sequential process begins with qualitative inquiry to develop an in-depth understanding of lived experience and meaning-making, which then informs subsequent qualitative content analysis and experimental study (Gillespie et al., 2024).

The rationale for using the mixed-methods design is threefold: 1) Triangulate data by validating findings across multiple sources (Bergman, 2008), including individuals' personal stories, media discourses, and implicit association; 2) Enrich the findings through analysis at different levels: subjective, cultural, and implicit assumptions; 3) Generate a more comprehensive understanding of online dating through the integration of complementary forms of data (Gillespie et al., 2024).

2.13 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

To acknowledge the researcher's positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019), it is worth noting that the primary researcher is a woman in her early thirties with personal experience of dating, relationships, and online relationships, and therefore, could, to some extent, relate to participants' experiences. At the same time, reflexive awareness was maintained regarding how personal perspectives and assumptions could shape interpretation, and this was addressed through ongoing reflexive practice and regular discussions with the research supervisor.

2.14 Sequence of Studies

The thesis is organized into three interconnected studies.

Study 1: Qualitative interviews. Study 1 examines the lived experience of online relationships and the dialogical tensions through which participants make sense of them. The same dataset is analyzed through two complementary lenses. The first focuses on dialogical meaning-making (Gillespie, 2006; Linell, 2003) in participants' narratives. The second adopts a life-course and trajectory perspective (de Saint-Laurent, 2020; Valsiner, 1994; Zittoun, 2012) to examine turning points and temporal reorientations in online relationships.

This recursive strategy – applying multiple theoretical lenses to the same empirical material (Gillespie et al., 2024) – is used in the study to address new research

questions and to capture how the meaning of online relationships evolves over time. Such approaches have a long methodological tradition. Hinds et al. (1997) delineate four types of secondary qualitative analysis, and this study focuses on different units of analysis (narrative vs. trajectory) to yield complementary insights without additional data collection. Together, these analyses provide the experiential and temporal basis for the subsequent examination of sociocultural discourse in Study 2.

Study 2: **Media Corpus Analysis**. Study 2 moves to the sociocultural level by examining how online dating is represented in Irish broadsheet media over time. Building on the findings from Study 1, this longitudinal study combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative thematic analysis to trace the frequency, tone, and evolution of dominant discourses over time. This level helps us to see how online dating is discussed socially and how particular tensions become dominant representations.

Study 3: Story-completion task. Study 3 investigates implicit associations related to different forms of relationship initiation. This experimental design enables a comparison of shared social and cultural meanings across online and offline contexts and extends the analysis from personal experience and public discourse to taken-for-granted cultural assumptions (Clarke et al., 2019). This design is particularly useful for exploring complex topics marked by stigma, contradictions between widespread use and dominant discourses, and varying degrees of personal experience with this mode of dating. By analyzing how participants continue a hypothetical scenario and the likely relational outcomes they construct, the method enables access to the sociocultural meanings that people draw upon when they write a story, imagining relationships and normative expectations.

Detailed methodological procedures for each study are presented in the corresponding empirical chapters. Chapters 3 –6 present the empirical studies in turn. Chapter 3 examines dialogical meaning-making in lived experience; Chapter 4 develops

the trajectory analysis of online relationships; Chapter 5 analyses Irish media discourse, and Chapter 6 explores implicit associations through story completion. Chapter 7 then synthesizes the findings within the theoretical framework outlined here.

Chapter 3:

Meaning-Making in Online Romantic Relationships and Friendships

This chapter is adapted from:

Pilek, M., & de Saint-Laurent, C. (2024). Dialogism and Meaning-Making in Online Romantic Relationships and Friendships. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2024.2447520

3.1 Chapter Preface

This chapter examines the first part of the Study 1 on lived experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals involved in technology-mediated close relationships through a dialogical lens. Rather than treating online relationships as outcomes shaped solely by platform features, this study focuses on participants' personal accounts and on moments of tension in which experience is constructed and negotiated in dialogue with the medium and with broader cultural discourses. This focus responds to the outcome-oriented and technologically deterministic approaches reviewed in Chapter 1, which highlighted the need to examine how relationships are experienced from the perspective of the person.

Abstract

Despite the recognition that technology is ubiquitous and critical in modern interpersonal relationships, little is known about the meaning individuals assign to their close online relationships. Furthermore, there persists a negative bias toward online relationships. This study, using a sociocultural approach, sought to address this gap by qualitatively investigating adults' lived experiences and processes of meaning-making in online relationships. Specifically, we sought to identify common dialogical tensions in participants' discourses as the moments when meaning is created and negotiated in dialogue with the medium and cultural context.

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were carried out in-depth with participants who had diverse experiences of close online relationships, including romantic relationships, dating, familial relationships, and friendships. We assumed that the distinctiveness of this research design would highlight the interconnectedness between different types of relationships. Additionally, we expected more pronounced levels of tensions among close relationships enabled by technology.

Through the analysis of dialogical discursive tensions, we identified four main tensions in the discourses: opportunities/constraints, authenticity/staginess, safety/risk, and proximity/distance. The latter emerged as a fundamental tension, intertwining with other tensions, and prompting reflections on the realness, depth, and validity of online relationships. The analysis unveiled that individuals' experiences with online relationships are shaped by the actual use of the medium, societal representation of technology, and cultural discourses. Often, these cultural discourses and representations contrast with individuals' lived experiences, contributing to the tensions. Navigating these factors poses a significant challenge for participants as they negotiate the complexities of online relationships.

3.2 Introduction

Since the creation of the Internet, and especially the apparition of social media, the role of digital technology in interpersonal relationships has been steadily growing. According to Datareportal (2023), there are at least 5.44 billion Internet users and one of the main reasons for going online is staying connected with friends and family (57% of users) and forming new connections (29% of users). Notably, the average Internet user spends approximately 6.5 hours per day online, with chat and messaging apps, along with social networks, ranking among the most frequently used platforms. These statistics underscore that a significant portion of our social and intimate interactions occurs within the digital sphere, reflecting patterns observed even before the pandemic.

Surveys indicate that more than 50% of American teenagers have made a new friend online, with 29% of them having made more than five new friends online (Pew Research Center, 2015). Also, a significant global expansion has been reported in the use of online dating platforms (Statista, 2023a). Yet other generations and groups have not been immune to these changes. For example, a study by Long et al. (2024) showed that older adults, 65–80 years old, used a wide range of technologies for maintaining their social relationships. Additionally, there is a noticeable rise in the prevalence of long-distance relationships among couples across various age groups (e.g., Janning et al., 2018).

Evidently, technology has become an integral part of people's relationships, and therefore, has changed interaction patterns, and the means of initiating and maintaining connections. Although research has examined the distinctive aspects of different types of online relationships, such as online dating, self-presentation, and communicative affordances of Computer-Mediated Communication, there is a dearth of research on the meaning individuals attribute to technology across a variety of relationships. Yet, online interactions are shaped by both technology's logic and the significance we assign to

technology and online relating (McCarthy & Wright, 2004). Therefore, understanding technology-mediated relationships requires uncovering the meanings and experiences involved.

In what follows, we first review the literature on online relationships, highlighting a prevalent negativity bias and arguing that the lived experiences of online relationships remain inadequately understood. Then, we explore relevant conceptualizations of technology within human relationships and ways of being. Subsequently, we propose the application of sociocultural and dialogical lenses to uncover dimensions of experience often overlooked in the literature. Finally, we present findings on how dialogical tensions manifest in online relationships, drawing insights from the perspectives of individuals who have directly experienced such relationships.

3.3 Understanding Online Relationships

Since the advent of online communication, a large portion of research on online relationships has focused on what is "lost" in the process, when compared to face-toface interactions. For instance, studies have looked at how online communication is less valuable for maintaining close relationships (Cummings et al., 2002) and can lead to the deterioration of communication skills (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001; Patterson, 2019). The increased use of the Internet for social purposes has also been associated with negative impacts on individuals' offline intimate and social lives (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Turkle, 2011). Additionally, the medium has also been seen as a contributor to various relational problems, such as cyberstalking (e.g., Papakitsou, 2020), cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008), and technoference (Halpern & Katz, 2017), among others.

Yet, a growing body of literature has highlighted relational and social benefits of the Internet, as a response to negative findings and preconceptions. It has been shown that the Internet can serve as a space that stimulates local and distant relationships,

thereby enhancing overall well-being (McKenna et al., 2002). Likewise, studies have shown that the Internet and online communication can reduce feelings of loneliness and positively impact the sense of belonging among the older population (Cotten et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2018). Furthermore, recent research indicates that online interactions, especially with close individuals, can be just as intimate and meaningful as face-to-face interactions (Croes & Antheunis, 2021; Litt et al., 2020). Studies also showed that online friendships can serve similar purposes to those formed in face-to-face settings, offering comparable support and companionship (Huang et al., 2020).

The negative focus in research on online relationships might thus be more the product of a negativity bias than be reflective of reality. This stigma associated with what is perceived as "excessive" Internet use for social purposes, is prevalent in both academic and social discussions. Researchers have reported that participants tend to evaluate face-to-face contacts as higher in quality than technologically mediated interactions. They also view computer-mediated communication as less valuable and fulfilling for maintaining close relationships compared to in-person interactions (e.g., Cummings et al., 2002; Hall et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2011; Schiffrin et al., 2010). Moreover, individuals engaged in online dating are often negatively stereotyped as unattractive, creepy, or desperate (Johanis et al., 2024). Despite these negative views surrounding the Internet and relational well-being, the usage of the Internet for social purposes continues to rise. This puzzling position, termed by Schiffrin et al. (2010) as the "new Internet paradox," reflects the disparity between negative perceptions and the increasing reliance on the Internet for social interaction.

The significance assigned to technology and its interrelation with intimacy and relationships could also be contributing to this paradox. As McCarthy and Wright (2004) argue, our experiences with technology are not only shaped by our direct

interactions with a medium, but they also incorporate the narratives surrounding the Internet and technology that we have been exposed to.

3.4 Beyond Dichotomies

Part of the difficulty for researchers and participants alike to explicitly acknowledge the benefits of online relationships may be how they are seen as essentially distinct from “real-life” interactions. Yet people rarely engage solely in fantastical, disembodied online relationships. Early studies (Katz & Aspden, 1997) indicated that only around 10% of Internet users have met new individuals online, while subsequent research (McCown et al., 2001; Parks & Floyd, 1996) discovered that these online connections frequently evolve into face-to-face engagements. Besides, these relationships are often formed in response to physical or psychological barriers inhibiting in-person interactions (McKenna et al., 2002).

Empirical evidence truly suggests a continuum between offline and online relationships, with online connections often transitioning to offline interactions (Antheunis et al., 2012; Parks & Floyd, 1996). The opposite is also true: offline relationships can and often do evolve into online interactions (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). Consequently, the delineation between online and offline relationships has become increasingly challenging due to the pervasive presence of technology in our social and intimate lives (Van Zalk, 2020). Furthermore, the dichotomy between online and offline relationships might have resulted in a tendency to emphasize individual relationship types, like online dating, long-distance romantic relationships, or cyber-friendships. This narrow focus has led to our compartmentalized understanding of online relationships, failing to capture the holistic nature and interconnectedness of various relationship types.

The tendency to compare online and offline relationships also emphasizes what is lost rather than exploring the unique characteristics and opportunities offered by the

online medium (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Yet the mediation of communication and relationships over distance started a long time ago, before the advent of the Internet and social media (Joinson, 2003). The growing prevalence of distant communication arises from the human desire or necessity to conduct relationships across space. It reflects a quest to transcend the constraints of time and space, rather than causing interpersonal separation (Boase & Wellman, 2006). The medium itself does not solely determine the outcome or quality of a relationship. The question is not so much what specific types of relationships a medium can support, but rather how individuals navigate the variety of online relationships they are involved in. This spans from acquaintances and friendships to intimate relationships and family. In this regard, understanding how they perceive and attribute meaning to their online relationships across the wider spectrum of relationships is crucial.

3.5 Toward a Socio-Technical Understanding of Online Relationships

Applying a sociocultural approach, we investigate individuals and their experiences of close relationships as personal yet embedded in social and cultural environments. There are four main theoretical aspects developed in sociocultural approaches of psychology that framed our examination of the object of study: semiotics, tool mediation, the role of sociocultural context and dialogism.

The first theoretical element draws on semiotics, traditionally focused on signs, symbols, and meanings and their use across diverse socio-cultural and historical contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Viewing technology as a semiotic tool reveals embedded values and norms in its materiality, thereby inviting and allowing for the construction of meaning. This perspective explores social rules guiding technology use across different contexts (e.g., private, professional, educational) and investigates its historical and cultural connections (Poulsen et al., 2018).

The second theoretical element concerns mediational means which are inherent to human activity and relationships, including language, signs, symbols, and artifacts (Wertsch,1997). According to Vygotsky's (1978) and Werstch's (1998) theories on the role of tools, these elements play a pivotal role in mediating human activity and experience. Technology, beyond being a tool, carries inherent meanings that shape our sense of reality, selfhood, and relationships (Scott et al., 2022).

While the medium allows for different relational experiences, individuals still play an active role in utilizing technology, extending their experience of relationships beyond technological affordances (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Simultaneously, affordances are dynamic, not fixed, representing an exchange between action possibilities and meaning-making opportunities (Evans et al., 2017), which includes individual intentions, goals, and technology adoption (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). When exploring technological mediation in relationships, studies traditionally focus on how media's inherent affordances impact interpersonal dynamics. This investigation highlights distinct features of online media compared to face-to-face interactions, including asynchronicity, availability, permanence, and the absence of non-verbal cues (Nesi et al., 2018). Some of these mediational processes allow individuals to communicate fast over great distances, enabling them to engage in multiple social contacts without being limited by time and space constraints (Bradner et al., 2002).

The third theoretical element involves studying online relationships within a larger sociocultural context, and historical period (e.g., Berscheid, 1995). Using online dating as an example, it is recognized that demographics and the social meaning of this phenomenon have much changed over the past few decades. And today, its implications can still vary significantly for individuals residing in small communities compared to those in larger cities. Much of the research on people's experience of technology-mediated relationships, however, has been conducted with a focus on an individual

human being (Åhman & Hedman, 2019), overlooking the context. Socio-cultural psychology bridges this gap by situating individuals in their social and cultural environment, and exploring how cultural traditions and societal behaviors govern, manifest, and reshape the human mind. It investigates the interconnectedness between the Self and Others, psychological aspects and cultural influences and the ways they coexist and interact (Shweder, 1995). Drawing from McCarthy and Wright (2004) perspective on technology as an experience, this inquiry encompasses discourses and culturally shared values surrounding online relationships. These may include social discourses on the role of technology in interpersonal connections and assessing risks and benefits in remote connections with familiar or unknown individuals. The study contextualizes potential differences between virtual and physical environments and qualities of relational experiences within cultural frameworks. This broadens our exploration of how individuals construct meaning from online engagements, navigating both continuity and technological discontinuities within relationships while considering the language of their lived experiences alongside societal discourses.

The fourth theoretical element approaches experiences as dependent on our interpretation, disposition, and innate, creative, and dialogical nature, rather than being fixed or predetermined (McCarthy & Wright, 2004). In this context, experiences and meanings are rooted in the ability to imagine and be in dialogue with other individuals, objects, culture, and society (Bakhtin, 1984; Marková, 2003). The Self is inherently dialogical, extended, and occupied by important others in the social environment, and it is expressed through dynamic exchange between different I-positions (Hermans, 2012). In applying Hermans' dialogical self theory to the analysis of online relationships, particularly in periods of uncertainty, we can perceive the digital space as a multifaceted arena where individuals negotiate their identities and relationships through interaction with others and their environment (Hermans, 2022). Dialogism posits that every

utterance is heterogeneous, echoing voices from different contexts appropriated by a speaker, and anticipating the response of other voices. Likewise, every utterance enacts its values and exists in micro-dialogues and dynamic tensions with other voices (Bakhtin, 1984; Grossen, 2010). Dialogical tensions, characterized by distinctions, oppositions, polarities, and antinomies, underpin all social phenomena and shape our everyday understanding of the world (Linell, 2003; Marková, 2003). For instance, trust and distrust dynamics, prevalent in daily life, manifest as tension between opposing poles. Trust is perceived through the lens of distrust and suspicion, and authentic speech is recognized in contrast to pretense (Marková, 2003).

Applicable to various relational situations, these dynamics become even more pronounced and challenging in online environments. Equally, our relationship with technology is dialogical, transcending the "I-other" distinction through dialogue and an orientation toward the other. This orientation establishes a space for meaning, where cyberspaces and technological tools reflect the perspectives and values of Others, including designers, communities, and societies (Cooke & McCarthy, 2002). In exploring how individuals construct and manage dialogical tensions, we aim to uncover these sociocultural elements present within the participants' discourses. Through analyzing moments of contradictions, we can see how meanings are constructed and discussed. Further, this analysis reveals the tool's role in creating tensions, the surrounding context, and how people interact with that context.

3.6 Method

3.6.1 Data Collection Method

The data in the present study consists of semi-structured interviews. Thirteen participants (7 male and 6 female), aged between 21 and 45, were recruited in Maynooth, Ireland, from June to November 2022. Ethical approval was obtained from

the Human Research Ethics Committee of the National University of Ireland Maynooth (see Appendix A) before data collection. Interviews were primarily conducted in person, except for one participant who was in the United States and conducted their interview online. The majority of participants (7 out of 13) identified as Irish, while the remaining participants belonged to diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Indian, American, French, Spanish, and Cuban. The interviews were anonymized, and all personal and identifiable information was changed to protect the participants' anonymity. To further de-identify participants, all personal names were removed, and pseudonyms were assigned.

Participants were recruited through online and social media advertisements, as well as local community and university posts (a recruitment flyer is available in Appendix B). Participants were included if they had direct experience of a close interpersonal relationship primarily maintained through digital media. The focus on close relationships was intentional, as these involve higher levels of intimacy and therefore make processes of meaning-making and dialogical tension more visible. Individuals without such experience were excluded.

Semi-structured interviews in English, lasting 45 to 90 min, explored participants' in-depth experiences in various close online relationships – friendships, romantic relationships, long-distance, long-term romantic relationships, and online dating. Relationships transitioned between online and face-to-face or remained exclusively online. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. An overview of participants, including pseudonym, age, gender, and relational experience, is presented in Table 3.1. The sample included 13 participants (aged 24–45), both men and women of varied nationalities, predominantly based in Ireland, who had a wide range of online relationship experiences, including dating, long-distance romantic relationships, and exclusively online partnerships.

The interview guide was informed by the literature discussed in Chapter 1 and was designed to explore relational experiences, expectations, maintenance, and possible transitions from online to offline contexts. Topics included the nature of online relationships, emotions, expectations, outcomes, interpretations, self-presentation, and ways of establishing connections. Open-ended questions elicited narrative accounts of relational histories, emotional experiences, and perceptions of technology's role, allowing participants to introduce themes that were personally meaningful while ensuring coverage of key dimensions relevant to the research questions. A detailed schedule is presented in Appendix C.

Table 3.1

Overview of interview participants

Interview	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Duration	Summary of Relationship Experience
1	Sarah	24	Female	45 mins	Irish student in a long-distance romantic relationship; previous tech-based relationship; active in gaming and online friendships.
2	Valentina	32	Female	45 mins	Cuban PhD student in Ireland; maintains long-distance marriage and family ties online; discussed online flirting.
3	Anne	38	Female	90 mins	Irish professional; shared extensive experience with online dating and mediated romance.
4	Matthew	45	Male	90 mins	American professional; diverse tech-mediated relational history; met current

Interview	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Duration	Summary of Relationship Experience
					wife through podcast; experienced catfishing.
5	Marianne	24	Female	60 mins	Irish PhD student; identifies as homosexual; engaged in a solely online romantic relationship for four years.
6	David	34	Male	85 mins	Irish professional; described online relationships with a negative tone; dystopian views on technology and social media.
7	Rahul	36	Male	80 mins	Indian professional in Ireland; in a solely online romantic relationship with a previous in-person acquaintance.
8	Amelie	29	Female	80 mins	French professional in Ireland; discussed online dating and forming romantic/friendship connections through tech.
9	Giovanni	25	Male	60 mins	Italian PhD student; built long-term online friendships via football communities; met one friend offline.
10	Marianne	24	Female	75 mins	Luxembourgish student in Ireland; discussed online dating and maintaining a long-distance relationship online.

Interview	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Duration	Summary of Relationship Experience
11	Benjamin	29	Male	85 mins	Irish professional; active in online communities and friendships; digital engagement in social life.
12	Alejandro	25	Male	80 mins	Spanish student in Ireland; met girlfriend online; shifted from online to offline and back again.
13	Anthony	31	Male	70 mins	Irish male identifying as homosexual; shared experiences with online dating, long-distance relationships, and friendships.

3.6.2 Data Analysis Strategy

This research adopts a semiotic approach, focusing on how participants make meaning of their online relationships. The data analysis aimed to identify the different perspectives participants expressed and to explore the dialogical tensions that emerged between these perspectives and the broader sociocultural context. This approach has been used in analyzing representations of the past (de Saint-Laurent, 2020) and is adapted from Gillespie's (2006) analysis of the different positions through which Ladakhis and tourists talk about themselves. In the initial data analysis phase an open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) technique was used to analyze the data line-by-line and identify categories and common themes within the data. The coding process included semantic, or factual codes, closely related to the text (e.g., "relationship status", "emotions", "technology use") as well as latent codes that go beyond the

surface level of data and try to capture underlying meanings in data (“motives”, “conflicts”, “trust”, “bravery”) (Byrne, 2022).

In the subsequent coding phase, we focused on identifying macro-tensions, which included more general and explicit tensions observed across multiple interviews. This involved examining indications of opposing viewpoints, and what Marková (2003) termed thinking in antinomies, such as right/left, good/evil, or edible/inedible. These poles, however, are not seen in isolation but rather as interconnected and mutually influencing. One pole might provide energy or emphasize certain aspects that contrast or complement the other pole. Nuancing the exploration, we included a micro analysis of linguistic indicators of tensions, such as linguistic polyphonic markers, negation, adverbial phrases, argumentative connectives (“so”, “but”, “however”, etc.), and sudden switching from one voice to another (Aveling & Gillespie, 2008; Fløttum, 2010).

Linguistic markers revealed contradictory voices emerging when individuals responded to the (implicit) perspectives and voices of others, considering viewpoints or positions that diverged from their own. The tensions we identified allowed us to recognize individuals’ experiences at a micro-level situated within macro-social contexts encompassing diverse voices and discourses. A wide range of tensions were identified in the data. We regrouped tensions into broader categories that still captured the essence of the tension but with nuances in different subcategories.

In the third phase of data analysis, we prioritized tensions and categories with distinct boundaries that consistently emerged in the interviews. During this process, some of the initial codes collapsed, and others were retained as dimensions within broader categories of tension. We proposed four main themes based on similarity, prevalence, and significance to capture the complexity and diversity of tensions in different interviews. In the final stage of refining tensions and drawing conclusions, all data were checked for the accuracy of tensions. This also involved assessing whether

the developed tensions effectively explained the complexity and diversity of data. Throughout these iterations, researchers engaged in frequent discussions, comparing and refining categories and themes. This ensured consistency and systematization in the data analysis process.

3.7 Findings

The analysis identified four main dialogical tensions that structure participants' experiences of technology-mediated close relationships. Table 3.2 provides an overview of these themes and subthemes, with illustrative excerpts preceding each theme before it is discussed in detail.

Table 3.2

Themes identified from interviews

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Opportunities – Constraints	Easy access – shallow relations; Selectivity – limited knowledge; Abundance of choice – rejection; Reduced risk – less real	Technology is experienced as simultaneously expanding relational possibilities and introducing new limitations, resulting in ambivalent experiences.
Authenticity – Staginess	Strategic self-presentation; Evaluating others' authenticity; Cues 'given off' as verification	Participants negotiate being genuine while using the affordances of the medium to present desirable versions of themselves and assess the credibility of others.
Safety – Risk	Physical safety; Fraud and verification; Emotional vulnerability	The online environment functions both as a protective barrier and as a source of uncertainty, requiring continuous trust/safety negotiation.
Proximity – Distance *(central tension)*	Emotional closeness; Imagined – real; Offline meeting as validation; Hybrid intimacy	Relationships are experienced as emotionally intimate yet physically absent, prompting ongoing reflection on their depth, legitimacy, and reality.

3.7.1 Theme 1: Opportunities and Constraints

The tension arises as participants perceive different relationship possibilities offered by technology, while also facing constraints linked to these opportunities. This theme, however, is not concerned with the objective technological affordances, or how they employ them for relationship purposes. Instead, we aim to present how the perception of these affordances and constraints shapes individuals' intimate relationship experiences. Participants highlight limitations while discussing how technology opens up new possibilities for relationships. This process is vividly demonstrated in Alejandro's (23) experience, whose relationship initially developed online, transitioned to face-to-face, and then reverted online:

> I can't really think of many positive things about being in an online relationship. Well, we wouldn't have met, which is already out here, so that it wouldn't have happened. But if we had met, and I had to leave… Personally, I would have just waited in a way and just sent letters. I'm not saying it would have been difficult, though, but I'm not sure if it would have been difficult or would have been easier… But I would rather stay with technology, to be honest. I don't mind the negative part. So that is maybe not to blame on the online component, but rather on the fact that we have stuff to do and it is more difficult to manage.

Alejandro is balancing what technology allows him to do with what he feels is lacking in that experience. Nonetheless, while he adapts the pre-digital perspective of writing letters, another position emerges to appreciate the effectiveness of technology as a tool for bridging distances. Without a digital medium, there would be only a sense of distance and separation from his intimate partner. This tension was central in the

participants' discourses and was evident through four main tradeoffs. Each of the following opportunities came with a constraint or negative aspect, likely contributing to the gap between discourses and reported practices.

Easy access, but shallow relations

Participants commonly associated the ease of initiating contact with others online, with perceived shallowness and lack of depth in these interactions. Benjamin (29), who has online friendships, said:

> The benefit is that it's, it's mostly constant. At any moment you send a text to someone… in a way it, it, it loses it, um, it loses its how can you put it…. It's closeness, intimacy. It's removed the necessity for the hard work necessary to maintain in-person relationships. And it's almost like becoming fast food socializing.

The comparison between online interactions and "fast food socializing", reflects the multiplicity of positions – one in which the participant is connected to others and immersed in mediated communication, and the other, in which they recall positions from pre-digital era, some of which likely not directly experienced by him, but also echoing cultural discourses of technology's impact on relationships. This creates a conflict between something easily available and something deep and worthwhile that requires "hard work". Similarly, in seeking romantic partners, participants easily accessed others looking for connections anytime and anywhere. While acknowledging the convenience, they noted that online accessibility, though offering numerous relational opportunities, doesn't hold the same significance as face-to-face interactions.

Being selective, but not knowing the other

Participants expressed the opportunity to be selective about whom they want to talk to and develop a relationship with online. However, this selectivity came with having a limited spectrum of relational experiences, resulting in controlled and polarized interactions. Benjamin contrasts the real world and online environments:

> Types of people I would meet on the Internet, I have the luxury of being selective. Um, and so having communication at your fingertips is far more convenient than getting yourself out into the cold a lot of the time and then going somewhere that you may not even be comfortable doing. […] Um, because there wasn't really much you could do together. There are activities that can be done online only. Video games are typically the medium for it. What else could we really do except for watch movies together? You can go volunteering somewhere and do something useful there. Or you can go to an activity or a wall climbing in real life. And then the side benefit is a conversation. And then you know more about each other's character through climbing the slope or slipping or getting angry maybe, and maybe that's a red flag or something.

The tension between different positions in Benjamin's experience reflects a contrast
between his enjoyment of online interactions and his reflective positions on what could be gained from in-person activities. Similarly, when dating online, individuals have plenty of choices for contact and in-person dates. However, these opportunities require thoughtful consideration to ensure a compatible and positive experience. This process of decision-making can pose an emotional and cognitive burden while having limited knowledge of another person.

Easy to choose, but the risk of being rejected

When dating online, individuals can select potentially attractive partners and contact an unlimited number of individuals to increase their chances of meeting someone. However, this abundance of choice also brings about an increased rejection, as Conor (33) noted: “So much choice, think they can do better all the time. That’s, picky”. Conor’s statement also suggests a belief that individuals might be less inclined to commit, expecting that they can find a more suitable partner. The selection process and taking the perspective of others illustrate the desire to make a good dating choice and the discomfort associated with being rejected. Rejection can burden a person who does the rejection too, as Alejandro described: “You reduce one person to a bunch of pixels. I think it is horrifying. I found it to be one of the most dehumanizing experiences of my life.” Another participant also reported negative feelings such as guilt and self-blame when rejecting other individuals.

Reduced risk, but less real

Online, there’s a reduced risk of social rejection and judgment due to increased anonymity and reduced visibility. However, this freedom may be perceived as less real. For example, Marianne (24) describes a period of her adolescence when she was feeling shy and socially isolated:

> There were very few people that I resonated with, I guess. And so when I was online, I just found it easier to talk to people… A massive social pressure that I felt didn’t exist when I was online. I felt like I could be myself. Because it was like, it is that anonymous piece. I can explore things in a way that I didn’t feel safe to do in real life. […] And I look back and sometimes I get flashbacks about how cringe I was. How embarrassing I was. Like, just like randomly messaging people.

We observe the interplay between different parts of Marianne's Self. On one hand, there is the past Self who felt lonely and socially isolated, finding comfort and acceptance in the online environment. On the other hand, a more critical position emerges, reflecting on and judging the past Self's behavior, evaluating it against current understandings and wider discourses of what is socially acceptable. Similar dynamics were noted in online dating, where individuals found it relatively easy to initiate conversations but consistently considered texting and talking online without meeting in person as a fantasy.

In summary, we noted a substantial integration of technology into participants' relational lives. However, participants predominantly emphasize the limitations and what is lost. Societal voices and the app language also push individuals between contrasting perceptions. The participants shifted their view of technology as a place of unlimited relational opportunities to seeing it as a force that destroys real connections.

3.7.2 Theme 2: Authenticity-Staginess

Self

When online, even more than in physical social reality, individuals need to engage in

some level of intentioned presentation. For instance, they need to say things about themselves that would be just observed by the virtue of sharing physical space. As such, online environments offered the opportunity for participants to be either fully authentic or strategic in their self-presentation. As Amelie (29) observes, "When you are online, or when you are texting, you can be the person you want to be." On the other hand, as Benjamin puts it, "You can have a manufactured version of yourself, but you can also have an entirely authentic version of yourself."

However, not all elements of self-presentation mean deception or lack of authenticity. Rather, particpants may have different styles of self-presentation depending on the context or personal/relational goals that they want to achieve. Amelie (29) talks about her online dating experiences concerning self-presentation and authenticity:

> If I get engaged in long texting, I will show my bright side. I will try to be a bit playful, play games, but it’s not really who I am. That’s a bit annoying. I know that. Some guys that I have dated told me that. They realized that I was a different person than the person I pretended to be at the beginning. I’m way more casual at the beginning. More playful. And, pretty more casual and flirtier. And actually, I’m quite a serious person. And I’m very opinionated, and I’m very strong in my opinions, and where I stand.

Amelie, while not intentionally deceptive, acknowledges the natural process of flirting, which, when online, can create a divide between online and offline personas, raising authenticity concerns. Online affordances, however, do allow individuals to craft their presentation and to say or do things in pursuit of their relational goals. Conor (36) talks about possibilities online to achieve his dating goals:

> But I’m well aware of how to manipulate people. But I don’t do that. So maybe that’s a slight advantage of online as well. I do know what to say. I’m pretty articulate. I know how to speak to her. I do know what to say, and what not to say. And that’s great. But that’s a facade. That’s an alter ego, that’s online. As I said, that’s not the real world.

This tension illustrates the conflicting positions within the Self, as the participant asserts that he is not manipulating others, while explaining how he portrays himself

favorably and says the right things.

Others

With awareness of online affordances, participants assess the authenticity of others

online as well. There is an underlying assumption that online personas are often modified, even if the revelation of additional information fails to confirm this belief. For example, Amelie (29) notes that the profiles of others online are embellished:

> It's like a profile on online sales, it's a commercial of yourself and that's no real you. You can say, Oh, I'm a very adventurous person and I do this and this, and actually, you do nothing. You spend most of your weekends sleeping on the couch.

However, later, in the conversation about other people's honesty online, she remains
unsure if people have lied to her:

> I don't know. I don't know. Because if I don't meet them, like, for more than a date, one date, I will never really know who they are. So, I don't know if they ever lied to me or not.

This contradiction may stem from awareness of the possibility for enhancement, limited cues available, and influences from popular discourses. Transitioning to face-to-face
environments, however, have the potential to unveil information that was previously (un)intentionally concealed, leading to a reassessment of the honesty and authenticity. Participants might have a complex relationship with others' presentations as it might touch on less desirable, or shallow, aspects of themselves. As Connor notes from his

experiences with online dating:

> Because, literally you can’t see anything, and you might see the person and they’re 20 stone. Again, I don’t care about that. Everyone has different types and different tastes. I don’t mind a woman who is curvy. That’s not a problem with me. But if you’re going to go online, show you are. Don’t pretend.

In defending his assertion that others should fully show who they are, Connor experiences tension between his desire for certain beauty standards and his aspirations to be open-minded.

Strategies for resolving the tension

Participants’ strategies for establishing someone’s authenticity online lay in what
Goffman (1959) characterized as given off. These are elements of our expressiveness over which we have less control. In face-to-face interactions, individuals benefit from a richer array of cues to understand someone’s personality and character. However, online, where such cues may be limited, Fiona (23) sheds light on potential strategies:

> Lot of online presence, like posting pictures, having followers on Instagram, and having different platforms. How they treat other people, especially when you’re playing games and you see how they treat other people. Because I think, people really still show their, even sometimes more, their true selves when they are doing something, like their hobbies online. Like, I’m using video games because that’s what I know. When you play video games, you can get angry and you can see how that anger manifests in people. Or you can get happy and you see how people are cooperating with each other.

Participants seek the unintentional appearances of others online, aiming to understand them beyond intentional self-presentation. This tension is complex, stemming from the interplay of creating identities, strategic relationship planning, societal discourses, and the genuine pursuit of authenticity.

3.7.3 Theme 3: Safety – Risk

At the heart of this tension lies the balance between caution and openness in developing a relationship that inherently requires a certain level of trust. Participants are generally wary of unknown individuals and their potential impact. However, some report feeling a stronger sense of trust and safety online, given the lower risk of harm to reputation or interference with face-to-face lives. As Matthew (45) explains:

> But in person, these are not escapable events. It's like I can't just turn around and walk away because that's rude. Like there's a different type of etiquette. I can shut my camera off. You are not protected, by a barrier of electronic communication. I can shut you off on my phone. I can block you. I don't have to deal with you ever again.

This quote reflects the tension between the social Self, which conforms to in-person
norms to maintain status and social decorum, and the more liberated online Self, which feels less constrained by those norms. While the online environment introduces new challenges, participants navigate both protection and emerging risks. This tension encompasses physical safety, fraud, and emotional well-being.

Physical safety

Participants online have more control over their environment, pace of sharing, and
overall exposure to others. Yet, they have limited knowledge about another person,

which becomes notably evident when transitioning relationships from online to in-person. In such situations, predominantly female participants were concerned about their physical safety. Anne (38) talks about her experience:

> But I'd say for me it's much more about their conversation. For a girl, I think particularly. Guys are very happy to just meet without having any conversation, but it's different for guys. They are not worried about meeting someone who is going to make them feel uncomfortable as much, they do not worry about getting murdered, not worried about anything bad happening to them.

In this excerpt, Anne takes a position of herself as a woman, considering cultural discourses around safety and the unique vulnerabilities women face in meeting strangers.

She contrasts this with the imagined male perspective, noting that men are generally less concerned with safety and discomfort in such encounters. The tension becomes even more pronounced when the protective barrier of the online medium is removed.

Online fraud

As the online relationship progresses, the focus turns to verifying the connection's legitimacy and reassessing risks, particularly when external voices challenge established trust. For example, Marianne, who developed a 4-year relationship with a woman through creative writing without meeting in person, initially had a few doubts about the woman's identity. However, as their relationship deepened, concerns about its validity arose:

> It was, it was really rough where they were like [Marianne's friends], they just really didn't believe she was who she said she was. Even though there was evidence that she was exactly who she was. And that it wasn't some old man, like, messing around or something. And I came to the point where I hunt for like proof.

The uncertainty arising from Marianne's friends also evokes some suspicion and hesitation in her as she hunts for proof while she also feels that she trusts her partner completely. Other participants did not discuss the fear of falling for fraud, perhaps because
they perceived it as something more likely to happen to others. As Marianne says:

> Why did some, like, I don't know, a predator go on to a creative writing group, do you like, what a weird way to find, like to find her prey or whatever. So I just fully believed it. And I felt like I had to.

People may perceive a distance from potential fraud, thinking such situations could
happen to others but not to themselves.

Emotional safety

Participants fear that initial optimism and trust may not align with reality during the
relationship progression or transition to face-to-face meetings. Despite acknowledging the uncertainty of knowing the other person online, participants showed an inclination to forge emotional connections. Anne gives an example of the connection she established with someone online:

> We texted for like six or seven weeks. It felt like we got really close, like we're very good friends. We were texting every day, we were sending like just pictures of holidays, dinner; we were sharing so much. Having phone conversations and you feel like you can trust this person. But, actually, that trust is not really there at all, you know. That person, you don't know them, and it's very misleading.

The participant's new perspective leads her to reevaluate the initial sense of closeness
and trust, realizing that the connection was more superficial than it seemed. Overall, the participants are aware of online risks, influenced by experiences of catfishing and societal discourses. Despite this, they recognize the importance of maintaining trust in digital interactions. Marianne's statement: "So I just fully believed it. And I felt like I had to," and Benjamin's assertion: "To a certain extent, you become a paranoid invalid," show individuals striving for a balance between risks and safety in relationship development.

3.7.4 Theme 4: Proximity – Distance

This theme explores the feeling of simultaneous presence and distance in intimate online relationships. It is also tied to a question of the relationship's quality and validity when it exists predominantly (or solely) in a virtual space. Participants grapple with feelings of closeness as they make sense of the awareness that some in-person experiences may be lacking online.

Emotional closeness

In long-distance romantic relationships, despite feeling emotionally and mentally connected, participants missed physical closeness and touch. For example, Valentina (32) shares her experience of her relationship:

> Technology makes you feel near to the person you love. I feel most, I need most is the sense of touching that person. That's the biggest thing I miss. I sometimes, I told him 'I need to touch you. I miss being close to you'.

This excerpt reflects the tension between the Self online, where technology facilitates
conversation, creating a sense of closeness, and the physical Self, which longs for the tactile connection that virtual interactions cannot fulfill. Alejandro explains the challenges
that he experiences in his long-distance relationship:

> We can't really do much like in real life. I mean, like physically, those things that you do in real life and you had fun doing with them, you can't do them anymore online. Like it is just purely verbal.

While absence of physical presence can evoke a sense of distance, participants can
still feel closeness and engage in meaningful conversations.

Imagined – real

The experience of simultaneous presence and absence makes participants question the reality or validity of their relationship. These doubts are especially pronounced in relationships that have existed solely online. This discrepancy is often connected to the sense of intimacy they experience in their online contact, and wider cultural norms defining an intimate relationship. For example, Rahul (36) had an online romance with a woman whom he had initially met in real life. He analyses his relationship through the (imagined) voices of his parents:

> I told them about this girl and everything. They also knew her by name, but again, our parents' generation, it becomes even more incomprehensible for them that if I tell them I am dating a girl whom I have never met, they will say 'You are crazy now, actually crazy'.[…] They didn't say much, but I know they did not approve of it. The way they reacted, was they were either too disappointed that what kind of a son they have who cannot not find a girlfriend in the real world or he is too desperate.

The importance of physical presence and intimacy for the depth of the relationship is also evident in Rahul's description of the post-break-up period:

> The only thing I would say in this case, fortunately for both of us, which we realized that because we never got intimate in that way, as in the physical presence sense. So probably that breakup was a bit easier. I would say, otherwise, and you share moments with the person, face to face, going out for a coffee, having laugh, sharing some stories.

Perhaps, Rahul finds it easier to cope with the loss because there are fewer reminders
of his relationship in his daily life and surroundings. However, he still felt hurt after the break-up: "I partied with my friends a lot for a few days. Typical guy's response. I felt sad."
The absence of physical closeness can be compensated for by intermediary objects and tangible gestures, like sending gifts and using wearable devices. Marianne described how receiving gifts from her girlfriend and using a digital bond touch make her see her relationships as more real. Marianne's phrase "she exists, she's real" indicates a desire to affirm the reality of the other person in a relationship context without physical

proximity. Meetings in person are important signifiers of the relationship's validity. Connor

says: "Until you meet that person in the real world, you're texting, and it's a fantasy". However, Benjamin noted that in-person relationships are not complete without an online component either:

> It isn't quite personal unless some of it [relationship] is online. It isn't personal, unless some of that is in person. So the conclusion that I would make is that the intimate relationship is defined by both elements, by both online and in-person.

From our participants' stories, we observed that some of the most intimate experiences occurred online, before, or without, meeting in person. We also noted that some social groups were more open to these experiences, while other predominant voices were questioning the depth of the relationship.

3.8 Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the unique meaning that individuals attribute to

their technology-mediated relationships, looking into an experiential dimension that extends beyond media affordances. This was attained by looking at dialogical tensions that exist between different voices, states, and areas of experience (Grossen, 2010; Linell, 2003; Marková, 2016). The analysis of the participants' stories and tensions from thirteen interviews raises five main discussion points.

First, using dialogical lenses, our study revealed that relationships experiences are dynamic, achieved through dialogues with real or imagined others which shape voices within participants themselves (McCarthy & Wright, 2004). We observed instances where participants referred to generational differences, voices of significant

others, public opinions, media discourses, and voices of technology. That is, every dating app and online social platform comes with explicit descriptions, stories, and promises that influence individuals' expectations and interpretations of relational experiences. The tension is coming from voices that invite individuals to do loads of relational activities online, but the experience can simultaneously feel alienating and dehumanizing. This extends earlier research that has primarily examined the effects of specific media affordances on relational outcomes discussed in Chapter 1, by showing how participants actively interpret these experiences through culturally available discourses (e.g., Nesi et al., 2018; Sharabi, 2024), an issue that will be examined at the level of public discourse in Study 2. It also moves beyond approaches that frame online dating in terms of individual traits, motivations, or strategic self-presentation (e.g. LeFebvre, 2018;), which often evaluate it as more or less successful or satisfying, but are less able to capture the coexistence of positive experiences, societal skepticism, and the moments in which meaning is negotiated. From this perspective, online dating is not simply experienced as good or bad, but as a dialogical process in which its value is continuously constructed.

Second, tension between proximity and distance serves as a central element influencing other identified tensions. We noted that the participants often struggled to define their online relationships, and frequently questioned their realness. Participants described a range of emotions, including psychological intimacy and closeness, yet also expressed doubt about the authenticity of these feelings, which may be intertwined with fantasy. This finding resonates with studies showing that communication with close others online can be experienced as equally intimate as face-to-face interaction, despite persistent cultural doubts about its authenticity (Croes & Antheunis, 2021; Litt et al., 2020), while also echoing research indicating that technology-mediated interaction may simultaneously produce moments of alienation (Goldberg, 2022).

Navigating these conflicting experiences required considerable emotional and cognitive effort from participants. It was evident that participants invested energy into sustaining their relationships while simultaneously appraising the depth and validity of these connections, especially considering their online components.

While dealing with these tensions, individuals employed strategies that resonate with Baxter and Montgomery (1996) patterns of adjustment. According to them, tensions persist, yet people employ different functional strategies to manage them. For instance, we identified in participants' stories a tendency to simultaneously adopt both poles of dimension by seeing their online relationships as both intimate, and incomplete, or themselves as being both authentic and strategic in their approach. In other scenarios, participants adopted segmentation, allocating specific areas of the relationship to emphasize one polarity and other areas for the opposite polarity. As an example, participants expressed that technology was effective for maintaining an existing relationship and connection, but not necessarily for establishing new connections. Even if they identified technology as beneficial for developing new connections, it was under the condition of transitioning these relations to face-to-face interactions. When considering the nature of tensions, we note that dialogical poles do not always exist in simple binary oppositions or a linear continuum, but they are expressed through several elements that exist in conflict (Galanes, 2009). For instance, authenticity does not necessarily imply lying or deception on the other pole, but at times, it might mean flirting, capturing someone's interest, or being more confident over self-presentation online.

Third, tensions surrounding the questions of authenticity, safety, and proximity were evident across various types of relationships. This observation implies continuity in the way different relationships are experienced through technology, highlighting common themes that transcend relationship types. This marks a departure from the

traditional approach of many relationship researchers, who often focus on one type of relationship to the exclusion of others. Analytical distinctions between different types of relationships (romantic, dating, friendships) might not correspond to the people's lived experience, given the commonalities and overlap existing in close relationships. Moreover, these findings suggest that meanings are not tied to a single relational category or stage but shift over time as relationships move between online and offline contexts, intensify, dissolve, or are redefined. This temporal dimension is explored further in Chapter 5 through a life-course analysis of the same empirical material. Attending to these tensions, therefore, foregrounds the temporal and fluid nature of online relationships, where authenticity, safety, and intimacy are continuously reinterpreted rather than resolved.

Fourth, as participants recounted their experiences with online relationships, there was a notable tendency toward deep introspection. Individuals demonstrated high levels of self-reflection when making relational decisions, prioritizing relational considerations over technological ones. This heightened reflexivity echoes Degen and Kleeberg-Niepage's (2022) findings, which show that users are continually required to position themselves in relation to normative expectations surrounding authenticity, success, and the "proper" use of dating apps. It also appears that characteristics and dynamics of relationships, typically less visible during direct face-to-face interactions, were brought to light while engaging through a medium. Participants' deliberations also extended to critical appraisals of technology's embedded capitalist structures, such as the abundance of choice and the monetization of design. As Chan (2018) concludes from user interviews, this fosters ambivalence in forming meaningful ties, intertwined with neoliberal consumption habits. Through their accounts, users position themselves in relation to platform logics, sometimes reproducing and sometimes resisting them,

revealing the dialogical negotiation between personal experience and the political economy of digital intimacy.

It is important to consider that individuals willingly volunteered to participate in the study. Consequently, there might be a self-selection bias, as these individuals may possess unique experiences with their online relationships. This study was conducted in the Irish context, which, culturally and economically, might have a more positive relationship with technology. The interviewed individuals were largely educated at university level or worked in a business or technology sector and likely have a more positive connection with technology. Nonetheless, the impressive level of depth and richness in the discourses demonstrated how people are acutely aware of this topic and engage with it strongly.

Interestingly, participants did not reflect much on technological characteristics, such as app features, design, or affordance. Instead, their focus was more on an overall relationship experience. In this sense, the findings challenge technologically deterministic interpretations that explain relational dynamics primarily through media characteristics (Walther, 1996; Nesi et al., 2018). Sometimes participants felt that they could not see each other or do anything meaningful together online. While in practice, certain technological affordances, such as seeing a person through a video call or doing other activities online, could facilitate such experiences. This tendency reveals that individuals' perceptions of technology's capabilities may not accurately mirror its actual functionalities, but it often reflects their feelings about themselves and their relationships. This highlights the duality of technological experience, encompassing both a sense of continuity and embodiment, as well as a sense of distance or discontinuation, as discussed in Chapter 1. Notably, the presence of technology became apparent for participants when seeking physical intimacy or perceiving relationships confined to online spaces, akin to conversing with a phone. Such instances resonated

with the concept of a breakdown or being present-at-hand, Heidegger's terms introduced to Human-Computer Interaction by Winograd and Flores (1986). This concept of technology being transparent until it breaks down has been widely applied in work and organizational contexts, but it is also apparent in relational experiences. For example, the absence of a means for connection or prolonged Internet issues often impacted interpersonal relationships. These moments offer a glimpse into how relationships might be experienced with limited access to technology. On the other hand, the visibility of the medium and moments of breakdown might make individuals more inclined to focus on what is negative about online relationships.

Finally, the participants frequently exhibited caution around the medium, possibly

echoing dystopian discourses surrounding it. There were voices expressing concerns, not necessarily reflective of individuals' personal experiences that technology leads to isolation, solitude, and a decline in connection and communication skills. Yet, none of the individuals interviewed reported increased feelings of loneliness due to technology.

A more plausible assumption is that technology did not consistently help individuals in achieving their relational goals or realizing an ideal type of relationship across distances.

While the medium brings individuals closer to others they care about, the voices of increased isolation might reflect broader trends on a community level. Individuals did feel hyper-connected to their close ones; however, they reported a decline in spontaneous rapport and a lack of engagement with society. This observation suggests that, while the medium does not make us less connected on the individual level, we might have a weaker connection with society.

3.9 Conclusion

Our study highlights the embeddedness of relationships in a sociocultural context and, thus, widens our understanding and conception of online relationships. Analyzing discursive tensions illustrated how the division between real and virtual influences the meaning individuals attribute to their online relationships. The medium's presence evokes unique tensions in individuals and society, suggesting a split between online and offline lives, yet there remains continuity in the experience. The division between online and offline, real and virtual, and close and distant, prompts inquiry into how close or real online relationships can be. While some of these relationships were more transient, others were experienced on a very deep and intimate level despite physical absence. Focusing on discursive tensions may help both researchers and individuals in revealing and understanding opportunities and constraints and defining new ways of being in a relationship.

The following chapter builds on these findings by examining how these meanings and tensions unfold across time and across different phases of relationship development

Chapter 4:

Meaning-making in the Trajectories of Online Relationships

This chapter is adapted from:

Pilek, M., & de Saint-Laurent, C. (2025). Digital romance: Meaning-making in the trajectories of online relationships. *Outlines. Critical Practice Studies, 27*, 27–64.

4.1 Chapter Preface

This chapter returns to the interview material introduced in Chapter 4 (Study 1, part 1) and re-analyses it through a different theoretical lens. While Chapter 4 examined participants' accounts through a dialogical tensions framework, the present chapter (Study 1, part 2) focuses on how meanings attributed to technology shift across relationship stages. Combining a sociocultural approach with a life-course perspective, the analysis foregrounds temporal development, turning points, and reorientations in participants' narratives, and clarifies how the role of the medium is continuously reconfigured as relationships progress.

Abstract

This paper examines how people make sense of their experiences of technology-mediated romantic relationships. While research shows that people increasingly and effectively use technology to meet their relationship needs, concerns about its negative impact on intimate and social lives persist, underscoring the importance of studying this phenomenon from the person's perspective. To address this contradiction, we adopt a sociocultural and developmental approach to analyze how relationships evolve and are experienced in the context of interactions with partners, technology, and broader social discourses. The study, which interviewed thirteen young to middle-aged individuals about their online relationships, shows that the meanings attributed to technology change as relationships progress. These changes are further shaped by the technology's characteristics and the social narratives surrounding it. The analysis highlights the dynamic interplay between technology, relationships, and societal expectations, providing insights into how people navigate their romantic lives in the digital age.

Keywords: online relationships, online dating, relationship trajectories, life course, transitions

4.2 Introduction

With over two-thirds of the world's population now using the Internet and a continuous rise in social media users (Datareportal, 2024), technology has transformed how we form and maintain our relationships. For young people, aged 16-24, connecting with friends and family is the primary reason for internet use, while it remains the second or third most common reason across all age groups. Social networks, chat, and messaging apps are the top types of websites and apps used across all demographics (Datareportal, 2024). Beyond maintaining connections, people also use technology to initiate new relationships. Despite earlier studies finding that most people preferred to meet others in person (Rumbough, 2001), recent reports by Statista (2024b) show that the number of online dating app users has grown dramatically, surpassing 380 million, with Tinder and Bumble leading the way, changing how couples meet.

Whether our relationships began online or in person, or whether we have adopted or avoided online dating, most of our relationships today include an online component. Given the modern lifestyle and migration patterns, many maintain essential connections with individuals in geographically distant locations. Additionally, most of our relationship maintenance and everyday communication now occur online.

Interestingly, only about 50% of dating platform users feel safe online, with concerns primarily centered on issues such as people lying about their identities and the fear of being scammed (Anderson et al., 2020). Research also shows that individuals who use technology to meet romantic partners tend to be viewed more negatively compared to couples who met through traditional ways (Sharabi, 2024). A persistent belief is that long-distance relationships are destined to fail (Crystal & Hancock, 2013). However, contrary to this prevailing bias, empirical studies consistently demonstrate that the quality of long-distance relationships is comparable to that of their geographically proximate counterparts (Kelmer et al., 2013), with higher satisfaction

levels and quicker progression from online dating to marriage (Rosenfield, 2017). These observations suggest that people might have a many-sided relationship with technology, particularly within interpersonal relationships, highlighting the complexity and potential biases inherent in conducting relationships online. This contradiction between practice and perceptions highlights the importance of understanding how individuals forge meaning in the context of technology-mediated relationships.

Numerous studies have provided insights into users' specific characteristics (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), self-presentation online (Ellison, 2006), risks associated with online dating (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2021), and the benefits and disadvantages of technology use for close relationships (Murray & Campbell, 2015). These findings and research on user experiences have informed the development of new media and design requirements (Hassenzahl et al., 2013). Given the extensive knowledge about the characteristics of online dating and maintaining relationships over distance, it is essential to delve deeper into the meaning people attribute to their online relationships. This understanding could shed light on the contradictions between representations of online dating and technology in relationships and actual practices, particularly in light of increased usage and positive outcomes. By incorporating a developmental perspective, we could further explore how the meaning of online relationships evolves over time and across different stages, acknowledging the dynamic nature of relational processes. This approach can deepen our understanding of the interplay between technological practices and individuals' changing needs and goals in relationships.

Before delving into the topic, we will explore perspectives on relationship development stages. Then, we will introduce sociocultural and life course perspectives as an analytical framework that aims to go beyond the objectified linear relationship stages in explaining how individuals forge unique meanings in their technology-

mediated romantic relationships. Ultimately, we will utilize this framework to explore how individuals construct meaning from their online relationships.

4.3 A Stage Model Approach to Relationships

Relationship scholars have developed various stage models to understand how relationships evolve dynamically, changing toward greater or lower levels of intimacy. One of the most recognized and extensively adopted models is Knapp's (1978) relationship dual-stage model, which delineates five stages of coming together and five stages of coming apart.

The first stage of Knapp's (1978) Stages of Relational Development is the initiation, where prospective partners evaluate each other's attractiveness and decide whether to start communication. In the experimenting stage, often the farthest point beyond which very few relationships progress, individuals begin to get to know each other by asking questions and discovering common characteristics and interests. If interest persists, the relationship moves to the intensifying stage, marked by greater intimacy and increased self-disclosure. During the subsequent integration stage, partners become increasingly interdependent and display signs of intimacy. Finally, the bonding stage involves a long-term commitment, whether through formal union or cohabitation, making the relationship more challenging to break.

Some relationship theorists have explicitly challenged the notion of relationships as a single, linear trajectory unfolding over time. For example, Rodrigue (2023) proposes *relationship course theory*, in which relationships are understood as multiple intertwined trajectories unfolding across time and across different relationship domains (e.g., love, sexuality, friendship, domesticity). From this perspective, relationships do not progress through a uniform sequence of stages but shift in form, intensity, and meaning, and may transition among relational configurations (e.g., friendship, casual involvement, committed partnership) over the course of their development. This

perspective, however, was developed primarily to account for the increasing diversity and fluidity of offline relationship types, and it has been used to conceptualize face-to-face relational trajectories rather than technology-mediated ones.

As discussed in the next section, the role of technology has been examined largely in relation to discrete relationship stages (e.g., initiation, maintenance, or dissolution). However, such a temporal and meaning-oriented approach has rarely been applied to online dating or to the changing role of media across relationship trajectories, thereby overlooking both the fluid temporal nature of relationships and the shifting meaning of technology within them. In face-to-face trajectories, mediation is often more implicit (e.g., shared places, routines, and social networks), whereas in technology-mediated trajectories the medium becomes a salient object of reflection and evaluation, shaping what counts as intimacy, progress, and relationship “reality.”

Additionally, traditional relationship stage models suggest that relationships can develop in two primary ways: toward greater intimacy and closeness, or toward separation and disconnection. This bi-directional approach might overshadow the complex nature of real-life relationships, which can change direction and meaning multiple times and in various directions throughout their never-finalized course. Cultural and media stories often emphasize the idea of happily ever after or dramatic endings, suggesting that these approaches are tied to cultural representations that researchers and laypeople alike have about relationships.

There is still merit, however, in analyzing relationship trajectories across different phases, if these are understood as subjectively experienced, potentially non-linear moments rather than as a universal developmental sequence.

4.4 Technology-Mediated Relationship Trajectories

When exploring its influence on relationships, researchers have examined how technology influences specific stages of relationships, ranging from initiation to break-

up (i.e. Brody et al., 2020; Fox & Tokunaga, 2015), as well as how romantic relationships evolve (e.g., Brody et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2014; Sharabi, 2024), or dissolve online (Brody et al., 2016; Fox & Tokunaga, 2015). These phenomena have been mainly explored through technological lenses, focusing on the implications of the affordances of social networking sites, such as searchability, visibility, anonymity, connectivity (e.g. Brody et al., 2020; Goldberg, 2022), and the relational behaviors they allow (e.g. Fox et al., 2014) on dynamics of romantic relationships.

Research shows that technology impacts different stages and relationship progression in various ways. The initiation phase has received significant attention, likely because it might differ significantly in an online context. Technology impacts this phase in two key ways: by shaping the processes involved in self-presentation and by altering how individuals select and approach others online.

First, self-presentation strategies, crucial for determining whether the other person will pursue a relationship, are especially pronounced in online dating, where individuals compete with a high number of different subscribers (Toma et al., 2008). Online, individuals have more control over their self-presentation due to fewer non-linguistic cues, relative anonymity, and the ability to edit information (Walther, 2007).

While this possibility has inspired public beliefs and academic discourses about greater deception online (Joinson & Dietz-Uhler, 2002) or the development of fantastical identities (Turkle, 1999), numerous empirical findings suggest that individuals aspire to present themselves quite accurately, especially if they seek to develop a romantic relationship (Ellison, 2006). This is not to say that self-presentation online is not curated; however, contrary to popular belief, most deception in online dating apps is slight and likely similar to that identified in traditional forms of dating (Cunningham & Barbee, 2008).

Second, technology has transformed partner selection via social media and dating apps, increasing exogamy by encouraging relationships across different social groups. Contrary to the belief that people tend to choose similar partners, online couples exhibit greater variability in traits such as education, religion, and ethnicity (Thomas, 2019). Additionally, individuals can gather information or evaluate profiles before interacting, unlike in face-to-face contexts (LeFebvre, 2018).

In-person meetings are considered a significant turning point for relationships that originated online. Studies focusing on predicting first-date success have shown positive outcomes for relationships that progress quickly offline (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017), but unfavorable consequences for those who wait longer before meeting in person.

After the initial meeting, whether online or in person, individuals typically use social networking sites and messaging apps further to facilitate communication, information-seeking, and disclosure processes. In this way, the uncertainty that characterizes the early stages of relationship development can be reduced (Fox et al., 2014; LeFebvre, 2018).

Relationships often evolve through the interconnection of online and offline interactions, with offline meetings crucial for bonding (Goldberg et al., 2022). As they progress, couples use social media to display their relationship publicly, shifting focus from self-presentation to managing impressions about the relationship itself (Sharabi & Hopkins, 2021). Public acts, such as going official on Facebook, sharing photos, and tagging each other, are key symbols of commitment (Fox et al., 2014). While social media can aid in relationship maintenance and foster togetherness (Goldberg et al., 2022), it can also introduce challenges, such as pressure for constant contact or partner monitoring (Fox et al., 2014; Su, 2016).

Finally, the resolution process is characterized by increased uncertainty again (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015), during which partners need to manage their digital ties and possessions, update their relationship statuses, and delete photos and relational symbols online (Brody et al., 2020; Fox et al., 2014).

In summary, communication technologies and social media play a significant role in romantic relationships. Much of the research has applied offline relationship development concepts to online contexts, demonstrating how relationships evolve across different stages with the use of technology. This approach, however, also applies an objectified perspective to human relationships, which does not recognize individual trajectories and discontinuities in relationship paths, perhaps contributing to our apprehension about the use of technology for different relational purposes.

Alternatively, focusing on how individuals make meaning of their technology use at different stages of a relationship could help us better understand why we still hold negative biases towards technology, despite its opportunities and positive outcomes.

4.5 A Sociocultural Life-Course Perspective to Relationship Trajectories

We propose moving beyond the universal, linear paths of relationship development and examining them through subjective lenses, recognizing the role of technological and social contexts in constructing meaning. To do this, we will use both the life course and sociocultural perspectives.

First, the life course perspective acknowledges that human lives (and their relationships) unfold in irreversible time (Valsiner, 1994), creating unique trajectories (Zittoun, 2012). The routines of everyday life are disrupted by events that challenge what is taken for granted, requiring significant adaptations and redefinitions of meaning (Zittoun, 2012). Thus, socially affirmed transitions may not be experienced as crucial by the individual, while other, less recognized events may be experienced as ruptures. For instance, in relationships, socially acknowledged turning points, such as moving in

together or getting married, might not hold significant meaning for a couple. In contrast, other events, such as changing jobs or returning to college as an adult learner, can significantly change the couple's dynamic and create a rupture. Therefore, we propose focusing on how individuals make sense of their relational trajectories rather than adhering to normative stages.

Second, the sociocultural perspective emphasizes that tools, signs, and symbols are central to shaping a person's activity and subjective experience (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). Tools are appropriated through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978) and come with inherent meanings that shape the person's sense of self and interaction with the world (Poulsen et al., 2018). For example, using Tinder and swiping on available individuals has become a cultural practice imbued with meaning beyond online dating.

The triangular metaphor of mediation (Vygotsky, 1978), which includes the person, the other, and the object, has been expanded by adding the dimension of time to capture the past, present, and future of sense meanings (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999) and the Generalized Other, which refers to the collective cultural representations, norms, and values that individuals internalize (Zittoun, 2008).

Our analytical framework begins with a triangle that draws from cultural psychology and mediated action theories. At the core of this model is a triadic relationship among the Person, the mediated communication Tool, and the relational Other. This structure captures how individuals engage with others through the mediating influence of a technological tool.

To account for the broader cultural context that shapes and reflects this process, we incorporate the element of the Generalized Other and expand the triangle into a semiotic prism (Zittoun, 2008). This dimension encompasses shared meanings and representations around technology, commonly understood as cultural narratives, values, norms, and public discourses. These discourses around relationships and online dating

circulate through media, culture, social groups, and interpersonal exchanges, influencing how individuals interpret their interactions and experiences. For example, cultural messages about dating apps being superficial or unsafe might be drawn upon when users reflect on their own experiences. In this sense, the Person's meaning-making is structured through their direct interactions, experiences with technology, as well as their broader cultural understanding of technology-mediated relationships.

Finally, to understand how these meanings and experiences dynamically unfold and evolve, we incorporate the time dimension, highlighting how meaning-making progresses across different stages of relationships and past experiences (de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, 2017). Individuals draw on past experiences – mediated by tools and social discourses – to interpret their current position and imagine where they would like to progress in the future with the relationship.

Applying this framework helps explain the discrepancy between the representation of technology and its actual use in relationships. This contradiction may stem from social representations of technology or specific aspects of the tool that create friction for users. The imagined perspective of the Generalized Other may account for some of these discrepancies, particularly if certain stages, such as initiation, are more strongly associated with online relationships, thereby influencing people's perceptions of those moments more than others. Additionally, specific characteristics of the tool, such as limited visibility or increased access to other people, can facilitate relationship development at certain stages while acting as barriers in different phases.

We will utilize this analytical framework in our study, which examines how young to middle-aged people in Ireland make sense of online relationships.

4.6 Methods

4.6.1 Procedure and Sampling

This study draws on the same interview sample described in Chapter 4 (Study 1, par 1). This study included 13 participants, 6 males and 7 females, aged 21-45, all of whom were residing in the Republic of Ireland at the time of the interviews, except for one American participant who lives part-time in Ireland. The sample consisted primarily of heterosexual individuals, with two identifying as gay. Participants were working professionals from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds. While racial or ethnic identity was not formally recorded, the majority of participants were white and of European origin. The sample also included one participant from North America, one of Indian background, and one from Latin America.

Participants were recruited through social media posts, online forums, and posters at Maynooth University, Ireland, and the local community. We sought to recruit individuals who were considerably relying on technology to maintain their romantic relationships or to initiate new ones.

The first author conducted 13 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in person, each lasting 45-90 minutes, with individuals about their experiences in long-distance romantic relationships, meeting partners online, using online dating, and their experiences with technology in their relationships.

The interviews were conducted during the second half of 2022, were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, prior to data collection. Interviews were anonymized, with all personal and identifying details changed to ensure participant anonymity.

4.6.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis involved a combination of inductive, 'bottom-up' (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and theoretical, 'top-down' approaches (Boyatzis, 1998). In the first stage, we employed an inductive approach using NVivo for open coding, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This stage involved semantic, close-to-text coding and identifying expressions that appeared intriguing or significant for our research purposes, as well as latent-level analysis aimed at identifying patterns and themes that were not immediately obvious but were implicit in the participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Refer to Table 4.1 for an illustration of this hybrid inductive-deductive process.

We generated 114 codes and grouped them into 7 broader themes and 5 subthemes (e.g., self-presentation, confidence, technology – affordances, apps, authenticity – self and other, relationship development, etc.). The sample table for coding structure is in Appendix D. Subsequently, we organized the themes around the poles of the semiotic prism to understand the relationships between Self, Other, Tool, and Generalized Other. Simultaneously, the themes were categorized into different stages of relationship development (e.g., initiation, bonding online, maintenance). Although this process occurred concurrently, it is presented in a linear sequential order for simplicity (Billig, 2013). This was achieved through an iterative process of revisiting the codes and refining the themes multiple times. This analysis builds on our previous work, where the same interviews were analyzed using a dialogical tensions framework (Pilek & de Saint-Laurent, 2024).

Progressing from left to right, the first and second columns provide examples of codes and the corresponding themes. The third column shows the reorganization of these inductive themes into a deductive semiotic prism framework.

Figure 4.1 presents the different stages of a relationship. Though inspired by Knapp's (1978) five stages of relationship development, the stage model presents four stages, as participants' discourses did not clearly distinguish between the stages of maintaining and developing a fully committed relationship. This figure represents relationship moments grouped into broader relationship stages; each analyzed through the semiotic prism.

For the analysis, we selected five stages based on the significance participants gave to them and/or their underrepresentation in the literature. By applying the semiotic prism alongside the relationship stage model, we recognized that different aspects of relationships evolve uniquely at each stage, rather than in a linear progression. The semiotic prism offers insight into how individuals construct meaning in their relationships through the interaction of tools and societal discourses, which intersect across various relationship stages. Thus, the findings are presented by the relationship stage and within each stage by the semiotic prism, although these analyses were conducted simultaneously.

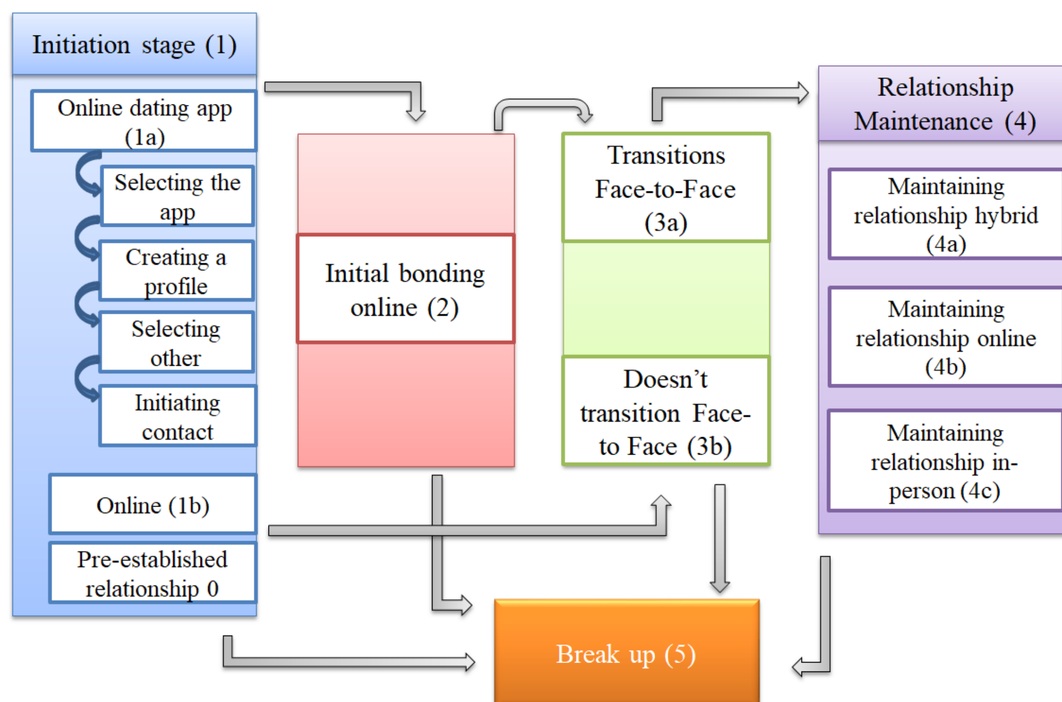
Table 4.1

Illustrative Inductive and Deductive Themes in Hybrid Thematic Analysis

Codes	Themes & Subthemes	Semiotic prism
Insecurity	Self-confidence	
Shyness		Self
...		
Creating a profile	Self-presentation	
Self-description		
...		
Anonymity	Technology - affordances	
Connectivity		Tool
Asynchronous communication	Technology-mediated communication	
...		
Excitement	Feelings for other	Relational Other
Mutual disclosure	Relationship development	
...		
Judgement		Generalized
Norms	Societal Voices	Other
....		

Figure 4.1

Map of the Relationship Development Stages



4.7 Findings

The findings are structured around the poles of the semiotic prism: Self, Relational Other, Tool, and Generalized Other. Although these poles are present in all relationship stages and themes, the findings focus on only the most significant or pronounced ones.

These will be explored through five stages of a relationship: initiation, bonding online, transitioning, the absence of transitioning to face-to-face, and the technology-enabled maintenance of the relationship (hybrid).

4.7.1 Initiation

In the initiation phase, two parallel processes unfold, depending on whether the relationship started on online dating apps or through a shared activity or online

community. Consequently, the meanings individuals derive in these two contexts differ and will be discussed separately.

Online dating app-initiated relationship (1a)

Self

Participants felt pressured to present themselves well on dating apps, as first impressions from profiles and brief interactions often dictate whether contact continues. Female participants, receiving more messages, struggled to filter meaningful connections, while male participants felt the need to stand out among numerous other (invisible) competitors. For example, David (34), shares the challenges in getting attention from women on dating apps:

> Because the top women are only going to want the top men who are earning loads of money and they're great looking, generally. So then what happens is the men's ego is dented and they say, 'Oh, hang on a minute, wait, why didn't they respond to me when in real life they would. [...]So, that's why you cannot take it personally, because, you're going to be seriously impacted by online dating.

The pressure to compete for attention and not receiving desired responses from others while presenting one's best self negatively affected participants' self-esteem. On the other hand, receiving matches, messages, and opportunities to date boosted their self-confidence.

The challenges around self-presentation and affordances were also interwoven with questions of authenticity. Participants grappled with the desire to be genuine and truthful, alongside the pressure and possibilities of portraying themselves in a positive light.

Medium

Dating apps served as a gateway for meeting people, offering an easy way to initiate contact by removing the initial discomfort of approaching someone. As one participant mentioned, individuals may already be acquainted with each other but feel uncertain about approaching them in person. In such cases, dating apps acted as a signal or permission to make a move.

The design of dating apps is often entertaining, particularly in the early stages of relationships. Swiping through an almost unlimited number of profiles, colorful interface, images of couples and mobile phone notifications after the first messages arrive created a highly engaging experience for participants. This gamified approach can be addictive and enjoyable, allowing individuals to explore new possibilities and spark their imagination. As David (34) described:

> Oh my God. So initially, yeah, for the first couple of weeks, I would check it quite regularly when I signed up because it was like a new toy, I wanted to see what was going on. So I would look at it. I could spend maybe two or three hours a day at that, when I first started.

One distinct feature of this gamifying process is the abundance of choices among available individuals seeking to date. However, this plethora of options also presented a challenge, as individuals felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of choices, which only sometimes lead to desired outcomes, such as high-quality dates or meaningful relationships. As Amelie (29) noted:

> In Tinder, I had a match all the time, like I was being there, like for two minutes and there was a ton of matches with a very, very little amount of conversation. [...] Oh, I haven't met anyone and stuff. But then actually, I met so many people. Doesn’t mean it’s a success each time.

Participants also had a pervasive sense that there was always someone potentially better out there, which made them less willing to commit to another person. Related to this, individuals often turned to apps with a smaller user base as they have a greater chance of meeting someone more compatible with their preferences. This reflects the need to manage options and available choices to optimize the experience.

Relational other

In their interactions with potential partners, participants described the process as one filled with imagination, envisioning what potential connections could emerge from these interactions. This initial excitement can, however, result in disappointment or in pressure to live up to someone's perceived or real expectations. As Anne (38) emphasized, "You build someone in your head, a picture of someone and a relationship that is not real". And as Benjamin (29) reflected: "They expect the best, they expect to be wowed. They expect a spark."

This process of imagining others and relationships is largely fueled by what participants read on others' profiles. However, they also understand that these profiles are often embellished, offering only snippets of the best moments and lacking depth or authenticity. As Amelie (29) said: "It's just like a false advertisement. It's like an enhanced profile of them."

As participants attempted to gauge the other person, they assessed factors such as the potential for engaging in respectful conversation and tried to foresee how they would feel around the person. The importance of judging the other person lies in ensuring mutual compatibility and protecting safety. Individuals recognize that they do not fully know the other person, which can present potential risks. Women, in particular, expressed concerns about safety and made efforts to assess the trustworthiness of potential partners. Some noted that finding common social connections made this process easier.

Generalized other

Participants' experiences were shaped by imagined others and widespread public discourses surrounding online dating and dating apps. Many felt curiosity, or pressure to join the online dating scene, steered by the perception that "everyone is doing it." As Anne said: "I missed out on that whole thing. I didn't really know; you hear your friends talking about Tinder."

Factors such as friends' experiences, depictions in media and movies, and the notion of finding "the one" played a role in shaping online dating experiences. This perhaps contributed to some participants' feeling of a predetermined course in dating, with expectations set for a certain number of dates or specific milestones, leading to a lack of spontaneity. The norms around online dating differ from those in face-to-face interactions, with new ways of interacting emerging. Participants reported about being more direct in their interaction, skipping the initial circumventing about one's availability and relational preferences. As Anne (38) shared:

> It’s like a way to establish what somebody wants. When you meet someone in person, you might kind of wait before asking them certain questions; you’re not going to say ‘What are you looking for?’ You kind of have to wait and see, whereas when you text someone, it's the norm to figure out, because some people will only stay up for casual sex, and so it’s completely a valid question to ask somebody what’s their expectations.

The lack of visibility and asynchronicity online also made it easier to discontinue communication.

Despite its widespread use, online dating still carries a significant stigma. Participants reported about encountering the same individuals across different apps or over time, which carries judgement, as Anne (38) noted:

> If someone was on Tinder and didn't have any luck, then, you know I felt like [laughs], it was like... I felt like if someone had to try lots of different dating apps, then you know there's a reason why maybe.

Participants also shared concerns about colleagues seeing them using dating apps, possibly due to self-consciousness about the process of looking for a partner. This is a stage in relationships where participants often find themselves multiple times. It was common to go through phases of bonding and meeting someone, followed by breakups and returning to dating apps. Some participants reported deleting the apps altogether due to unmet expectations and repetitive outcomes.

Online medium initiated relationship (1b)

This section explores the experiences of participants who initiated relationships through online forums and communities such as gaming, hobbies, creative writing and work. This way of meeting people is less frequent, offering a smaller pool of potential partners and opportunities for developing relationships. However, it did occur to some of our participants.

Self

Compared to their experiences on online dating apps, individuals felt less pressure to manage their self-presentation and authenticity in these other online social contexts. Here, participants focused on their interests, work, hobbies, and means of fulfilling them. The lower risk of social judgment allows them to further explore themselves, as Marianne (24) noted: “For me, online relationships have been like kind of a very key point of exploring my sexuality and understanding it.”

Some participants faced greater acceptance and self-confidence in online connections. For instance, Sarah (24) described how online platforms can alleviate insecurities while developing connections: “They can actually get to know you first. You remain anonymous until you otherwise want to. […] You know, anxiety is rising. It’s the social pressures and whatever. Technology’s kind of like a getaway.”

Increased control over exposure and the pacing of interactions helped participants build self-confidence and feel more comfortable in these online spaces.

At this stage, the medium was not primarily used for developing specific relationships, which made it more transparent and valued as a social or leisure tool without as many relational constraints. Unlike dating apps, where meeting a person is often the ultimate goal, here it is one of many possible activities.

Relational other

Participants appreciated the choice and the ability to connect with interesting and diverse individuals, including those from niche communities, based on mutual interests, passions, and hobbies.

These relationships, on the other hand, often involved long distances between individuals, lower rates of transitioning to in-person meetings, and the risk of the partner disappearing. The likelihood of finding a romantic partner and forming a lasting relationship in this context is also lower due to the smaller pool of available partners.

Generalized other

Even though participants viewed this way of meeting others differently, reactions from their friends and families still carried some judgement. However, participants did not internalize it as much, possibly because the serendipity of meeting a partner this way is much closer to that experienced in face-to-face contexts.

4.7.2 Initial Bonding Online (2)

This phase explores experiences from the earlier stages of connection development to the formation of stronger bonds. Individuals may remain in this stage for several days, months, or even years before transitioning the relationship to an in-person meeting or ending it. At this stage, self-reflection shifted from focusing on identity and self-presentation to examining past relationships. Participants sought to understand how previous experiences shaped their current relationships and potential future outcomes.

Medium

The medium becomes transparent here, serving as an enabler of deeper connections. Participants felt that technology expanded the possibilities of meeting

compatible partners, even those located far away on different continents. Marianne (24), from Ireland, describes establishing an exclusively online romantic relationship with someone living in the United States:

> Technology makes you feel, it kind of opens up that idea of a person that would suit you; or one of your soul mates, or maybe your soul mate could be on a different continent. And, at least now we have the technology to find them.

Additionally, participants discussed the differences in the nature of their relationships based on the platforms they used. Those who met online through mutual interests or activities judged their relationships as more organic than those who met through dating apps.

The richness of communication is crucial here, particularly with digital media such as pictures, messages, and videos, which help establish connections and strengthen bonds. Matthew (45) described how he fell in love with his current wife through technology: "Phone conversation. FaceTime and texting were also available. So it became this big ball of everything." This integration of various communication forms enhances the feeling of closeness and helps build a stronger foundation for the relationship.

Relational other

At this stage, individuals were actively trying to get to know each other better. While they recognized the limited access or exposure to the other person, they often exhibited a level of trust. Concerns around authenticity were generally lower, as one

participant noted: “They are not just an online persona once you get to know them.” However, these concerns persist to some extent.

Imagination played a key role as individuals, lacking complete information about their partner and relationship, filled the gaps by envisioning potential outcomes and activities (Walther, 2007). This created a sense of excitement but also led to disappointment when reality didn’t meet these imagined scenarios. For example, Rahul (36) imagined what he wanted to do with his online girlfriend:

> It would be great to kiss you. I could be great to hold you… but you cannot actually do it…when the call ends, then it plays it even more. I wish I could do this. [...] And there is one spot in between two cities, which is very beautiful, with lakes and everything. So we thought we will meet there. It's very romantic. But it just didn't materialize.

As participants developed their relationships, they went through a sequence of envisioning desired futures for their relationships and comparing them with present realities.

Generalized other

Social discourses and cultural stories about online relationships encompass a spectrum of experiences, ranging from catfishing, scams, and exploitations to heart-warming accounts about true love found through online media. Participants referred to these stories to make sense of or judge the feasibility of their online relationships. For example, Matthew (45) used cultural references to position his then-only online relationship: “I mean movies have been done about this type of stuff. There was a

French movie called The Untouchables, Right Guy in a wheelchair who wrote letters to a woman constantly."

These social discourses also question whether online relationships can be truly deep and meaningful.

4.7.3 Transitioning Face-to-Face (3a)

The central question for participants was when and how to shift their relationship from online to in-person. Delaying the transition too long raised fears of developing a false bond, while transitioning prematurely brought up concerns about comfort and safety.

Self

Unlike in the bonding phase, when individuals did not focus so much on themselves or their confidence, in this stage, questions of confidence, authenticity, and experiences of self resurfaced strongly.

As participants transitioned their relationships to in-person, they felt exposed and pressured to meet the standards they've set for themselves and their relationships. For example, Anthony (31) shared his insecurities around transitioning to in-person after two months of being online:

> And I spoke to this person for over two months and worried that I wouldn't live up to their expectations. Am I going to live up to his expectations? I didn't even think to myself, like, is he going to live up to mine?

Relationships that did not survive the transition to face-to-face interactions had implications for participants' self-esteem and confidence. For example, Anne (38) discussed the impact of in-person rejection after developing a bond with someone online:

> When you text someone for that long as well, obviously, you can tell that they like your personality. And when you go and meet them, and they don’t like you, it’s very disappointing, and it’s a hard rejection. Because you’re thinking, ‘Okay, I’m not pretty enough, or I’m too fat,’ or you know. I would have terrible thoughts in my head.

Participants also reflected on their own authenticity, grappling with how their online persona aligned with their true selves. For example, David (34) is reflecting on his self-presentation online and in person: “When you meet me in person, I’m still pretty much the same person. I still have the same sense of humor. I’m not arrogant. I’m nice.” On the other hand, Amelie (29) judged herself as being less authentic online:

> I think like with. If I get engaged in long texting, I will show my bright side. I will try to be a bit playful, make games and things like that. But it’s not really who I am. That's a bit annoying.

The transition from online to face-to-face interaction brought out the challenges individuals face in maintaining their self-confidence and authenticity. Social discourses often emphasize the importance of being authentic and true to oneself online, which can complicate the reality that we all behave slightly differently online, often adapting to the nature of the online medium.

Relational other

As participants transition to in-person interactions with their relational partners, they experience strong feelings marked by both positive excitement and apprehension due to the uncertainty. As Sarah (24) expressed: “Oh, I’m finally meeting this person that I was talking to for a whole year. You get these, like I said, like emotions, adrenaline.”

Even if participants were not overly enthusiastic about their online partner, they hold onto the hope that they would either experience a better match or have a more fulfilling experience in person.

In their first face-to-face meetings, participants evaluated the authenticity of others, assessing whether their impressions formed online align with the reality observed in person. For example, Anne (38) reflected on her experience with online dating:

> I’ve learned that just because you can see someone in a picture and you could say that person looks like my type, or they look attractive, and then you can meet them… and their essence just comes out the minute you see him, you know the vibrancy, and it's like, and it could be a completely different thing.

The question of authenticity has pervaded since the early stages of bonding and it is tied to safety risks, especially for female participants. The level of risk depended on participants’ perception of how well they knew their potential partners and on previous experiences.

In making these decisions, individuals relied on social discourses and advice about how long to wait before meeting, what to do on the first date, and how long to

stay. Existing norms around relationships were questioned or negotiated, as these situations involved meeting someone for the first time who already felt familiar.

4.7.4 Does Not Transition to Face-to-Face (3b)

In our data, there were two cases where individuals developed a significant bond and maintained a relationship for several months or even years without transitioning to face-to-face meetings. These rare instances involved significant, committed, and monogamous relationships with future plans, yet the expectation of transitioning the relationship to in-person was broken.

Through these experiences, participants realized aspects of themselves they hadn't known before by redefining their stance toward online relationships and understanding themselves as relational beings within these contexts. Rahul, whose relationships did not survive due to the online component, re-evaluated the meanings of online relationships and concluded that they could not work. On the other hand, for Marianne (24), who wished to maintain her relationship online because she could not envision being with anyone else but her partner, there was a shift in how she conceptualized relationships:

> Oh, you know, but is that a real relationship? This is where my insecurity comes from because I would have thought that about a friend who had a girlfriend online once […] It's taught me to be very open-minded about people's relationships.

The meaning of the medium is dual here; it alternates between feeling deeply connected, where it seems to fade into the background during shared activities and moments of intimacy and becoming acutely aware of the technology's presence, which changes the nature of interactions. Like Rahul (36) said:

> When you are facing a camera, you will always be conscious. Even if you were lying in your bed, on your couch, as comfortable as you can, because you are holding a phone or a laptop, you are facing the camera.

The medium acted as an enabler in the case of Marianne (24) who decided to stay in the relationship. Marianne employed various strategies to create proximity, such as sending gifts or using wearables: "When I send a vibration, I feel like she gets it. I hope she knows that I'm thinking of her."

Distance and the absence of meetings in person cause friction and significant conflicts between partners following the re-evaluation of the relationship. Like Marianne said:

> It was a real point of tension in the relationship with Shalyn because I'd be coming to her and being like, 'Oh, you know, like my friends this, my friends that'. And we and I would have multiple fights […] We're really strong and content now.

In another case, the inability to transition to face-to-face interaction resulted in the termination of the relationship and feelings of disappointment.

When reflecting on the depth and validity of their relationships, individuals referred to societal voices and opinions, underscoring the importance of social recognition for their relationships.

Participants felt self-conscious and concerned about how others perceived their online relationships. As Marianne (24) shared: "I feel very self-conscious. I'd be very concerned about people seeing my relationship as less than and not feeling like that because it means so much to me and it feels so real." Similarly, Rahul faced significant judgment from both his parents and friends regarding his online romantic relationship, which ultimately led to its termination.

4.7.5 Maintaining Relationship – Hybrid (4a)

After the initial bonding phase, participants' relationships typically transitioned and further developed in-person, or broke-up, both of which fall outside the scope of this study. Here, we analyze hybrid types of relationships where, after the relationship is established, a significant proportion of interactions occur online with occasional face-to-face meetings.

At this stage, the focus shifts from the self to relationship plans and how individuals balance their career aspirations with romantic relationships. For those maintaining long-distance relationships, making life decisions and integrating their relationship into their overall life trajectory becomes important.

Medium

Once individuals have met in person, the medium becomes less transparent with participants recognizing the clear difference between online and in-person experiences. As one participant noted, in-person interactions involve dates and intimacy, whereas online communication merely sustains the feeling of connection.

Medium also symbolized separation and distance, causing frustration and dissatisfaction with the relationship dynamics. For example, Alejandro (25) says:

> I can't think of anything positive about having to be in an online relationship. [...] The transition from online to in-person was for the better. But going back to online, it has obviously, I mean, not damaged, but it has made things much more difficult.

Long-distance partners employed various strategies to create feelings of closeness and intimacy. Video calls allowed them to see each other while texting remains accessible and ubiquitous. Engaging in activities together online also helped maintain a sense of closeness. The medium acts as a buffer, balancing feelings of

closeness and separation; however, once participants met their partner in person, it brought a rush of happiness and excitement.

Relationships with clear plans for the future and higher levels of commitment tended to experience fewer difficulties with separation and conflicts around the distance.

Societal voices and discourses were not as salient at this point, likely because many relationships have become hybrid and thus normalized. Instead, individuals focus on the viability of maintaining long-distance relationships.

4.8 Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how the meaning attributed to a relationship expressed through the online medium changes across different relationship stages, using a life course and sociocultural perspective. Applying the semiotic prism, we represented its poles at various relationship stages, leading to several key discussion points for each pole.

Self

Participants demonstrated high levels of self-reflection and introspection, likely higher than in relationships in general. This indicates how merging technology with our lives and relationships provokes deep contemplation and underscores the merit of this method for studying online relationships to access the richness of this experience. We showed how the experience of Self transitions throughout the stages, from a strong focus on Self, self-presentation, and authenticity in earlier stages of a relationship to a more Self-less or fused-with-other experience as the relationship progresses. These shifts are more pronounced when technology is being (re)introduced or removed from the relationship. Even in later stages of relationships, characterized by commitment and stability, the meaning of oneself as a relational being is continually redefined and negotiated with the fluctuating presence of technology.

Relational other

Similarly to the dynamic experience of the Self, the ways participants experience their relational partner online change from initial questions of authenticity to more relationship-focused concerns. In the early stages of online contact and bonding, especially in online dating, doubts about the other person's authenticity are prevalent. Over time, as the tension around who the other person is diminishes, individuals seek greater closeness. Once the relationship is established or experienced in person and the online medium is reintroduced, individuals strive to create a sense of proximity and closeness with their partner. Communication becomes essential not just for conveying information but for maintaining the relationship. Conversely, in relationships that do not transition from online to in-person, the relational partner may be perceived as a fantasy, leading to conflict, re-evaluation, or termination of the relationship.

Tool

In the early stages, relationships may benefit from the relative anonymity and limited visibility provided by communication tools acting as gateways to others. These affordances reduce the fear of social judgment and the risks associated with self-disclosure, facilitating initial connections. Conversely, as relationships develop, these affordances may present new challenges and create a sense of constraint in the desire to reach a deeper level of (physical) intimacy.

The desire for more information about their partners encourages individuals to employ additional communication modalities (Monberg, 2005). The nature of the relationship itself often guides the selection of appropriate media, ensuring alignment with the desired level of intimacy, engagement, and communication style. For instance, participants appreciate the richness of video communication, but they tend to opt for it when they feel more confident in themselves and their relationships. Likewise,

transitioning communication from more public media, such as Facebook or dating apps, to more selective or private apps, like WhatsApp, served as a symbol of relationship development.

Previous studies and theoretical approaches have often overestimated the medium's role in shaping relationships, focusing primarily on bandwidth and limitations (Lea & Spears, 1995; Walther, 1996). However, considering the person's intent, need, and the meaning they assign to these tools shows that affordances are not static; they evolve and hold different significance at different times. For example, anonymity or limited visibility might facilitate approaching others or discussing sensitive topics online, while in other cases, they may hinder closeness. Thus, the perception of these and other online media characteristics – shaped by one's needs, goals, and broader social prescriptions of romantic relationships – can shift the medium's role from a transparent enabler of connection to a source of separation and distance. For a more detailed discussion on how perceptions of tools enable and constrain relationships, see Pilek and de Saint-Laurent (2024).

Online dating apps evoke powerful and contradictory meanings. While these apps facilitate approaching other individuals, they make selecting, getting to know others meaningfully, and establishing lasting connections difficult and frustrating for many. The ease of swiping and matching often questions the complexity and effort required to develop genuine relationships.

Generalized other

While numerous rules and norms have always governed dating, coupling, and marrying, these dynamics are further shaped by our representations of the continuous development of technology and dating apps. Despite increased social acceptance, negative perceptions and judgment persist around online dating and romance. The social discourse shifts from the initial promise and prescriptions surrounding finding a perfect match online to skepticism about the authenticity, safety, and longevity of online relationships.

Particularly, strong social judgment exists against relationships that do not transition to face-to-face contexts. Individuals whose relationships remain online often face disapproval from close friends and family, which can strain their offline friendships or even lead to the dissolution of their online relationships.

In addition, social discourses extend beyond online relationships to encompass technology itself, often highlighting its perceived adverse effects – a pattern that is not unique to recent technological developments. Emerging social technologies are often perceived as reducing the frequency and quality of time spent in face-to-face interactions, ultimately leading to increased loneliness (e.g., Dunbar, 2016). However, evidence for these causal claims is lacking. Studies consistently report positive effects of online media, such as removing obstacles to personal disclosure (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009) and increasing social contacts when opportunities to connect are limited (Ramirez et al., 2017). Social media and technologies do not offer easy solutions to relational and psychological needs, particularly for vulnerable people, but they are far from solely responsible for isolation and loneliness.

4.9 Conclusion

Our study provides insights into the meaning assigned to technology use in romantic relationships and the contradictions between positive experiences and negative judgments of technology, which could be further explored through quantitative analysis.

First, participants' experience of the Self and their relationships change with their choices and methods of using media. This shift ranges from initial concerns about authenticity to a stage where the relationship itself takes precedence over concerns about authenticity.

Second, the role of media shifts from being a transparent facilitator and valuable access point in the early stages of a relationship to becoming a visible barrier to achieving desired intimacy later or in hybrid contexts. Additionally, characteristics of tools, such as the abundance of choices or gamified designs standard in dating apps, can create tension between using the tool for entertainment and perceiving relationships in a non-human or commodified manner.

Third, participants' experiences of navigating their online relationships are shaped by social discourses of imagined or real others, whose voices influence what is considered a legitimate or feasible relationship.

Another significant observation, likely influenced by generations of social representations about media, is the intense ambivalence toward technology use in romantic relationships and society as a whole. Media can be viewed positively as enhancing relationships and providing enjoyment, but it can be seen as threatening genuine connections, societal cohesion, and overall well-being.

These findings help us better understand the discrepancies between increased technology use, reported benefits, and negative perceptions. We observed moments where technology both helps and causes friction in achieving desired intimacies and

relationships, as well as the dynamic positioning against often critical and judgmental social discourses in making sense of the role of technology in romantic relationships.

The findings from Study 1 show that meaning-making around online dating is never only ‘in’ the relationship or ‘in’ the tool, but is continually negotiated in dialogue with broader discourses about what online dating is and what kinds of relationships it can produce. To examine these courses further, the next chapter focuses on how Irish broadsheet media frames online dating, and how these discourses resonate with, amplify, or diverge from the lived meanings described here.

Chapter 5:

Irish Media Representations of Online Dating

This chapter is adapted from:

Pilek, M., & de Saint-Laurent, C. (under review). Dating in The Digital Age: Irish Media Representations of Online Dating. *Acta Psychologica.*

5.1 Chapter Preface

The interview findings in Study 1 showed that online dating is shaped not only by interactions with partners and the affordances of the medium, but also by broader societal voices and narratives that participants draw on to interpret what online dating means to them. Building on this, the present chapter shifts to the sociocultural level and examines how Irish newspapers have framed online dating over time. By analyzing thematic emphasis, evaluative tone, and the populations made visible in coverage, the chapter maps the public discourses that may resonate with, amplify, or diverge from participants' lived experience.

Abstract

Despite becoming one of the dominant ways to meet partners, online dating continues to receive disproportionately negative attention, including in media coverage, which may shape social representations of online dating. This study uses media content analysis to examine how three Irish newspapers (Irish Independent, Irish Times, and Irish Examiner) have represented online dating since the early 2000s, focusing on thematic framing, evaluative tone, and their longitudinal development. The analysis of 846 articles identified ten primary thematic categories, with crime and fraud as the most frequently reported topics. Negative portrayals increased over time, suggesting a broader shift toward critical framing. Media attention was concentrated on young heterosexual individuals, particularly women, while groups that disproportionately use dating platforms, such as LGBTQ+ populations, were underrepresented. A qualitative analysis of advice articles shows competing normative expectations concerning relationships, app use, safety, and self-presentation online. The findings are discussed with implications for reporting and public understanding of online dating.

Keywords: Media representations, Irish media, Online dating, Sociocultural analysis, Longitudinal analysis

5.2 Introduction

Online dating has transformed how people meet and form romantic relationships, reshaping the landscape of modern intimacy. By 2024, over 300 million people globally used dating apps, including approximately 432,000 in Ireland, which accounts for approximately 10% of the adult population (Statista, 2024) – a figure projected to grow further in the coming years, and which signals the increasing significance of online dating in contemporary society.

As online dating becomes more prevalent, it has captured the attention of academics, the media, and the public alike. Discussions frequently focus on its success in fostering relationships, concerns about safety and authenticity, and its broader impact on romantic relationships. These debates often mirror broader societal anxieties and hopes about how technology reshapes human connection, while treating technology as the primary detriment to social and relational outcomes.

Media representations play an important role in shaping public perceptions of online dating. Research suggests that mass media's emphasis on danger or deceit can heighten user anxiety and perpetuate stigma (Hildebrandt, 2015). Despite the growing normalization of online dating, social discourses often emphasize risks and discomfort, suggesting persistent ambivalence toward this form of relationship-building. However, limited recent research has examined how media representations of online dating have evolved over time, leaving gaps in our understanding of the narratives' shifting trends.

This study examines news coverage of online dating in three mainstream Irish newspapers from the earliest available articles to 2024. Analyzing these representations over time, from the early days of online dating to its widespread usage, uncovers how societal perceptions of online dating have evolved and situates these narratives within broader social and historical contexts. A second, more in-depth analysis focuses on media advice, as these recommendations encourage specific behaviors and offer unique

insights into societal values, beliefs, and expectations regarding online dating and its users.

5.3 Negative Biases Surrounding Online Dating

Online dating has received considerable social criticism since its early days. Users of dating apps were often stereotyped as desperate or lonely individuals unable to find love through traditional means, while relationships formed online are frequently judged as superficial or unnatural (Finkel et al., 2012). These representations can lead online daters to experience intense and conflicting emotions, including hope for finding love online, alongside pressure to stay safe and manage social skepticism (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). While the stigma surrounding online dating has lessened, individuals who date online are still perceived less favorably than those who use offline methods (Johanis et al., 2024). Furthermore, the focus on safety concerns such as deception, catfishing, and intrusive behavior remains prevalent (Phan et al., 2021; Smith, 2023) and may overshadow the benefits this form of dating can offer.

The meaning we assign to technological affordances, more broadly, and online dating, specifically, often reinforces these negative representations. For instance, the large base of dating app users and their choice of online dating apps has been associated with a 'relationship shopping' approach (Heino et al., 2010), in which romantic connections are commodified, potentially reducing users' willingness to commit (Alexopoulos et al., 2020). Similarly, features like limited visibility, asynchronicity, and editability are linked to increased risks of misrepresentation (Toma et al., 2008). However, empirical studies consistently show that most online self-presentation involves only minor embellishments rather than deliberate deception (Ellison et al., 2006). Despite this, public discourse continues to entertain the possibility of a more serious deceit, suggesting that anxieties surrounding online dating are shaped as much by cultural narratives as by the affordances themselves.

Despite these negative representations, studies continue to highlight potential benefits of dating apps. Research by Hobbs et al. (2017) indicates that concerns that dating apps reduce willingness to commit are unsupported, as users still value genuine intimacy and meaningful relationships. Greater access to potential partners and reduced communication barriers can offer more control over relationship development (Hu & Rui, 2023). Additionally, some studies have found that relationships formed through online dating tend to be more satisfying and progress to marriage more quickly than offline relationships (Cacioppo et al., 2013). This contradiction between the empirical evidence and persistent public negativity may reflect broader, long-standing societal ambivalence toward social networking technologies. As such, many of these polarized discussions about online dating are filled with hopes and promises on one side and fears and frustrations about the medium on the other.

5.4 Theoretical Framework: Media Framing and Representations of Online Dating

The theoretical framework for this study is media framing and social representation theories. The media plays a strong role in people's understanding of social reality, not only reflecting societal trends but also actively constructing public perceptions, narratives, and meanings of the world (Happer & Philo, 2013). As a powerful source of information, the media guide how audiences conceptualize and respond to social phenomena (Sotirovic, 2003).

The news media's impact on public opinions, ideas, issues, and people has been demonstrated in research. For instance, Carlyle et al. (2008), in their study on newspaper coverage of intimate partner violence, showed how the media can shape public perceptions and even influence social policies. Sometimes its influence in shaping public opinion can be stronger than factual data alone, as demonstrated by Scheufele and Lewenstein's 2015 study on public knowledge and representations of

nanotechnology. That is not to say that the impact of the media should be understood in terms of direct or immediate effects, but that repeated exposure to its frames has been shown to contribute to the gradual formation of shared perceptions.

Online dating apps, like other emerging and evolving technologies, are subject to media framing. Because the relational practices enabled by dating apps are multifaceted, emotionally charged, and, in some respects, unprecedented, the media plays an important role in shaping how these technologies are socially understood and experienced. Existing research shows that, although many users experience online dating as routine and uneventful, the media often highlights extreme cases, creating a more sensational narrative and potentially contributing to stereotypes and anxieties (Rosewarne, 2016). Themes such as deception, safety risks, and isolation are frequently reported, despite the lack of empirical evidence that these are widespread issues (Schmitz et al., 2011). Albury et al. (2020) similarly identified criminal activity, sexual misconduct, and health concerns as dominant frames in media coverage across Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Comparable patterns appear in popular culture. Hildebrandt's (2015) research identified thousands of TV shows, movies, and web pages that depict extreme cases such as catfishing and deception. Likewise, Rosewarne's (2016) analysis suggests that the media frequently portrays online daters as liars or con artists, engaging in less authentic relationships. This theme persists in contemporary popular media, with many shows focused on catfishing and deception. For example, The Tinder Swindler became one of Netflix's top 10 movies in 94 countries, including Ireland (Netflix, 2022), reflecting society's fascination and concern with the darker side of online dating.

While media influence now extends across multiple digital platforms, newspapers remain an important and comparatively underexamined site of public discourse. As edited, standardized, and curated texts directed toward a broad national

audience, newspapers provide a particularly valuable arena for examining how social issues are framed and normatively structured. Recent data from Ireland indicate that 65% of people aged 16 and older - approximately 2.58 million individuals - read a print newspaper at least once weekly (Newman et al., 2023). Among daily newspapers, the Irish Independent leads with 346,000 readers, followed by The Irish Times with 251,000. This represents substantial public engagement with traditional media in a country with a population of just over 5 million, underscoring the value of examining how online dating is framed within Irish newspapers.

5.5 Analytical Focus of the Present Study

Building on the findings from the studies, the present work extends existing research in several important aspects.

First, considering the growing normalization and widespread adoption of dating apps, this study adopts a **longitudinal perspective** to examine how online dating is framed across a range of socially significant themes, how these representations are emotionally toned, and which population groups are most prominently discussed. By mapping thematic prevalence, evaluative tone, and demographic visibility over time, this approach captures how media representations shift alongside technological and sociocultural developments.

Second, the study focuses on advice-oriented articles as a distinct discursive form, for three main reasons. First, advice is directly addressed to the reader, revealing what journalists and the media believe about the audience’s needs, values, and behaviors. From this viewpoint, offering advice reflects the representation of difference (Gillespie, 2008), showing how the media positions itself as an expert that guides readers toward the ‘right’ course of action, while presuming what a reader should know about the process.

Second, advice assumes action, and in these moments of decision, opposing dilemmas and ideological conflicts come to the fore (Billig et al., 1988). As readers are encouraged to act, the advice highlights the competing tensions and ethical challenges of online dating, such as balancing authenticity with self-presentation, safety with freedom, and pursuing relationships while acknowledging the associated risks.

Finally, advice provides actionable recommendations and insight into shifting societal norms over time, making it valuable for temporal comparison. Through advice, media texts articulate dominant values, such as individualism, self-sufficiency, and changing attitudes toward singlehood, while also revealing how these values evolve across historical periods.

By integrating quantitative content analysis with qualitative thematic analysis of advice, this study provides both a systematic mapping of media representations and an in-depth examination of their normative dimensions.

5.6 Sociocultural Context of Media Representations in Ireland

Ireland offers a particularly interesting context for studying media representations of online dating due to the substantial historical, social, and demographic shifts it has experienced over recent decades.

Historically, the Catholic Church strongly influenced Irish society, shaping norms around marriage, dating, and gender roles. Women often had limited autonomy in choosing their spouses, and once married, they were expected to quit their jobs. Up until the late 20th century, practices like sending women to Magdalene laundries – institutions that confined unmarried mothers, ‘fallen’ women, and others deemed deviant – were common.

The rigidity, oppression, and even cruelty historically linked to the Catholic Church in Ireland have caused a significant decline in its popularity and authority, leading to public resentment and resistance. The Church’s involvement in controversial

events, such as the discovery of unmarked graves containing the remains of over 800 babies and widespread sexual abuse scandals among clergy, has contributed to this shift. Over a relatively short period, power has shifted from the Church to the State, resulting in further social progress. From closing the last Magdalene's laundries in 1996 to being one of the first European countries to legalize same-sex marriage in 2015, Ireland's social norms have radically evolved. This change continued with the repeal of the Eighth Amendment in 2018, which paved the way for the legalization of abortion.

Ireland has also experienced dramatic economic growth, transforming from a history of poverty and near bankruptcy in the 1970s to becoming one of Europe's leading economies. It has attracted major technology companies to establish headquarters and data centers in the country, underscoring the significant role of technology in both the Irish economy and daily life. This shift has led to a wave of immigration, making the society more diverse than it once was.

However, despite progressive changes, increased investment, and rising immigration, Ireland paradoxically ranks as the loneliest country in Europe, with over 20% of Irish people reporting feelings of loneliness – compared to the European average of 13%. This contrast highlights the complexity of Ireland's modernization, as contemporary influences coexist with a deeply rooted cultural commitment to preserving its traditional identity. The rapid changes in recent decades and the need to adapt to new social structures may have also contributed to feelings of isolation.

Against this backdrop of rapid social change and reported feelings of isolation, media representations of online dating offer a valuable lens for examining how intimacy, connection, and risk are publicly constructed. Guided by media framing and social representation perspectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What dominant thematic frames characterize media representations of online dating in Irish newspapers, and how have these frames shifted over time?

RQ2: How is online dating evaluatively framed in Irish media coverage, and how has this emotional framing evolved longitudinally?

RQ3: What associations exist between evaluative tone, thematic framing, and gendered representations in media coverage of online dating?

RQ4: How do media representations of online dating distribute attention across different population groups (e.g., gender, age groups, sexual orientation)?

RQ5: How do advice-oriented media texts articulate normative expectations regarding dating practices, self-presentation, and risk management in online dating?

5.7 Methods

5.7.1 Data Collection and Sampling

Articles were sourced from the digital Irish Newspapers Archive. From the available publications, the three most widely read Irish newspapers - The Irish Examiner, The Irish Independent, and The Irish Times - were chosen for this study. The search strategy used the keyword 'online dating' to identify articles that explicitly addressed the phenomenon

. This decision was made to prioritize relevance and specificity, as broader or alternative search terms risked retrieving many articles on adjacent topics such as social media, sexuality, fraud, or relationships more generally. The search returned approximately 5000 articles containing the words 'online' and 'dating', though they were not always used together; in such cases, they were excluded.

The analysis included all articles discussing online dating or romantic relationships mediated by technology, covering a range of content types, including news

reports, advertisements, opinion pieces, and book or TV reviews. Repeated coverage of the same event or topic across the newspapers was retained, as it was considered informative for assessing the prominence of certain topics. After the selection, the final dataset consisted of 846 articles: The Irish Independent (337), The Irish Examiner (288), and The Irish Times (221).

The data collection spanned the earliest available articles through the 23rd of August 2024, when the collection process was completed. Due to the limited number of articles published between 1996 and 2000, the analyses were restricted to articles published from 2000 onward to ensure a more robust statistical analysis.

5.7.2 Coding Process

We conducted a media content analysis. All articles were coded along three analytically distinct dimensions: (i) article function, (ii) thematic content, and (iii) the article's evaluative tone.

5.7.3 Coding Dimensions

First, articles were coded for their **type and** the role the piece played in media discourse. During data collection, multiple types were identified (e.g., news reports, advertisements, opinion pieces, reviews, advice, and personal accounts). For the purposes of analysis, only two types were retained as analytically meaningful and conceptually distinct from thematic content: Advice and Testimonies. Advice articles explicitly provided guidance on online dating and relationships, whereas testimonies consisted of first-person or reported accounts describing lived experiences of online dating. Other article types were not used as a separate analytic variable because they largely overlapped with thematic categories. For example, advertising content was coded thematically as Business, and crime reports were coded within the Fraud/Crime category.

Second, articles were coded for **thematic content**, capturing the main topic discussed in relation to online dating. The first round of thematic coding involved reading all articles and developing preliminary categories and an initial coding framework. Given the high variability of topics covered in articles, thematic categories were proposed based on their prevalence and theoretical importance, drawing on themes frequently discussed in the literature, such as stigma and self-presentation. Additionally, the coding process was informed by oppositions inherent in online relationships (Pilek & Saint-Laurent, 2024), such as the tension between authenticity and presenting one's best self.

Each article was reread during the second coding round, and the initial coding framework was refined to ensure it adequately captured the variety and complexity of themes present in the articles. Some smaller codes and categories were collapsed or merged into broader themes, and only themes with clear boundaries were retained. Hence, the final coding framework was data-driven and guided by the theoretical framework in selecting which aspects to code in the articles. Thematic categories included, among others, Fraud/Crime, Infidelity, Business, Authenticity/Self-Presentation, Stigma, Safety, Superficial/Unreal, and Matchmaking. These themes were not mutually exclusive, as a single article could address multiple issues (e.g., a testimony describing an experience of online dating fraud).

Third, all articles were coded for evaluative tone, reflecting the overall framing of online dating in the article. Tone was coded as Positive, Negative, or Neutral/Undefined, based on whether online dating was predominantly presented favorably, unfavorably, or in a mixed/descriptive manner.

Finally, each article was coded for the primary population it discussed or, in the case of advice articles, the audience it addressed (e.g., women, men, couples, LGBTQ+ individuals, older adults, or a general/unspecified population).

Articles that focused predominantly on one gender were coded as **women** or **men**, respectively. When both women and men were addressed without a clear primary focus, or when no specific group was identifiable, the article was coded as **general**. References to couples were coded separately, and smaller or less frequently represented groups (e.g., people with disabilities, migrants, farmers, or single parents) were classified under the category '**other**'. Articles mentioning professional actors in the online dating industry (e.g., matchmakers, dating coaches, or app representatives) were coded as **service providers.**

Both authors discussed and refined the coding framework prior to the second coding round. The first author then recoded the full dataset, while the second author independently coded a randomly selected 10% subsample of articles. Intercoder reliability was calculated for all coding dimensions, with agreement levels reported in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1

Coding Framework for Article Theme and/Types and Intercoder Reliability (IRC)

Article Category	Description	IRC
Advice	Tips or guidance on dating and relationships.	.84
Testimonies	Personal accounts shared by individuals.	.94
Fraud/Crime	Coverage of scams, crime and fraudulent/deceptive behavior.	1.0
Infidelity	Stories about technology-facilitated infidelity.	1.0
Business	Business side of apps or services.	.60
Authenticity/Self-Pres.	Issues of honesty, self-representation, and catfishing.	.81
Stigma	References to stigma around apps.	*
Matchmaker	Traditional matchmaking	.63
Superficial/Unreal	Superficial, shallow nature of online relationships	1.0
Safety	Safety concerns.	1.0
Population	The main population discussed (e.g., gender, niche, LGBTQ, etc.).	.87
Tonality	Overall tone (positive, negative, neutral)	.87

* Insufficient data

5.7.4 Quantitative Data Analysis

We quantified the frequency and proportional distribution of each thematic category, population group, and evaluative tone across five-year periods. To examine temporal trends, we conducted regression analyses (linear and piecewise models) to identify shifts in category prevalence over time. Associations between tone, thematic categories, and gender were assessed using chi-square tests of independence. All quantitative analyses were conducted using Python statistical tools.

5.7.5 Qualitative Analysis of Advice

Thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was used to identify the types of advice offered by the media and to analyze and interpret themes within this category. Articles were coded by the type of advice they provided (e.g., Safety, Self-presentation) and could receive multiple codes. Fourteen primary codes were developed and then grouped into four broader themes: Dating Apps, Relationships, Safety, and Self. For instance, articles that discussed how users should stay safe online or how to protect themselves from disappointment were coded as Safety (e.g., physical safety, emotional safety). All articles that advised users on how to operationalize dating apps and navigate their features and affordances were coded as Dating Apps. Articles that discussed how to portray oneself online or how to become more self-aware in relationships were coded under the Self category. The Relationships category included articles that advised on developing intimacy and communication online and on building a high-quality relationship.

To preserve conceptual distinctiveness, unique dimensions within specific themes were retained (e.g., different types of Safety, Self-presentation, Authenticity in the Self theme, etc.). Finally, the themes and their temporal evolution were analyzed.

5.8 Findings

5.8.1 Overall Coverage and Thematic Evolution of Articles Over Time

To address RQ1, we first calculated the total number of articles in the dataset, as shown in Table 5.2. The temporal distribution indicates an increase in coverage from 2000 onward, peaking during 2010–2014. After a decline in the following period (2015-2019), the number of articles surged again in 2020-2024, reflecting renewed interest in the topic, potentially amplified by Covid-19.

Table 5.2

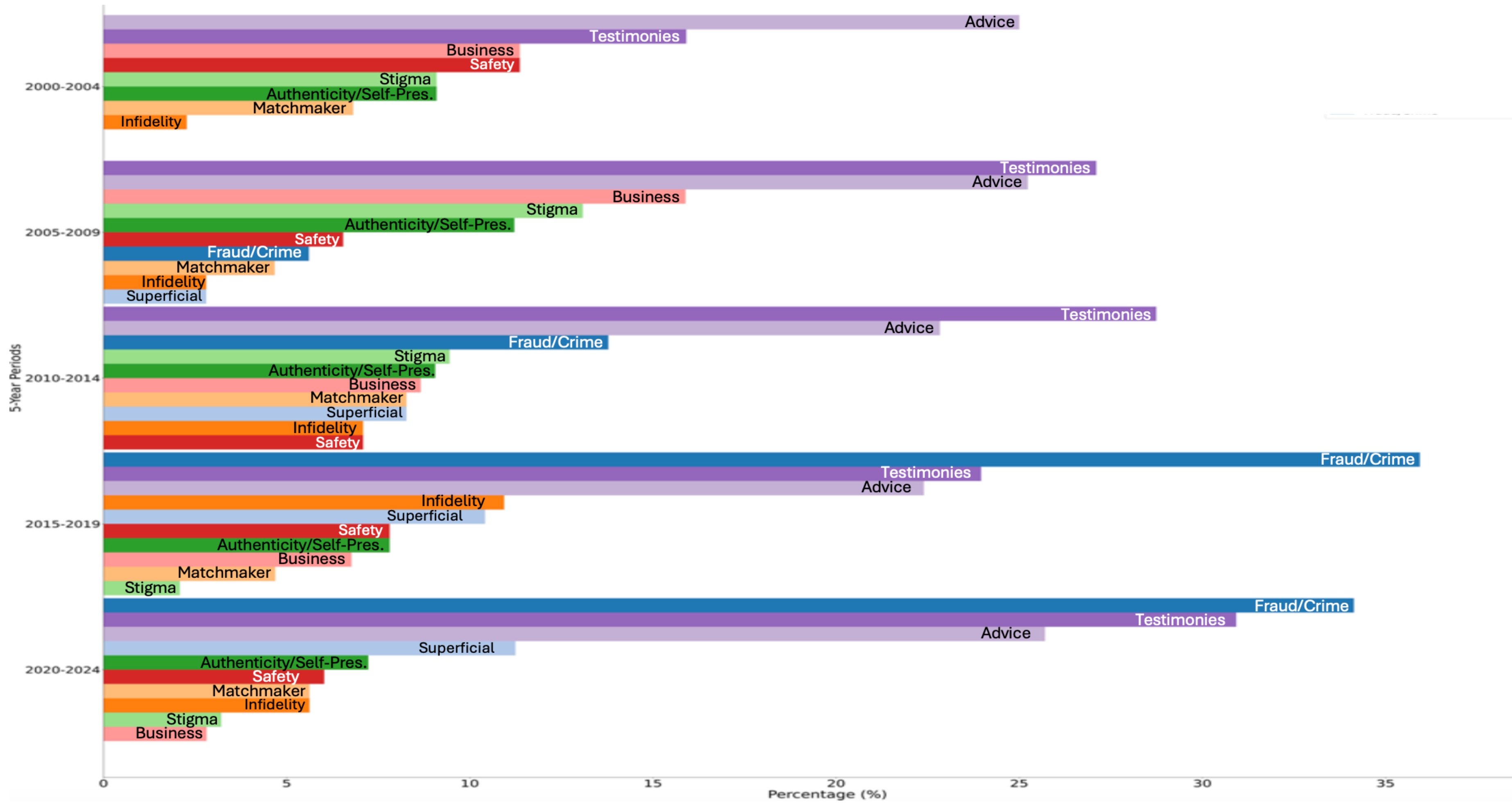
Temporal Trends in Article Coverage (2000-2024)

5-Year Period	Articles
2000-2004	44
2005-2009	107
2010-2014	254
2015-2019	192
2020-2024	249
Total	846

Regarding article types, the highest proportions were observed for Testimonies and Advice, whereas Fraud/Crime was the most prevalent theme, each accounting for approximately 25% of the dataset. The remaining categories are relatively low, each contributing less than 10%. Figure 5.1 presents the evolution of categories over time.

Figure 5.1

Distribution of Categories Over Time



Given the high variability in the data, we aimed to identify distinct patterns within changing category trends. To this end, we chose a piecewise regression model, which offers analytical strength in detecting changes over time while remaining parsimonious and interpretable. When identifying segments or inflection points, we followed two main rules. First, we limited the number of segments to no more than two to avoid overfitting and keep the model parsimonious. Second, we selected inflection points that were clearly indicated by the data distribution, ensuring they naturally aligned with the observed trends.

The fitted regression models are presented alongside the original data points in Figure 5.2, with statistically significant trends indicated. Detailed regression coefficients and model statistics are provided in Table 5.3.

Figure 5.2

Piecewise and Linear Regressions by Category over Time

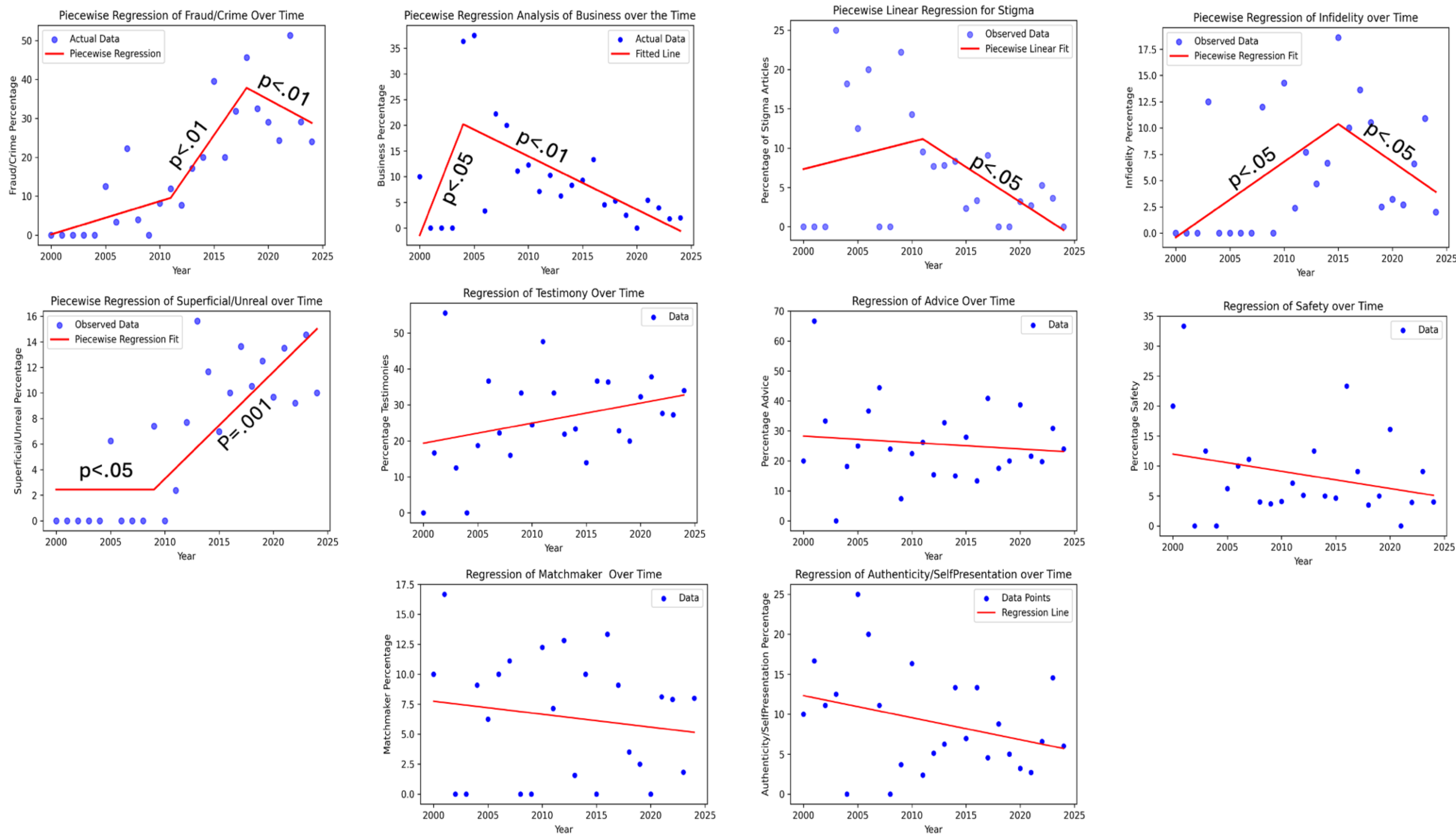


Table 5.3

Piecewise and Linear Regression Results by Category

Category	Breakpoints	Coefficients	P-value	R^2
Fraud/Crime	Before 2011	0.8	.165	
	2011	3.18	**.005****	.76
	2018	-5.54	**.009****	
Stigma	Before 2011	.79	.138	
	2011	-1.18	**.012***	.2
Infidelity	Before 2015	.72	**.017***	
	2015	-1.44	**.027***	.29
Superficial/Unreal	Before 2009	0.64	**.040***	
	2009	0.63	**.001*****	.68
Business	Before 2004	5.4	**.013***	.41
	2004	-6.4	**.007****	
Authenticity/Self-Presentation		-0.28	.119	.1
Safety		-0.29	.192	.07
Advice		-0.21	.575	.01
Testimonies		0.56	.124	.1
Matchmaker		-0.11	.458	.02

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001

Several notable trends emerged from this analysis. The Fraud/Crime category was absent until 2005 and remained low (5%) between 2005 and 2009. Then, it experienced a dramatic rise after 2010 (peaking at 35%) before stabilizing at a slightly lower rate (below 35%) around 2018, reflecting a gradual normalization of dating app usage. The sharp increase in Fraud/Crime coverage after 2011 corresponds with the launch and rapid adoption of Tinder and other mobile dating applications, suggesting heightened media attention during the early days of online dating.

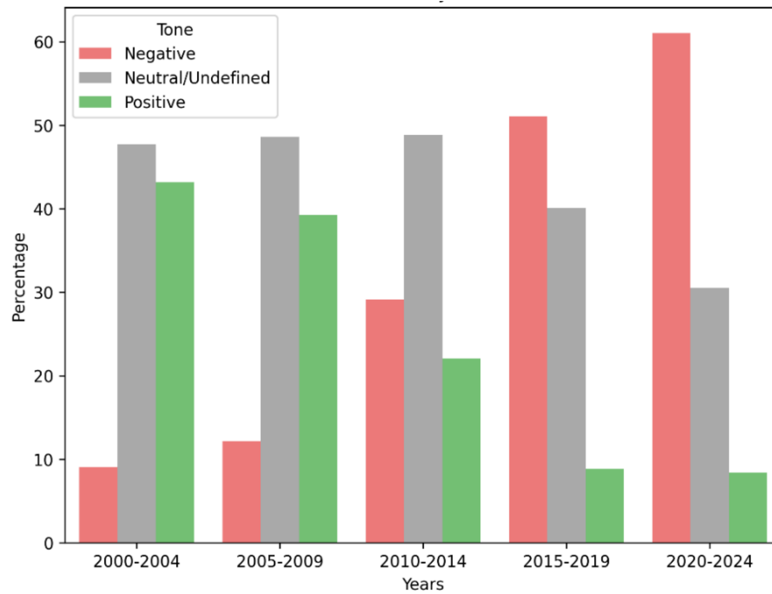
Some themes declined over time. The Stigma category was more frequent between 2000 and 2014 (10-15%) but decreased significantly in the last decade (below 5%). Similarly, the coverage in the Business category surged in the early years (15%) but steadily declined over time (below 5% in the last 5 years). The proportion of Infidelity steadily increased until 2015 (10%) but saw a noticeable decline since (down to 5%). Conversely, the Superficial/Unreal category, initially low in the first decade (below 5%), grew substantially after 2009 (10-15%). During this time, headlines increasingly focused on dating app burnout, disillusionment, and the perceived superficiality of digital interactions, suggesting growing public fatigue with app-based dating and continued concern about its potential social consequences.

5.8.2 Tone Distribution

To address RQ2, we analyzed the overall tone of media coverage of online dating, focusing on its temporal distribution, as shown in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3

Distribution of Article Tone over Time



The tone analysis revealed significant shifts in the emotional framing of online dating over time. The positive tone declined sharply from 45% in 2000-2004 to below 10% in 2020-2024. In contrast, the negative tone increased markedly, rising from under 10% in 2000-2004 to 65% in the most recent five-year period, 2020-2024.

The neutral tone remained steady at around 45% until 2014, after which it declined to 30% in the last five years, coinciding with a rise in negative tone.

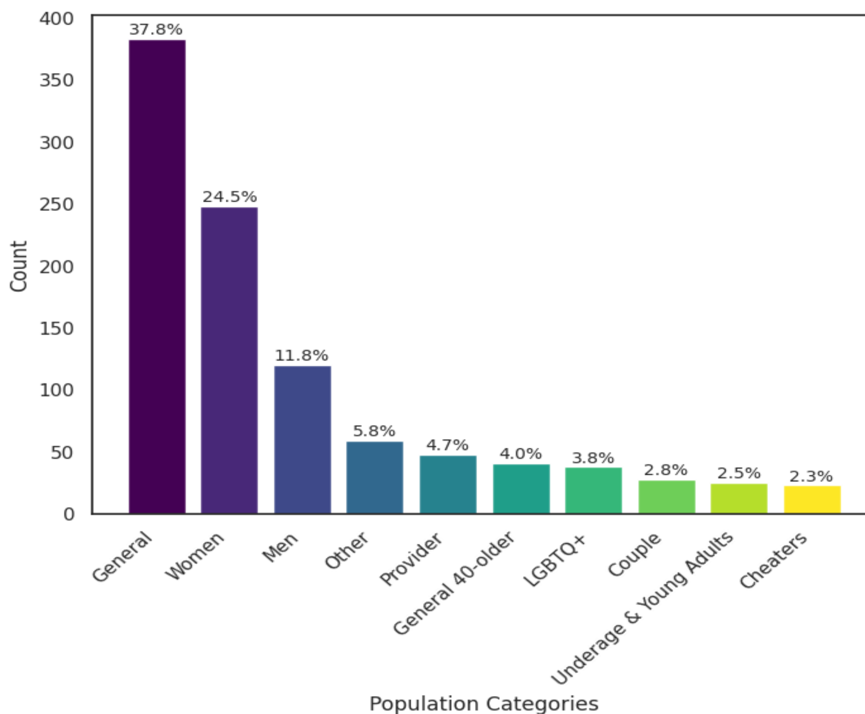
Exploratory analyses did not show consistent differences in tone between the three newspapers.

5.8.3 Population Coverage

To address RQ3, we analyzed the representation and prevalence of demographic groups reported in the news media. The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 5.4.

Figure 5.4

Frequency of Population Groups



The majority of articles (37.5%) discuss the general or unspecified population. Among those focused on a specific gender, twice as many articles are focused on Women (24.5%) as on Men (11.8%).

Other demographic groups are underrepresented, with some notably so. For instance, articles discussing individuals aged 40 and above account for only 4%. While no specific data is available for Ireland, UK statistics – a culturally and geographically comparable country – show that 34% of the population falls within the 40-64 age range (Statista, 2024), underscoring this group's underrepresentation in media coverage.

Likewise, LGBTQ+ representation comprises nearly 4% of articles, aligning more closely with demographic estimates that 5-10% of Ireland's population identifies as gay, bisexual, transgender, or lesbian (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012). However, this level of media attention appears low when considered alongside evidence that LGBTQ+ adults are substantially more likely to use dating apps than heterosexual adults (Smith, 2022).

5.8.4 Relationship between Tone and Categories

To address RQ4, we conducted a chi-square test to examine the relationships among tone, themes, and gender in media coverage.

The analysis revealed a significant association between tone and thematic categories (χ^2 (18) = 311.257, $p < .001$). While most categories exhibited a predominantly negative or neutral/undefined tone, pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni corrections highlighted distinct trends in tone distribution across themes.

As anticipated, the Fraud/Crime category differed significantly from all other categories ($p < .001$), with a predominantly negative tone (nearly 95%). Similarly, the Superficial/Unreal category exhibited a highly negative tone (50%) and minimal positive coverage (below 5%), which differed significantly from categories such as Advice and Matchmaker. The Safety and Authenticity/Self-Presentation categories also leaned strongly toward negative tones.

In contrast, the Business category exhibited a distinctly positive tone distribution (approximately 45%), with the lowest percentage of negative tones (approximately 10%). It differed significantly from all other categories ($p < .001$), except for Stigma, for which no significant difference was found. Notably, the Stigma category demonstrated a higher prevalence of positive tones, with articles often suggesting that societal stigma had diminished. The Testimonies category exhibited the most balanced distribution of tone, whereas categories such as Advice, Matchmaker, and Infidelity were more likely to adopt neutral or undefined tones.

Finally, examining tone representation by gender revealed no significant difference ($\chi^2(2) = 5.223$, $p = .073$), indicating that tone was not significantly associated with the gender focus of articles.

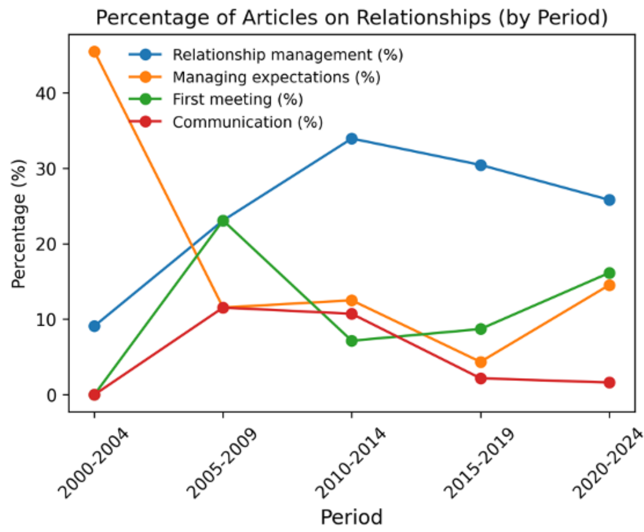
5.8.5 Advice

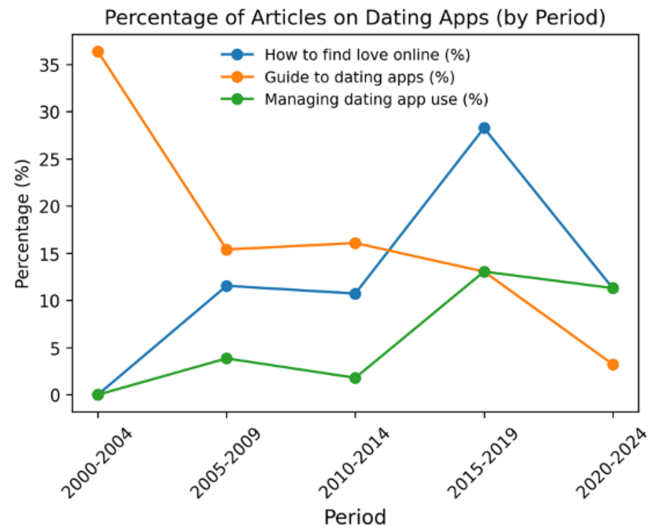
The qualitative analysis of Advice articles (N = 202) identified four main themes: Dating apps, Relationships, Safety, and Self. The temporal distribution of (sub)themes is illustrated in Figure 5.5.

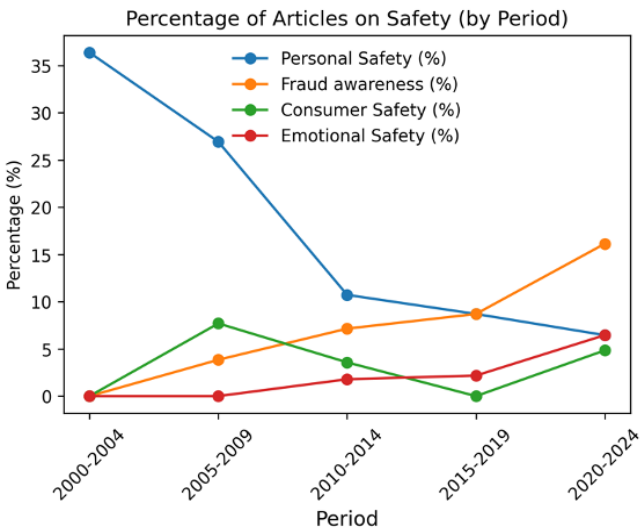
Regarding gender representation, among the 202 articles in this category, 54 were explicitly directed at women, while only 18 were directed at men, suggesting a gender bias in the advice offered by the media. This aligns with the overall gender distribution in the dataset, in which, among articles discussing a single gender, 201 focus on women and 85 on men. Beyond numerical imbalance, this distribution may reflect implicit assumptions about women as the primary managers of relational work and self-improvement in dating contexts.

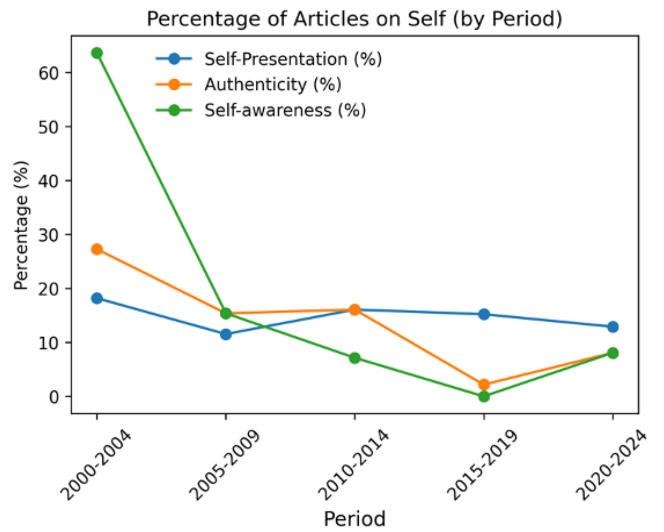
Figure 5.5

Distribution of Advice Type Over Time









Relationships emerged as the most prevalent theme, accounting for approximately 40% of all advice articles and remaining relatively stable over time. This theme focused on *managing relationships* in online dating, including navigating evolving dating norms, defining when a connection becomes a relationship, and *managing expectations* to maintain realistic outlooks. Practical advice included tips on planning *first meetings* and fostering effective online *communication*.

A recurring sub-theme concerned the 'Rules' of dating, through prescribed behaviours such as playing hard to get, dressing to impress, or deciding who pays on a first date, which online dating both reinforced and challenged. Early advice introduced digital communication etiquette (e.g., punctuation, acronyms, message tone) and warned against the illusion of intimacy created through prolonged online interaction (e.g., Sweeney, 2014).

Guidance on first meetings further revealed tensions between risk and romantic expectation. While safety practices, such as meeting in public, sharing one's location, and avoiding home invitations, remained constant, more recent articles reflect growing disillusionment with online dating and stress the mismatch between digital personas and offline encounters (e.g., Shah, 2023), encouraging earlier face-to-face meetings to establish authenticity.

Dating apps were the second most common theme, making up 35-40% of advice articles in the early years and dropping below 20% in recent years. At first, the focus was on *app* usage and setup guides, with articles like 'Dummies' guide to online dating' (O'Ryordan, 2012) explaining different apps, their costs, and how to use them, encouraging readers to try online dating to find love. Over time, the focus shifted to *finding love online* and *managing app use*. Later advice addressed dating app burnout, recommending time limits, mindful swiping, and periodic breaks to maintain balance and reduce fatigue (West, 2023b).

The **safety theme**, representing slightly less than 25% of advice articles, primarily focused on *personal safety* - how to protect oneself when sharing personal details, meeting new people, or establishing trust. Over the past decade, a notable rise in coverage has highlighted *fraud awareness*, particularly around scams and catfishing. Typical examples include 'Don't get hooked by a catfisher' (Ryan, 2018), which often depicts vulnerable older women as victims, advising readers to watch for warning signs such as reluctance to meet in person, evasive behavior, and emotional manipulation. Additionally, *consumer safety* advice emphasized vigilance regarding app subscriptions and avoidance of exploitative practices. A smaller subset addressed *emotional safety*, including gaslighting and attachment management, encouraging readers to recognize manipulation and establish boundaries (Walters, 2023).

Lastly, the **Self theme** comprised approximately 15% of advice articles, focusing on *self-presentation*, *authenticity,* and *self-awareness*. Readers were guided in crafting profiles, selecting photos, and building confidence, while navigating a tension between honesty and strategic curation. For example, 'How to raise your online dating game' (West, 2023a) advises using recent photos and concise bios that project personality and values, while phrases such as 'Everyone lies online' (Harrington, 2018) capture a cynical acceptance of misrepresentation, suggesting that self-presentation is both expected and morally ambiguous. Beyond image management, advice emphasized emotional readiness and self-reflection, underscoring the duality between personal growth and conformity to idealized standards.

5.9 Discussion

This study examined longitudinal media representations of online dating in Ireland, revealing persistent risk-oriented framing, increasing evaluative negativity, and gendered normative reporting. By integrating quantitative content analysis with qualitative analysis of advice, the findings show how online dating is simultaneously

normalized and problematized in public discourse. Guided by media framing and social representations perspectives, the discussion below is structured around the five research questions.

The **first research question** addressed the dominant thematic frames characterizing Irish newspaper coverage of online dating and their temporal shifts. The findings show that fraud and crime were the most prevalent and growing themes, particularly after 2011, following the launch and rapid adoption of mobile dating applications such as Tinder, and then stabilized after 2018. This spike also corresponds to broader societal reactions to emerging technologies, in which new possibilities are accompanied by heightened attention to perceived risks. Similar patterns have been observed in media coverage of other technological innovations, where risk narratives often dominate early reporting (de Saint-Laurent, 2024). The subsequent stabilization may indicate a gradual normalization of dating app use, though it is accompanied by concerns that this technology is making people lonelier.

Other themes evolved differently. Coverage of stigma and business declined over time, suggesting that social judgment around participation and fascination with technological novelty diminished as online dating became mainstream. In contrast, the Superficial/Unreal category increased after 2009, with headlines focusing on burnout, disillusionment, and the perceived gamification of relationships. These shifts suggest a transition from moral stigma to concerns around technology and social and relational well-being.

Taken together, these patterns align with prior international findings emphasizing deception, safety risks, and criminality in media coverage (Albury et al., 2020; Rosewarne, 2016), yet the longitudinal analysis demonstrates that these frames intensify and evolve across phases of technological normalization and societal changes. From a framing perspective, repeated exposure to risk-oriented narratives may

contribute to the stabilization of online dating as a morally ambiguous and emotionally precarious domain, even as participation increases. This reporting frame may contribute to users' dissatisfaction and expectations regarding the apps and may further influence non-app users' readiness to engage with them.

Answering the **second research question** on evaluative tone and its development over time, we found that overall negativity has increased, even as online dating has become normalized. Alarmist headlines such as "It's as addictive as gambling, how dating apps have ruined a generation's love lives" exemplify this evaluative framing. Themes of deception, superficiality, and relational instability persisted in recent years, despite research suggesting that fears that dating apps undermine commitment are empirically unsupported. Hobbs et al. (2017), for example, found that dating app users continue to value genuine intimacy and meaningful relationships.

These framing tendencies should be taken seriously, as they contribute to the marginalization of online dating and to the negative representations of relationships formed through it. Sharabi and Dorrance-Hall (2024) reported lower marital satisfaction among couples who met online and linked this difference to social pressure and persistent negative perceptions surrounding online dating. At the same time, media interpretations of the same finding (Sales, 2023) attribute this effect to the design and logic of dating apps themselves. This contrast illustrates how media narratives can privilege technological explanations of relational outcomes, even when empirical research indicates the importance of social context and stigma.

Our findings align with similar discourses on the negative impact of social media on youth mental health, which is often amplified by news media constructing a narrative of dysfunction around social media use (Stern & Odland, 2017). Empirical studies continue to challenge this perspective, including a survey of UK teens that found

that the majority reported minimal negative impacts of social media use across various domains, with some even highlighting positive effects on relationships and education (Mgekn et al., 2021). While social technologies may not inherently foster higher-quality relationships, they do expand opportunities for connection. Ultimately, relational and social challenges are complex, and attributing blame to technology risks oversimplifying processes that are shaped by broader cultural, structural, and interpersonal dynamics.

The **third research question,** on the most prominently represented populations, found that women emerged as the most frequently discussed group, both in crime coverage as victims and in advice articles, where they were more than twice as likely to be directly addressed. Through this gendered visibility, women are discursively positioned as both primary participants in and managers of relational risk, disproportionally assigning emotional labor and relational responsibility to them. The emphasis on women as vulnerable victims in crime narratives, coupled with their prominence as recipients of advice, constructs femininity as both endangered and responsible for navigating risk.

In contrast, older adults were underrepresented, and LGBTQ+ representation was significantly underreported relative to their above-average use of dating apps. Notably, reports on homosexual victims appeared primarily after 2015, coinciding with the legalization of same-sex marriage in Ireland, highlighting how shifts in legal and cultural recognition may influence media visibility of specific groups. Still, they were most likely to report harassment from dating apps (63.4% versus 43.4% non-LGBTQ+; Albury et al., 2020), a trend that has not been proportionally captured in the reports on Fraud and Crime.

The **fourth research question** explored associations between evaluative tone, thematic framing, and gender representation. Tone was significantly associated with

thematic category but not with gender focus. Crime-related coverage was predominantly negative, whereas business articles displayed comparatively positive framing, suggesting a monetary appeal and advertising this form of dating in a positive light. Advice and Testimonies showed more balanced distributions, perhaps because they are broader and capture a greater variety of experiences. A more positive tone in Stigma articles highlights that stigma has diminished, and that the audience is invited to pursue their relational needs without feeling inadequate.

The absence of a significant association between tone and gender suggests that negativity is primarily driven by thematic framing rather than by the gender of those discussed. However, the interaction between theme and gender remains meaningful: women are disproportionately positioned within negatively framed crime narratives and prescriptive advice texts.

5.9.1 Advice as a Cultural Script for Online Dating

The **fifth research question** examined how advice-oriented texts articulate normative expectations. Through qualitative analysis of articles as key sites for negotiating competing cultural values, three interrelated patterns emerged: persistent relational tensions, gendered positioning of users, and the central role of emotions.

First, advice discourse was structured by a **tension** between opportunity and risk, and between authenticity and strategic self-presentation. Approximately three-quarters of advice focused on finding love, navigating relationships, and optimizing self-presentation, while a substantial proportion emphasized safety and fraud prevention. This dual orientation constructs online dating simultaneously as a space of romantic possibility and as a domain requiring vigilance. Rather than evaluating online dating as either positive or negative, media representations frame it as an ambivalent social practice that requires continuous, reflexive management by users.

Normative expectations were particularly visible in guidance on self-presentation and desirability. Articles portrayed the traits of the ‘successful’ online dater in terms of status, appearance, personality, and independence, while simultaneously promoting authenticity, thereby reinforcing the tension between being oneself and strategically curating a marketable identity. This tension resonates with relational dialectics theory, which conceptualizes relationships as constituted through ongoing negotiations between opposing yet interdependent demands (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In the context of online dating, in the early stages of relational development, these tensions manifest as a focus on self-presentation, self-management, and self-regulation, while the parallel emphasis on authenticity sets moral and emotional limits on excessive curation. At the same time, the coupling of these relational tensions with safety advice reflects cultural concerns about the capacity of digitally mediated encounters to foster meaningful intimacy and about the risks associated with using technology to initiate such interactions.

Second, this normative guidance was also **gendered**. Although much advice was framed as universal, explicitly targeted content was directed predominantly at women, positioning them as responsible for managing relational progress and personal safety. This pattern complements the quantitative finding that women are more visible in media coverage and are discursively constructed as the primary managers of relational risk and labor. Women are expected to lower standards, select wisely, and remain careful. In contrast, advice for men more often emphasized effort, persistence, and maximizing opportunities. While it is not possible to determine from the present data whether this gendered targeting reflects differences in readership, assumed audience interests, or editorial conventions, these findings point to how newspapers construct an implied reader and distribute relational responsibility within that imagined audience.

Third, **emotions** play a central role in shaping advice and influencing how online dating is represented. Emotional appeals often target feelings of threat, pity, exhaustion, and longing for connection. On the one hand, singles are portrayed as 'vulnerable lonely hearts,' with messages like 'There is no shame in advertising your singleness' (Ingle, 2004), implying that being single might be undesirable or incomplete. On the other hand, contradictory messages promote independence and confidence, encouraging singles to embrace self-sufficiency even as they pursue romantic relationships. Humor often softens these emotional discourses, balancing the harsh realities of dating with levity. For example, one article quips, 'So, you're dating - it's brutal out there', and 'If you wait to meet someone in the traditional manner, you will die alone and be eaten by your cats' (Harrington, 2018). These humorous observations presuppose the frustrations and pressures of modern dating while creating a more digestible and relatable commentary. Through these emotional frames, advice discourse positioned online dating as a domain requiring not only practical competence but also continuous emotional self-regulation.

5.10 Limitations

This study analyzes media texts rather than audience reception, so it cannot determine how different population groups engage with newspaper content or how readers interpret and evaluate these representations. Future research that combines content analysis with audience studies would provide a stronger basis for assessing how media frames are taken up, negotiated, or resisted in everyday experience. Nevertheless, repeated exposure to such narratives contributes to the symbolic environment in which individuals make sense of online dating, even when they do not fully endorse these representations.

A second limitation concerns the difficulty of disentangling media negativity from broader societal anxieties about intimacy, technology, and shifting relationship

norms. The present study documents patterns in media coverage but cannot determine whether negative framing is specific to online dating or reflects a broader tendency in news reporting to privilege risk, conflict, and moral concern. At the same time, the recurring tone and distinctive language associated with particular themes suggest that online dating is often positioned as a uniquely problematic pursuit, indicating that this pattern may extend beyond general news negativity.

Finally, the analysis of advice texts focuses on their discursive content and normative orientation rather than on patterns of access and use. It therefore remains unclear which audiences seek out advice, how frequently such content is consulted, and how it informs actual dating practices. Addressing these questions would require complementary research on media consumption and user experience.

5.11 Conclusion

By combining longitudinal content analysis with a qualitative examination of advice, this study showed that Irish newspapers construct online dating as an ambivalent practice shaped by the simultaneous promise of connection, the management of risk, and, arguably, unwarranted fears about technology's detrimental role in close relationships. Although dating apps are frequently associated with deception, superficiality, and crime, they are also presented as enabling intimacy and expanding relational opportunities, particularly for those facing structural or social constraints. These findings suggest that media discourse does not simply reflect technological change but actively organizes public understanding of contemporary intimacy.

The results also have implications for public discourse and online daters. The persistent emphasis on negative outcomes risks reinforcing simplified causal links between technological change and broader concerns about loneliness, relationship instability, and declining social cohesion. A more balanced media approach would recognize that such challenges are shaped by wider cultural transformations rather than

by technology alone. Moreover, such frames may adversely shape users' experience, particularly in areas where there is an absence of empirical or epidemiological evidence of harm. While contemporary dating practices, coupled with a money-driven technological design, present unique and often complex challenges, the exploration of these issues should not be driven by bias or by simplified attributions of blame to technology.

Chapter 6:

Implicit Associations in Online Dating

This chapter is adapted from:

Pilek, M., & de Saint-Laurent, C. (under review). Do we love or hate Tinder? Exploring implicit associations in online dating through the story completion method. *Journal of Social Psychology.*

6.1 Chapter Preface

Study 3 addresses the contradiction observed in the two previous studies between individuals' growing use of and benefits from online dating apps and the persisting negativity and concerns surrounding these apps. People seem to endorse dating apps yet draw on culturally dominant narratives that implicitly privilege certain forms of relationship initiation over others. By eliciting participants' narrative continuations of relationships initiated through different forms (e.g., in-person, Tinder, and internet-based online groups), we can capture cultural scripts that shape what is considered risky, authentic, or real in relationships. In doing so, Study 3 examines whether ambivalence expressed in lived experiences (Study 1) and negativity dominating public discourse (Study 2) reflect broader implicit associations, or whether dating apps are now understood as a viable and legitimate mode of relationship initiation.

Abstract

Online dating is increasingly used to form romantic relationships but remains negatively portrayed in public and academic discourse. This study examines the implicit representations of relationships initiated through online dating apps and compares them to those of traditional and other online methods. In a between-subjects experiment using a story completion method, participants (N = 573) were presented with scenarios varying by the method of relationship initiation (e.g., in-person, dating app Tinder, online writing group). They continued the stories and evaluated the relationships in terms of quality, outcomes, and duration. Results revealed a significant difference in perceived relationship quality. Relationships initiated in online groups were rated more negatively than those formed in person or via Tinder-assisted in-person dates. However, no significant differences were observed in positive evaluations or relationship duration across initiation methods. Notably, Tinder-initiated relationships showed no negative associations. These findings underscore increasing societal acceptance of online dating while highlighting persistent biases against specific online contexts.

Keywords: online dating, online relationships, online forum, story-completion task, social representations

6.2 Introduction

Online dating has revolutionized the way romantic relationships begin, evolving from personal ads and early matchmaking sites in the 1990s into a global phenomenon driven by mobile and location-based apps (Matthews, 2023). Today, with over 300 million users worldwide (Statista, 2024b), online dating has evolved from a niche activity to a common and accepted means of connecting with others. In the United States, for instance, more than half of single individuals have used online dating, demonstrating how deeply it has become part of contemporary life and relationship habits (Matthews, 2023). Its rapid growth has not only changed the way people meet but also sparked broad discussions about intimacy, risk, and authenticity in modern relationships.

Despite its widespread use, skepticism and stigma have accompanied its expansion. In the early days, online daters were often viewed as desperate, deviant, or socially awkward (Cali et al., 2013; Peris et al., 2002), and concerns about health, safety, addiction, and problematic use still persist (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2021). Negative narratives often overshadow potential benefits, depicting online dating as risky and associated with superficial or fleeting connections. Over time, however, as online dating became the main way to start relationships (Rosenfeld, 2019), the stigma decreased, and the benefits – such as accessibility, inclusivity, and the ability to build meaningful connections – became more recognized (Wiederhold, 2020).

Yet ambivalence remains. Even as user experiences and attitudes have generally become more positive (Pew Research Centre, 2023), studies continue to show that online-initiated relationships are often judged less favorably than those formed face-to-face or through other digital environments (Johanis et al., 2024; Pilek & de Saint-Laurent, 2024; Selterman & Gideon, 2022). Given its widespread use and changing perceptions, key questions arise: What are our current views of online dating and the

relationships it creates? Has it become more accepted, or do doubts and biases still exist? Are relationships formed through dating apps considered equal to those in person or through other digital means?

Building on Study 1, which examined lived experiences of online dating and the shifting salience of technology across relationship stages, and Study 2, which mapped dominant Irish newspaper framings of online dating, Study 3 examines a third level: culturally available, often implicit expectations about relationships initiated via different modes. Using a story completion method allows us to explore representations that may not be fully captured through direct self-report, and to compare dating apps with other online and offline initiation contexts. By analyzing how participants judge fictional characters' relationships in different settings – such as in-person, online writing groups, Tinder-only, and hybrid modes – the study aims to identify both obvious and subtle societal perceptions of online dating.

6.3 Evolving Representations of Online Dating

Like many new technologies, online dating initially raised significant concerns and criticisms, affecting perceptions of the self, relationships formed online, and dating practices overall. Early research on attitudes and beliefs about online romantic relationships and dating sites showed mostly negative views and a sense of stigma (Anderson, 2005). People who looked for partners online were often seen as desperate, deviant, shy, socially awkward, or mainly interested in casual sex (Peris et al., 2002). Worries about dishonesty and misrepresentation were also common (Gibbs et al., 2006), and many, especially those without direct experience with online dating, considered the practice risky and untrustworthy (Anderson, 2005).

While the stigma has decreased with the increased use of online dating (Dinh et al., 2018), negative portrayals still exist. Recent discussions highlight the commodification of love (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022), where relationships are

negatively impacted by the efficiency and rationality typical of dating apps. These apps are also frequently linked to a hook-up culture (Timmermans & De Caluwe, 2017) and accused of diminishing human bonds (Bauman, 2003). Some even claim that Tinder users tend to report a higher need for sex and more sexual partners (Shapiro et al., 2017). Such concerns are reflected in the media's growing negativity toward online dating and its focus on the superficial nature of relationships formed online (Author, under review). Additionally, these worries seem to resonate even among younger generations, who criticize the dehumanizing and addictive aspects of online dating (Pilek & de Saint-Laurent, 2024).

Risks associated with dating apps continue to be a significant focus in much of the literature, which may explain why negative social perceptions persist (Castro & Barrada, 2020). Dating apps have been linked to compulsive use and addiction (Hu & Rui, 2023), risky sexual behavior, and sexual harassment – particularly among younger women and sexual minorities (Badal, 2018; Gillet, 2018). However, many of these risks are similar to those encountered offline, with dating apps arguably making them more visible rather than causing them. Public and scholarly discussions often tend to attribute causality, though. For example, regarding risky sexual practices, Albury et al. (2020) mention ongoing speculation about a causal link between dating app use and the increase in sexually transmitted diseases, despite the lack of empirical evidence supporting such a connection.

Yet, despite widespread concerns, empirical research has often painted a more balanced picture. Early work already suggested that individuals who date online are socially skilled and active internet users who view an online medium as an additional avenue for finding love (Kim et al., 2009). Although fears about the commodification of love and the dominance of hookup dating app culture are prevalent, studies consistently show that these fears are unfounded. More recent research has demonstrated that dating

app users have diverse motivations, including self-exploration, seeking sexual connections, and gathering information (Sumter et al., 2017), while the majority continue to value love and seek long-term commitment (Hobbs et al., 2017; Langlais & Lee, 2025). Likewise, contrary to popular assumptions about deception and inauthenticity, most misrepresentations online are minor, and users value authenticity as they strive to balance idealized and genuine self-presentation in their profiles (Gibbs et al., 2006; Pilek & de Saint-Laurent, 2024).

As dating apps have become mainstream, their affordances – such as availability, mobility, and access to a large pool of potential partners – have been shown to make dating more convenient and efficient, particularly for those from marginalized groups (Goldenberg, 2019). They also accommodate increasingly busy lifestyles, allowing individuals to seek partners regardless of location or the need for physical presence, such as attending bars or parties (Zhou, 2023). Moreover, dating apps enable users to connect with others who share common interests and preferences, allowing them to learn about potential partners in advance and gauge compatibility, relationship goals, values, and personal characteristics before meeting offline (Dredge & Anderson, 2021). By 2019, nearly 40% of couples had met online, surpassing any other method of meeting a partner (Rosenfeld, 2019).

Despite the increasing use and benefits of dating apps, many individuals report that modern dating has become more challenging, particularly in terms of harassment and the difficulty of finding compatible partners (Pew Research Centre, 2020). Notably, many of these fears and negative perceptions stem from individuals with little to no direct experience with dating apps (Pew Research Center, 2023). What is striking is that even when people report comparable experiences across online and offline contexts, they nevertheless evaluate dating apps more negatively. Selterman and Gideon (2022) found that, although people assess online and offline dating similarly in terms of

attraction, partner perception, and dating behavior, they expressed more negativity towards online dating. Moreover, their willingness to use dating apps depended on their perception of whether their friends and others use them, pointing to the role of social representations in sustaining ambivalence.

In addition, fatigue has become a commonly reported issue, with some users seeking alternative forms of connection on platforms such as Instagram, which are perceived to facilitate more authentic interactions (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2025; Suenzo, 2024). Long-term relational consequences have also been debated. Early evidence suggested that couples who met online had more lasting marriages (Cacioppo et al., 2013), but more recent studies indicate the opposite (Hu et al., 2024). Sharabi and Dorrance-Hall (2024) further found that marriages among couples who met online were less satisfying and less enduring compared to those who met offline, suggesting that broader societal marginalization of online-initiated relationships may help explain these differences. Such perceptions matter, since negative beliefs about dating apps and the relationships they foster can diminish satisfaction and commitment, shaping how online-initiated relationships are evaluated and sustained.

Two important issues remain underexplored in the literature. First, most studies focus either on explicit attitudes toward online dating or on direct relationship outcomes, without capturing the discrepancy between what people say about dating apps and how they experience and feel about them. Second, research on the initiation of romantic relationships online has predominantly centered on dating apps, overlooking how such methods are perceived in comparison to other online environments. Some studies suggest that perceptions differ depending on the medium through which relationships are initiated. For example, participants in Pilek and de Saint-Laurent's (2024) study reported that dating apps were seen as a less natural way of meeting people than more serendipitous forms of connection, such as through interest groups, forums,

or gaming environments, suggesting that bias may stem from the intentionality of seeking love. Similarly, Johanis et al. (2024) found that individuals who meet partners online are often evaluated more negatively, particularly those who use social media, compared to those who meet through more traditional means. By contrast, Suenzo (2024), studying a queer sample, found that many individuals deliberately shifted their dating interactions to Instagram, associating it with more authentic and less scripted encounters.

These studies suggest that negative perceptions of online-initiated relationships may be influenced more by the medium through which they begin, as well as by whether the meeting is perceived as intentional partner-seeking or as a more serendipitous connection. To explore this further, the current study compares different ways of starting interactions, focusing on two types of online interaction: Tinder, the most popular dating app, and an online writing group, which provides a more chance-based environment where people connect through shared interests rather than actively seeking a partner. Research shows that interest-based settings can promote trust, openness, and a feeling of belonging (e.g., Baym, 2010). To make a direct comparison with offline situations, we also included a writing workshop where two people meet face-to-face. This design helps us determine whether biases come from online settings in general, from dating apps specifically, or from the difference between intentional partner-seeking and chance encounters.

This study aimed to explore implicit representations of how different modes of relationship initiation influence the perceived quality, anticipated outcomes, and estimated duration of relationships. Using the story completion method, it examines ***how participants continue relationship scenarios and evaluate the relationships based on various initiation contexts, including in-person, Tinder, Tinder-assisted in-person dates, and online communities.***

We hypothesized that the mode of relationship initiation would significantly influence perceptions of relationship quality, future outcomes, and estimated duration. Specifically, (1a) relationships initiated in person were expected to be evaluated as having the highest quality, better outcomes, and longer durations. Conversely, (1b) those initiated through Tinder without transitioning in person were anticipated to be perceived the least favorably. Additionally, (1c) relationships initiated within online communities were predicted to be evaluated more positively than those initiated via Tinder or Tinder-assisted in-person dates. Lastly, (1d) relationships transitioning from Tinder to in-person interactions were expected to be perceived more positively than those that remain exclusively on Tinder but less positively than those initiated through online communities or in-person interactions.

6.4 Methods

6.4.1 Preregistration and Ethical Approval

This study was preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/c4w6-6hfb.pdf. Ethical approval was obtained from the Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee. All participants received information sheets outlining the study's aims, procedures, potential risks and benefits, measures, and plans for dissemination (see Appendix E).

6.4.2 Participants

Participants were recruited through the Prolific platform, an online research platform based in the United Kingdom. To control for the characters' story locations, eligibility was restricted to participants registered in the United Kingdom; however, we could not independently verify participants' actual locations. Participants were compensated at £6 per hour, a standard Prolific rate; given an estimated completion time of 10 minutes, each participant received approximately £1. Participants were

informed that the study focused on people's experiences developing romantic relationships. Data were collected in October 2024.

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the required sample size for a one-way ANOVA with four groups. To detect a small-to-medium effect size ($f = 0.20$) with 90% power at an alpha level of .05, the required sample size was 360 participants. The target was met, with a final sample of 573 participants. A total of 642 individuals participated in the study. In line with the preregistration, participants who failed both attention checks (N = 69) were excluded. The attention checks consisted of a simple factual question ('The Sun is revolving around the Earth') and an instruction-based item ("It is important that you pay attention to this survey. Please select 'Agree'"), both designed to ensure attentiveness and motivation.

The final sample (N = 573) consisted of 282 men, 285 women, four non-binary participants, and two participants who did not disclose their gender (see Appendix F). The average age of participants is M = 32.96 years (SD = 7.16). In terms of sexual orientation, the majority identified as heterosexual (n = 481), with smaller groups identifying as bisexual (n = 55), homosexual (n = 24), or other (n = 9); a few participants preferred not to disclose their orientation (n = 4). Regarding dating app use, 79 participants were current users. For past use, over half the sample reported either never using dating apps (n = 79) or using them very rarely (n = 200). The remainder indicated occasional or sometimes use. In terms of experiences with dating apps, the majority described their experiences as neutral or somewhat positive/negative, with fewer than 10% reporting either very positive or very negative experiences.

6.4.3 Design

This was a between-subject 1x4 experimental design, where participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (1) meeting on Tinder (*n* = 145: *M* = 70, *F*

= 74, and preferred not say = 1), (2) online writing group (*n* = 144: *F* = 71, *M* = 71, non-binary = 1, and preferred not say = 1), (3) meeting in person (*n* = 136: *F* = 66, *M* = 70)), and (4) Tinder-assisted date in person (*n* = 148: F = 74, *M* = 71, non-binary = 3).

6.4.4 Materials

Story Stems

The design of the story stems was informed by the work of Kitzinger and Powell (1995) and Clarke et al. (2019). This approach is based on the premise that participants project their hidden motives, feelings, and thoughts onto the stimuli, providing deeper insights into their perceptions and responses. The stories were crafted in the third person to depict scenarios where characters developed feelings for one another. However, intentional ambiguity was introduced regarding the relationship's further development and geographical distance, allowing participants to interpret the situation in their own way.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four versions of a story-completion task. Each story stem depicted one of four distinct means of initiating a romantic relationship, with both male and female versions for each scenario. This allowed for comparisons of relationship quality, outcomes, and duration under different conditions: (1) Online Community: Characters meet through an interest-based online group, (2) Tinder Only: Characters connect exclusively through the Tinder app, (3) Characters meet in-person, representing traditional, offline relationship initiation, (4) Tinder-Assisted In-Person Date: Characters connect initially on Tinder and arrange their first date in person, blending online and offline elements. Although we did not include gender as a variable, each story was presented in a male and female version, with half of the participants seeing a female and the other half a male version to ensure balance.

An example of a story stem:

Maya, a 28-year-old writer from London, joins an online creative community to connect with fellow writers and artists. There, she meets Adam, a 30-year-old artist from Birmingham, and they quickly bond over their shared love for storytelling and artistic expression.

As Maya and Adam discuss ideas for stories and character development, Maya discovers an admiration for Adam's creativity and passion for art. Their interactions extend beyond the forum as they exchange messages, emails, and handwritten letters, sharing personal anecdotes, artistic inspirations, and literary recommendations.

Maya finds herself drawn to Adam's imagination, wit, and vulnerability, leading to deep and intimate conversations about their life experiences and philosophical thoughts.

Over six weeks of constant communication, Maya and Adam realized they had developed feelings for each other.

Each version of the story was designed to maintain a comparable structure and level of commitment, differing only in the medium through which the characters initiated their relationship. The remaining stories can be found in supplementary materials (see Appendix G).

Relationship outcomes measures

Participants were asked to evaluate the story character's relationship on three key aspects: relationship quality, the likelihood of positive and negative outcomes, and the estimated duration of the relationship in days, months, or years.

The ‘Likelihood of Possible Outcomes’ scale consisted of five questions on a 5-point Likert scale, three assessing negative outcomes and two assessing positive outcomes (e.g., ‘Maya and Adam never met in person and after a while realized that their connection was more of a fantasy than reality’). The ’Relationship Quality’ scale included four questions on a 5-point Likert scale, with two measuring positive aspects

and two measuring negative aspects (e.g., 'Maya is at risk of falling victim to fraud'). Both series of questions included attention checks outlined above. These items were developed explicitly for this study, informed by previous research on online dating representations (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2006; Hobbs et al., 2017; Pilek & de Saint-Laurent, 2024; Sevi, 2019). While these scales have not previously been validated as standardized instruments, the item development process prioritized content and face validity. Items were designed to reflect themes that have consistently emerged in the literature, including concerns about authenticity, safety, and emotional fulfillment.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test supported the factorability of the item pool (KMO = 0.71, Bartlett's $p < .001$) for the relationship outcomes scale. Exploratory factor analysis indicated a two-factor structure distinguishing negative and positive relational dimensions. Although the exploratory factor analysis did not yield a strongly distinct factor structure for relationship quality items, the conceptual distinction between positive and negative relational quality is well-grounded in theory and prior research. Given some empirical indication of item clustering alongside theoretical relevance, positive and negative quality were treated as separate subscales in analyses. This decision facilitates interpretability and is consistent with established practice when measuring complex relational constructs.

Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the resulting subscales was moderate to acceptable in the present sample: $\alpha = .744$ for Negative Outcomes, $\alpha = .561$ for Positive Outcomes, $\alpha = .628$ for Negative Quality, and $\alpha = .505$ for Positive Quality. Consistent with reporting guidelines, we note that the moderate to low alphas, particularly for the positive subscales, may reflect construct breadth, diverse item content, or limited item numbers; thus, findings pertaining to these subscales should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

6.4.5 Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in a survey on modern romantic relationships and were asked to consent. They were then randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions, where they read a story about a male and female character at the beginning of a romantic relationship. Participants were instructed to write a continuation of the story in at least 30 words.

After completing the story continuation, participants evaluated the quality of the character's relationship and the likelihood of positive and negative outcomes and provided an estimated duration of the relationship (in days, months, or years).

Finally, participants answered demographic questions, including their age, gender, sexual orientation, relationship status, past and present dating app use frequency, and evaluative experiences.

6.5 Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using the Python statistical package.

To assess the effects of relationship initiation context on perceived relationship outcomes, quality, and duration, one-way ANOVAs were employed.

Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were tested using the Shapiro–Wilk and Levene's tests, respectively. In cases where assumptions were violated, non-parametric alternatives (e.g., Kruskal–Wallis H test) were applied. Post-hoc comparisons were conducted using Tukey's HSD test.

Exploratory ANCOVA models were used to control for the influence of dating app use (past, current, and subjective experience) on outcome variables.

Text data from the story completion task were analyzed using computer-assisted text analysis tools in Python to identify common words, underlying themes, sentiment, and emotional classifications. Prior to analysis, the text underwent preprocessing, including duplicate removal, cleaning, and tokenization. Emotional content was

classified using DistilRoBERTa, a pre-trained natural language processing model that assigns text to Ekman's basic emotion categories (anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, and neutral). Chi-square tests were used to assess differences in emotional tone between groups. Sentiment and topic proportions were also analyzed and are reported in the supplementary materials.

6.6 Results

6.6.1 Direct Measures: Relationship Outcomes

The reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The scale for Positive Outcomes demonstrated low reliability ($\alpha = 0.527$), while the Negative Outcomes scale showed decent reliability ($\alpha = 0.744$). Descriptive statistics, including means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*), are summarized in Table 6.1.

We tested the normality of the distributions using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated that both Positive Outcomes ($W = 0.91$, $p < .001$) and Negative Outcomes (W = 0.98, $p < .001$) deviate significantly from normality. However, Levene's test confirmed the homogeneity of variances for both Positive Outcomes ($W = 0.37$, $p = 0.773$) and Negative Outcomes ($W = 0.62$, $p = 0.604$), allowing us to proceed with ANOVA.

A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant effects of the experimental conditions on evaluating positive or negative relationship outcomes (see Table 6.1 for full results).

Table 6.1

Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA Results for Positive and Negative Relationship Outcomes

Measure	Experimental Condition				Group differences
	In-person *M (SD)*	Online *M (SD)*	Tinder *M (SD)*	Tinder+ met *M (SD)*	
Positive Outcomes	3.89 (0.71)	3.83 (0.69)	3.8 (0.70)	3.74 (0.71)	F (3, 569) = 1.11, p =.343, ηp^2 = .006
Negative Outcomes	2.75 (0.93)	2.89 (0.92)	2.87 (0.87)	2.84 (0.95)	F (3, 569) = .596, p = .717, ηp^2= .003

Stories with different mediums for relationship initiation yielded no significant effect on the participants' evaluation of possible outcomes. Hence, we cannot reject the null hypothesis.

6.6.2 Direct Measures: Relationship Quality

The reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The Positive Quality scale demonstrated low reliability (α = 0.461, while the Negative Quality scale showed acceptable reliability (α = 0.635). Descriptive statistics, including means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*), are summarized in Table 6.2.

We tested the normality of the distributions using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated significant deviations from normality for both Positive Quality (W = 0.91, p < .001) and Negative Quality (W = 0.95, p < .001). However, Levene's test confirmed the homogeneity of variances for both Positive Quality (W = 0.69, p = 0.554) and Negative Quality (W = 0.62, p = .603), allowing us to proceed with ANOVA.

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant effects of the experimental conditions on evaluating negative relationship quality but not on positive relationship quality. The results are summarized in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2

Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA Results for Positive and Negative Relationship Quality

Measure	Experimental Condition				Group differences
	In-person *M (SD)*	Online *M (SD)*	Tinder *M (SD)*	Tinder+ met *M (SD)*	
Positive Quality	3.76 (0.71)	3.75 (0.74)	3.82 (0.67)	3.63 0.72)	F (3,569) = 1.81, p = .144, ηp^2 = .009
Negative Quality	2.46 (0.81)	2.85 (0.76)	2.65 (0.78)	2.63 (0.76)	F (3.569) = 6.01, ***p* <.001**, ηp^2=.031

A Tukey's HSD post-hoc test was conducted to identify specific differences between experimental conditions. A significant difference was found between the In-person and Online Community conditions ($M_{diff} = 00.$391, p < .001). These findings suggest that relationships in the online community were rated as having the most negative qualities. At the same time, perceptions of negativity decreased in scenarios involving in-person interactions. However, no significant difference was found between the online community and Tinder-only conditions, indicating that participants perceived similar levels of negative relationship quality in these two scenarios.

6.6.3 Indirect Measures: Relationship Duration

We tested the normality of the distribution and the homogeneity of variances for relationship duration, which was standardized and converted into months. The Shapiro-Wilk test indicated significant deviations from normality (W = 0.54, p < .001), but Levene's test confirmed the homogeneity of variances (W = 2.39, p = .068), allowing us to proceed with ANOVA. Descriptive statistics and ANOVA results are summarized in Table 7.3.

Table 6.3

Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA Results for Relationship Durations

Measure	Experimental Condition				Group differences
Months	In-person *M (SD)*	Online *M (SD)*	Tinder *M (SD)*	Tinder+ met *M (SD)*	
	92.81 (171.98)	69.58 (137.35)	74.18 (162.96)	118.65 (221.76)	F (3, 569) = 2.33 p = .073; ηp^2 = .012

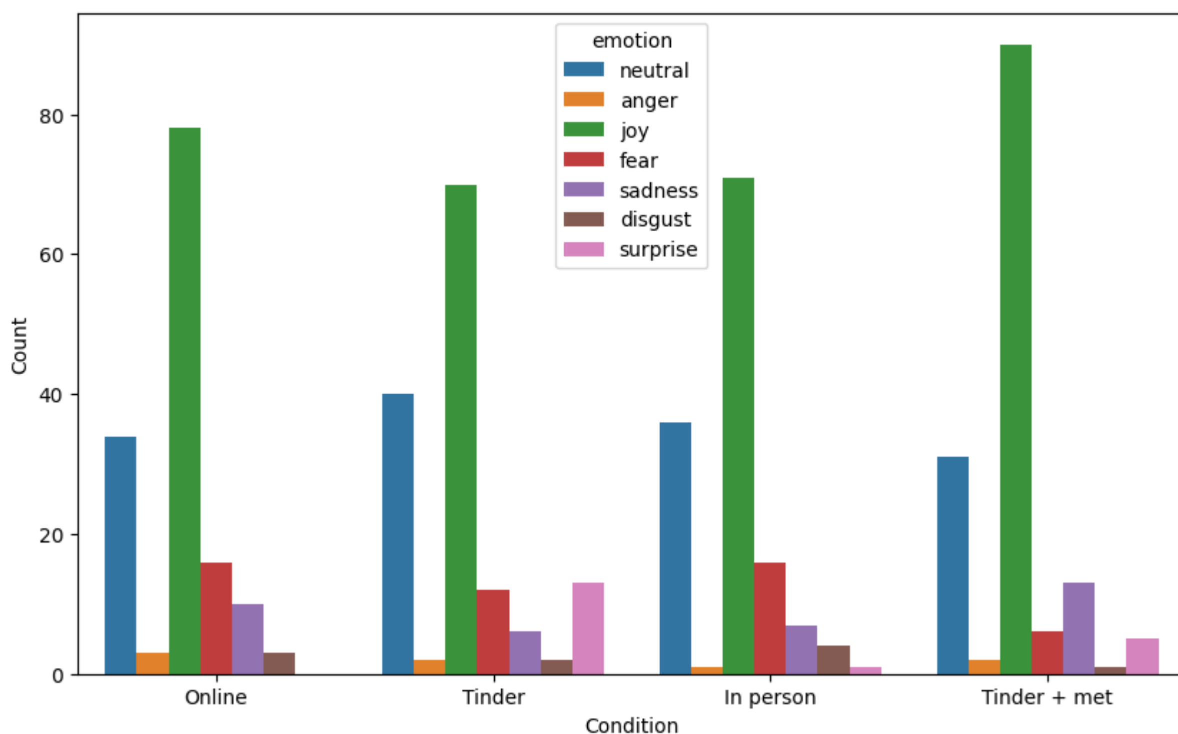
Experimental conditions had no significant effect on the estimated duration of relationships, so our hypothesis was not confirmed.

6.6.4 Story Stems

No significant differences were observed across conditions for overall sentiment or topic proportions (see Appendix H). However, the distribution of emotion categories differed significantly between conditions, $\chi^2(18) = 37.51$, p = .004 (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1

Emotion Distribution Across Conditions



The Chi-Square test was used to compare the frequencies of emotions across the different conditions. The test results showed a significant difference in emotion distribution between the conditions (χ^2 (18) = 37.51, p = .004). This suggests that the emotional tone of the stories varied significantly across the experimental groups.

The post-hoc analysis was conducted using standardized residuals to identify specific observations with significant deviations from the expected values, as the traditional Chi-Square test's assumptions were violated due to low counts in some groups. Standardized residuals with absolute values greater than 2 are considered significant. In this case, the only significant finding was the overrepresentation of 'Surprise' in Tinder stories, with a residual of 3.834, indicating that surprise occurs more frequently in Tinder stories than would be expected by chance. Other notable residuals, though not statistically significant, included the underrepresentation of 'Surprise' in Online stories (-1.883) and 'Disgust' in Tinder + met stories (-1.377), as well as 'Anger' in In-person stories (-1.317).

6.6.5 Exploratory Analyses

Relationship Measures

An item-by-item analysis was conducted to measure the specific effects of independent variables on dependent variables. This analysis was preregistered as exploratory. The results are presented in Table 6.4.

Significant results were found for the 'Fraud' and 'Fulfilling tech' items. For the Fraud item, a post-hoc Tukey analysis revealed significant pairwise differences among groups: In-person vs. Online (M_{diff} = 0.6, $p < 0.001$), In-person vs. Tinder (M_{diff} = 0.38, p = .005), and Online vs. Tinder + met (M_{diff} = -0.4, p = .002). These results indicate that participants in conditions where the characters had never met in person were more likely to perceive a risk of fraud. Importantly, this perception of risk was not tied to the specific online medium used.

A significant main effect also emerged for the item “With the help of technology, Maya and Adam can have a fulfilling relationship.” Post-hoc comparisons showed that participants in the Tinder condition rated this item significantly higher than those in the Tinder + met condition (Mdiff = –0.32, p = .012). This suggests that technology was seen as more central to relationship fulfillment when the characters’ interaction remained exclusively on Tinder.

Table 6.4

An Item-by-Item Analysis of Perceived Relationship Outcomes and Qualities

Items	Experimental Condition				Group Differences
Possible Outcomes	In-person *M (SD)*	Online *M (SD)*	Tinder *M (SD)*	Tinder + met *M (SD)*	
Not real	2.42 (1.18)	2.65 (1.17)	2.62 (1.14)	2.51 (1.17)	F (3, 569) = 1.17, p= .321, ηp^2=.01
Too far	3.04 (1.16)	3.08 (1.15)	3.17 (1.17)	3.16 (1.23)	F (3, 569)= 0.41, p=.748, ηp^2=.002
Moved city	3.75 (0.97)	3.56 (0.92)	3.57 (0.87)	3.56 (0.92)	F (3, 569) =1.4, p=.243, ηp^2=.011
Long distance	3.99 (0.781)	4.04 (0.78)	4.00 (0.81)	4.01 (0.77)	F (3, 569) = 1.24, p=.293, ηp^2= .001
Not honest	2.8 (1.07)	2.92 (0.98)	2.83 (1.08)	2.85 (1.05)	F (3, 569) = 0.36, p=.784, *η*p^2= .009
Relationship Quality					
Deep connection	3.71 (0.86)	3.77 (0.87)	3.76 (0.85)	3.70 (0.87)	F (3, 569) = 0.22 p=.885, ηp^2= 0.006
Hurt	2.64 (0.85)	2.83 (0.85)	2.65 (0.82)	2.78 (0.82)	F (3, 569) =1.78, p=.15, ηp^2=0.015
Fulfilling tech	3.82 (0.91)	3.73 (0.92)	3.89 (0.83)	3.57 (0.94)	F (3, 569) =3.44, **p=.017**, ηp^2= 0.011
Fraud	2.31 (0.97)	2.94 (0.95)	2.71 (0.92)	2.46 (0.99)	F (3, 569) =9.75, **p<.01**, ηp^2= 0.059

6.6.6 Experiences with Dating Apps

Analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were conducted to control for the effects of online dating experiences and past and present usage of dating apps on participants'

evaluations of relationship outcomes, quality, and duration. The significant findings were found for positive quality ($F(1,566) = 11.99$, $\boldsymbol{p = .001}$; $\eta p^2 = .029$), and negative quality ($F(1,566) = 4.18$, $\boldsymbol{p = .041}$; $\eta p^2 = .011$). The results of regression analysis showed that more negative experiences with dating apps were associated with lower ratings of positive quality and higher ratings of adverse outcomes. The results of these analyses are presented in the supplementary materials (Appendix H).

6.6.7 Exploratory analyses of gender

Exploratory ANCOVAs were conducted to examine whether participant gender and story-character gender influenced the main outcome variables. Participant gender did not have a significant effect on positive or negative outcomes or on relationship quality, and there were no significant interaction effects between participant gender and initiation condition. A small main effect of story-character gender emerged for negative outcomes, with higher perceived risk in stories featuring male characters. Full statistical outputs are reported in Appendix H.

6.7 Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the ongoing prevalence of negative representations of online dating in relation to relationship quality, outcomes, and duration. We hypothesized that relationships initiated through dating apps would be perceived as having lower quality, shorter duration, and more negative outcomes than those initiated in person or through other online methods. However, the data did not support this hypothesis.

Relationships initiated on dating apps were evaluated to have comparable quality to those started in person or through other online methods. The only significant difference emerged for negative quality between the in-person and online writing groups, with online conditions generally perceived as less satisfying. Even if the

relationships have not transitioned to in-person, as is the case with a Tinder-only condition, those relationships were not judged negatively. Item-level analyses further revealed that participants rated the usefulness of technology for sustaining relationships more positively in the Tinder-only condition. At the same time, across all online conditions, concerns about fraud were more pronounced than in in-person relationships. This suggests that although online relationships are perceived as riskier, concerns about deception are not tied to specific platforms but reflect the broader online environment.

These findings suggest a shift in societal representations of online dating. Although dating fatigue and disappointment are frequently reported (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2020, 2025; Suenzo, 2024), and stigma and stereotypes are still present (Johanis et al., 2024; Pilek & de Saint-Laurent, 2024), our findings show that many individuals nevertheless believe that Tinder relationships can be comparable to offline ones. This normalization may reflect the broader integration of dating apps into everyday life and relationships, as well as the recognition that such platforms can support successful relationships. It could also mean that the judgment was more closely tied to seeking love online (Johanis et al., 2024), or even in other settings (Knee, 1998), rather than the relationships themselves.

Importantly, our findings contribute to the growing recognition that the 'real impact' of online dating must be distinguished from how it is mentally and socially represented. While many studies suggest that people evaluate online and offline relationships similarly in terms of quality and dynamics, dating apps continue to be described more negatively or as less likely to lead to long-term relationships, even when users report direct positive experiences (Langlais et al., 2024; Selterman & Gideon, 2022). Social representations and acceptance play a crucial role in this context, as perceptions of dating apps are significantly influenced by cultural narratives and peer usage, rather than solely by personal experience. Sharabi and Dorrance-Hall (2024)

even suggest that there is a normative tendency to disapprove of relationships that begin online, reflecting negatively on the long-term impacts and relationship quality. By focusing on implicit representations, this study highlights how ambivalence persists beyond direct attitudes or outcomes. Even when participants did not consciously compare different modes of initiation, their narratives revealed how cultural scripts continue to shape evaluations of online dating beyond direct personal experience.

Exploratory analyses revealed that individuals who reported negative experiences with dating apps were more likely to evaluate online relationships negatively. This is consistent with prior findings that personal dissatisfaction often reinforces broader cultural stereotypes of online dating as risky or unfulfilling (e.g., Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2020).

Interestingly, despite an unexpectedly high number of individuals having no or minimal experience with dating apps, many did not evaluate Tinder relationships negatively. This suggests that dating apps are becoming increasingly normalized, even among those who have little firsthand engagement with them. One possible explanation is that positive narratives about dating apps, including stories of long-term relationships and marriages, are now more visible in culture, gradually offsetting earlier stigma. Another explanation is that participants may have drawn on broader social scripts that now portray online dating as a mainstream means of forming relationships.

One unexpected finding was that relationships formed via online forums were associated with a more negative quality than those formed via dating apps. This result contrasts with participants' reports in the Pilek & de Saint-Laurent (2024) study, where spontaneous interactions on forums were perceived as more authentic and genuine. One possible explanation is that forums, like social media platforms, are often used for purposes other than romantic relationships, leading such behaviors to be interpreted as inappropriate or harassing (Johanis et al., 2024). In contrast, dating apps are explicitly

designed to facilitate romantic relationships, potentially creating more unequivocal expectations and norms of behavior for users. This distinction may contribute to the more favorable evaluations of relationships formed through dating apps. It is also possible that the participants had a limited first-hand experience with these forums. Indeed, they are quite a niche, and while they are natural ways of meeting people for those participating in them, there might be an underlying suspicion about individuals who form relationships or look for relationships in that way. Also, a lack of clarity in relational intentions, often overshadowed by other priorities on these platforms, further complicates the establishment of clear expectations, potentially fueling skepticism or mixed evaluations of relationships formed through them.

Another noteworthy observation, though not statistically significant due to high data variability, is that relationships initiated through Tinder-assisted in-person dates had the longest estimated duration in months, followed by purely in-person relationships and Tinder-only relationships. These findings suggest a decreasing stigma associated with dating apps and the potential for longer-lasting relationships, indicating that this mode of relationship initiation is evaluated quite favorably.

Several possible explanations merit further exploration. First, as previously noted, meeting people through Tinder inherently involves an understanding that participants are seeking some kind of relationship, creating an environment that encourages directness. While concerns about hookup culture, fraud, or misrepresentation may be prevalent, meeting in person might alleviate some of these anxieties by enabling individuals to judge compatibility and provide security against potential deception. Additionally, dating apps often facilitate conversations about relational aspirations and expectations, which could guide relationship development. Suppose a mutual bond or compatibility is perceived, and the relationship transitions to in-person interactions. In that case, it might provide a stronger foundation, accompanied

by hopes or promises that the relationship could endure over the long term. However, given the lack of statistically significant findings, these interpretations should be approached with caution and warrant further investigation.

Finally, it is worth noting that participants tended to construct quite positive relationship narratives across all conditions. While the story stems allowed for varied outcomes, they often elicited optimistic continuations, suggesting that culturally familiar romantic scripts remain influential when imagining relationship development, regardless of initiation context. These narratives suggest a continued hold on values of commitment and long-term relationships. Despite the negative connotations often associated with Tinder – such as scams, harassment, and hookups - this way of meeting people did not significantly evoke such responses or carry those stigmas. The only notable difference was the presence of 'surprise' in online conditions, which may reflect lingering novelty, risk, or the serendipitous nature of online dating. These findings could suggest evolving dynamics in romantic expectations, where the unpredictability of online dating becomes part of its appeal.

6.8 Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, the predominantly positive tone of the story stems may have primed more favorable responses, potentially contributing to the generally optimistic relationship narratives observed across conditions.

Second, the sample was recruited via Prolific and was self-selected, which may limit generalizability. Participants on online research platforms are typically more digitally literate and may hold more favorable attitudes toward technology than the broader population. The mean age of the sample was 33 years, which may also reflect a group relatively accustomed to digital communication and online platforms. In addition, a substantial proportion of the sample reported little or no direct experience with dating apps, which may further reduce representativeness in relation to active users.

Third, as with many online text-based tasks, it was not possible to fully control how participants produced their story continuations; although attention checks and a minimum word requirement were used to encourage engagement, the potential use of external tools such as generative AI cannot be entirely ruled out.

Fourth, the scales for *Negative Outcomes* and *Positive Quality* demonstrated somewhat lower internal reliability, meaning that results based on these measures should be interpreted with caution. Importantly, we did not observe significant effects for these scales, which reduces the risk of Type I error. To strengthen our conclusions, we complemented scale-level analyses with item-by-item examinations. These exploratory analyses did not reveal systematic differences across conditions, except for the *fraud* and *fulfilling technology* items, which provided additional nuance beyond the aggregate scales.

The reliability issues may also stem from the multidimensional and complex nature of the construct, which includes various aspects such as emotional fulfillment, authenticity, and safety concerns. Instead of just a measurement limitation, these findings emphasize the broad theoretical scope of the construct and suggest that relational quality in online settings is multifaceted. This variability encourages future refinement of the scale and supports the need for multidimensional measurement methods that align with the growing complexity of modern relationships.

Fifth, our story stems featured heterosexual couples, which may not fully capture the experiences or perspectives of queer participants. While queer individuals were included in the sample, the lack of sexuality-specific scenarios limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized across diverse sexual orientations. Future studies should investigate these dynamics across diverse demographic groups and sexual orientations to capture a more inclusive picture of online relationship perceptions.

Future research could also explore how societal perceptions of online dating continue to evolve, particularly with the rise of emerging technologies like AI-assisted dating platforms. Understanding whether these technologies reinforce or challenge existing narratives about online relationships could provide valuable insights. Examining potential differences between stereotypes attached to individuals looking for love and relationships initiated this way can provide further insights into the persistence and eventual decline of stereotypes.

6.9 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that online dating apps are increasingly perceived as a legitimate and meaningful means of forming relationships. While concerns about hookup culture and risk remain salient in public and academic discourse, participants' representations suggest that relationships initiated through dating apps are evaluated as equally capable of fostering commitment, intimacy, and long-term potential as those that begin offline or in other online spaces.

At the same time, the more negative evaluations of relationships initiated in online forums highlight how cultural narratives and the design of specific platforms shape perceptions differently. The intentional design of dating apps, which emphasizes relational goals, facilitates communication and meetings in person, may help explain why they are represented more positively than other digital contexts.

Taken together, these findings suggest a cultural shift: dating apps are no longer viewed solely through the lens of risk or casual relationships but are increasingly integrated into broader romantic scripts. The predominance of positive story narratives, including the element of 'surprise' in the Tinder condition, underscores how apps are imagined as spaces where unexpectedly meaningful and rewarding relationships can emerge.

Chapter 7:

General Discussion

7.1 Overview of the Thesis

The primary aim of this thesis was to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals who engage in online dating. Beginning with an in-depth, person-centred approach, the thesis expanded its focus to examine broader public discourses and, finally, tested implicit associations individuals hold about different forms of relationship initiation.

To achieve this, the thesis presented three interconnected studies: 1) a qualitative interview study with 13 participants exploring close relationships, both romantic and platonic, developed and/or sustained online; 2) a media analysis investigating dominant representations and discourses surrounding online dating in Irish newspapers; 3) a story completion experiment examining the implicit assumptions and projected meanings associated with different modes of romantic initiation, including dating apps, online communities, and in-person encounters.

We begin by synthesizing and discussing the main findings, drawing on the theories and literature introduced in earlier chapters. We then present an integrative framework proposed to synthesize the key dimensions of technological mediation in relationships. We conclude with an outline of the study's limitations, the thesis's main contribution, and recommendations for future research.

7.2 Summary of the Findings

The first empirical study on online dating showed intense ambivalence and the polarized effects of technology in shaping relational experience amid the heavy reliance and benefits of its use. The four identified themes pointed to dialogical tensions in individuals' meaning-making and opposing perceptions of technology's role, which, on the one hand, facilitates connection, and, on the other, brings much negotiation, reflection of what is missing from their relational experience, and more broadly, what

constitutes closeness in modern society. This analysis also highlighted contradictions between participants' lived experiences and the more or less explicit societal voices that disapprove of, guide, or construct online dating in particular ways.

The second analysis of this study showed how these processes evolve across different relationship stages, highlighting the change in their relative importance at various moments. The meanings assigned to the medium, the experience of relating to others, and the perception of broader social voices all shifted over time, creating a dynamic interplay between acceptance, criticism, and negotiation of norms surrounding online relationships. For instance, establishing a connection online before meeting in person was considered necessary, but bonding too deeply or for too long before transitioning offline was judged as unrealistic or fantasy-like.

Study 2 also demonstrated an increasing normalization in public discourse, as evidenced by rising coverage, growing advice on how to date online, and efforts to push back against stigma. Yet, what stood out was a parallel rise in adverse reporting, marked by recurring concerns about the superficiality and dangers of online dating. Contradictions were also present in the advice offered. In one way, it encourages protection from harm, and in the other, it promotes success on widely criticized platforms. Broader concerns around smartphone dependence and overall fatigue with online dating were also evident.

In Study 3, using the story completion method, we found a negative association between relationships initiated on online forums and their perceived quality, though this was not the case for Tinder. The findings suggest that online dating has become normalized, and many people believe that it is possible to establish committed relationships on Tinder. Still, lingering negativity toward establishing relationships on online platforms continues to shape user experiences.

Together, these studies highlight the complexity of lived experiences, shaped by changing dynamics of acceptance, judgment, and the polarized effects of technology. They also connect individual and relational dimensions with technological mediation situated in a broader sociocultural and historical context. Several key themes emerge across the three studies, which we explore in more detail in the next section.

7.3 Thematic Synthesis

7.3.1 Tensions Surrounding Online Dating Technologies

In a review of affordances, we noted how technologies can pull users towards mutually opposing experiences by enabling something while taking away other aspects of the experience. This contradiction, the almost paradoxical nature of technology, has long attracted academic attention, particularly regarding the society and theory of technology (Arnold, 2003), culture and possibilities (de Saint-Laurent, 2024), close relationships (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004), and online dating (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2022). Technology has made relating easier, mitigated distance, improved access, and provided choice, yet it has also complicated relationships in unforeseen ways, bringing new challenges around closeness, intimacy, and risk that emerge from the very affordances meant to simplify what they are designed for.

Our studies provide several examples of the coexistence of contradictory elements. In Study 1, participants reflected on how online dating platforms made finding and approaching potential partners easier but also made it challenging to form meaningful connections. Many felt overwhelmed by the number of available users, but also not satisfied with the people they could meet and form relationships with. The repetitive cycle of browsing, hope, and disappointment was emotionally taxing, as individuals were unsure if they found a match or if someone better was just a swipe away. This dilemma, known as the paradox of choice (Schwartz, 2004), is widely

discussed in the literature on user experience (e.g., Apostolou, 2024; Thomas, 2023), leading to decision-making difficulties and emotional fatigue. Our findings align with these studies, as our participants find it difficult to filter and select others. One might like a person enough to match with them but not enough to seriously date them, yet a binary design that requires a quick decision to like or pass on a profile makes these decision-making processes more challenging.

The ease of making choices is also matched by the ease of rejection, which can be pronounced online, as users are constantly in a position where they are being accepted, liked, swiped, and asked out, creating pressure to maintain an attractive profile. In a way, rejections might seem less personal online, but they still impact users' confidence and satisfaction. When matches are so plentiful, the lack of interest can feel especially pointed. Our findings align with other research showing that these experiences can lead to resentment towards online dating, apps, and other daters, which, in turn, can create a negative self-fulfilling prophecy where negative expectations incite behaviors that confirm those initial expectations (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2025).

A commercial tension exists as dating platforms benefit from users remaining engaged longer, losing two customers for every successful match (Cicchirillo et al., 2025). Thus, there is an incentive to prolong the engagement, or account upgrades, which can be intensified through gamified design, including visually appealing interfaces, badges, matching notifications, and promises of connection. Even partially hidden information, for example, the number of users who have 'liked' a profile, can spark curiosity or an account upgrade. Yet while these designs aim to maximize attention and activity, users often describe them as shallow, manipulative, and frustrating, a tension also noted by Nader (2024).

The theme of the opposing workings of technology persisted in discussions of *connection* and proximity. Participants were excited to meet someone they felt was right

for them, only to discover they lived far away. Technology solved the issue of distance but also changed what we consider closeness. This paradox of bringing the distant near while keeping the close at arm's length is reflected in the work of Arnold (2003) and Ben-Ze'ev (2004) and was evident in participants' efforts to understand the essence and boundaries of intimacy. Several noted a complex tension between feeling anchored in their location while emotionally invested in those far away, with the increasing dependence on phones, apps, and the Internet. Constant digital availability has become an emotional and relational burden for individuals as they try to balance closeness and separation, maintain boundaries, and sustain communication (Hall & Baym, 2012).

This *paradox of connection* is widely recognized (Turkle, 2011) in social and academic discussions and appears in our findings, which are particularly significant given growing concerns about rising levels of loneliness in Ireland. People are more connected than ever, yet they still yearn for connection. In Study 1, this was evident in references to parasocial experiences and the desire for connection while constantly being 'on.' Some participants mentioned that it feels more difficult, or less likely, to approach someone face-to-face, as the phone provides an easy escape. Study 2 reflected this through increased public concern about superficiality, disconnection, and the decline of meaningful interaction amid the growing use of technology for dating and constant digital connectedness.

People see themselves in relation to dating apps, even if they don't use them, a dynamic also observed by Adamczyk et al. (2022), as meeting people through traditional methods is experienced against the background of knowing that online dating is always available, and it has become almost an expectation. Participants frequently described feeling less likely to meet someone spontaneously in person because they believe 'everyone is online,' which changes their perception of the availability of partners in physical settings.

Despite these tensions, there are many advantages to online dating and relationships, especially within Ireland's broader social context. This study was conducted in a technologically advanced, capitalist society that values work, independence, and mobility. Many participants moved for career reasons, reflecting broader geographical shifts toward cities or economically developed areas. Technology enabled them to connect across these distances. It saved time, offered more options, helped maintain existing connections, and, at least in theory, improved traditional ways of meeting people. However, in practice, it often replaced and reconfigured those methods. Indeed, dating was difficult even before technology, but we now tend to attribute the issues to technology when things do not go smoothly.

7.3.2 Stigma and Negativity Bias

Alongside the dual nature of technology, our findings show how lingering negativity continues to shape individual experiences and broader social discourses. Early associations with desperation and deviance and the idea that online dating is for the lonely or socially inept (i.e., Wildermuth, 2004) have faded. Today, dating apps are often considered helpful tools, particularly for busy individuals or those from marginalized groups (Wiederhold, 2020). Their presence in everyday media, advice columns, and popular discourse further signals a shift toward normalization. Yet, this acceptance is not complete.

In Study 1, participants explicitly rejected the idea that using dating apps was desperate, often stating that there was “no shame” in it. This suggests an active resistance to lingering stigma, whether rooted in past cultural discourses or in real or imagined judgment. Our findings are consistent with Degen and Kleeberg-Niepage (2022), who show that users position their self-presentation and relational intentions in relation to dominant social norms and recurring criticism of dating apps as superficial. Similarly, in Study 2, we observed instances in media discourse where stigma was

denied, with headlines framing online dating as 'normal' or 'just how things are done now.' Still, the need to assert this normalcy often implied the presence of contrary voices.

What seems to be diminishing is the stigma linked to people who use dating apps, while a broader negative bias toward these types of relationships and platforms continues. This is also shown in Study 3, where romantic relationships formed through online forums were viewed less favorably than those created offline or via Tinder. A similar result was reported by Johanis et al. (2024), who found that participants viewed individuals who used online methods more negatively than those who used offline methods.

Study 2 showed that the media still heavily emphasizes negative outcomes related to dating apps, such as fraud, crime, loneliness, and the decline of love and intimacy. This aligns with other research that reports media biases in highlighting harassment, scams, sexually transmitted diseases, mental health problems, and loneliness in online dating (Albury et al., 2019; Rosenware, 2020). Although fraud reports have leveled off and advice columns are more common, the overall tone around online dating is growing more negative. The central belief is that people tend to be more dishonest and less genuine online, and that digital connections are somehow more fragile (see also Konings et al., 2024; Ward, 2017).

The persistent elements of stigma and negativity toward online relationships are concerning because broader social acceptance is vital for the quality and stability of romantic relationships. Research indicates that perceived approval from others encourages positive behaviors toward one's partner and boosts relationship satisfaction (Lemay & Suad Razzak, 2016). This same dynamic also influences attitudes toward technology and online dating. For instance, Sharabi (2021) found that believing in the effectiveness of dating algorithms can lead to better dating outcomes, regardless of the

algorithm's actual capabilities. In this way, the judgments and values placed on the phenomenon can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Fears about technology are not new. From the early days of writing to the rise of radio, and even with newer social media forms like comic books and rap music, each generation has expressed concern over new media and their supposed moral or social impacts, and a similar issue arises with dating apps. We tend to place strong emphasis on how individuals use – or misuse – the apps, and to attribute negative outcomes either to the technology itself or to users' lack of care. Broader issues that are also present across developed Western countries, such as economic and political instability, late capitalism, growing social insecurity, and the neoliberal market economy, also shape how we relate to one another. It is possible that dating apps were developed and appropriated within these wider transformations, which are accompanied by many social and psychological tensions.

Thus, a narrow focus can give rise to public anxieties and policy responses that are, at best, ineffective and, at worst, counterproductive, because they address what is most visible and easiest to regulate rather than more complex structural issues, such as gender inequality, the power of technological companies, and the wider socio-economic conditions that shape contemporary intimate life.

7.3.3 Safety

Safety is a significant concern regarding online relationships, and in some ways, it is a valid one. Just as dating apps have made it easier to access and meet others, they have also offered opportunities for negative behaviors, including scams, exploitation, and different forms of harm. The whole range of sexual and intrusive behavior, particularly towards women, was observed across the studies (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2021). Likewise, participants in our research frequently mentioned direct experiences of unsolicited or overly forward sexual messages, pushy behavior, and, in some cases,

aggressive advances. Notably, men also voiced concerns, particularly about being scammed, manipulated, or emotionally harmed.

Study 3 found that people perceived a high risk of fraud in all online situations, reflecting societal concerns about online deception. A 2023 Pew Research Center survey (Vogels et al., 2023) found that more than half of Americans consider online dating unsafe, a figure that has increased over the last five years, particularly among younger women. Interestingly, individuals who used dating apps were more likely to perceive them as safe than those who did not, suggesting a discrepancy between representations and lived experience.

In Study 2, it became clear that news media disproportionately report on crime related to online dating. While this is understandable, since Irish media often focuses on bad news (Gallagher et al., 2023), blaming the technology or the users solely gives a biased view that hides the variety and complexity of factors involved in violence, loneliness, and similar issues. Conversely, safety concerns and negative experiences across different dating modes have received little to no attention. Albury et al. (2020) observed the same trend, where the media portrayed dating apps as risky and linked to sexually transmitted diseases, despite no evidence supporting those claims.

Notably, online dating platforms have implemented several safety measures. Tinder, for instance, introduced an option for photo verification, linked profiles with social media, and used machine-learning models to detect harmful language (Gillet et al., 2022). Safety prompts are also common during registration, before the number exchange, and when arranging an in-person meeting. Although not foolproof, these measures represent an effort to make online dating environments safer. The question of whether online dating is riskier than offline dating remains open to debate, as many authors acknowledge the connectedness between violence and risks of online and offline dating (Jaureguizar et al., 2024).

7.3.4 Continuity Across Different Relationship Types and Technologies

As noted by Ogolsky and colleagues (2013) and Rodrigue (2023), in the late 20th century, scholars investigated 'universal' dimensions and processes that apply across various types of relationships, including intimacy, commitment, and satisfaction. However, with the development of technology, we became increasingly focused on the objective qualities and outcomes of specific relationships, such as online dating, social media friendships, or digital acquaintances. While this can be useful in aspects, it has also contributed to a fragmented understanding of how people relate online. As Rodrigue (2023) points out, even though perspectives on 'meaning structures' promote attention to relationship diversity, researchers typically specialize in only one type of relational form.

A critical contribution of this thesis is its broad approach in capturing continuities between different kinds of close relationships from the person's perspective. The themes identified in Study 1, such as the tensions between authenticity and staginess, safety and risk, and proximity and distance, were not exclusive to dating but emerged across different relationships. This continuity reinforces the idea that relationships share common dynamics in their formation, maintenance, and emotional tone, both online and offline.

Connectivity was also observed between dating apps and other platforms, such as social media, messaging apps, and shared-interest forums. Consistent with channel escalation theory (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007), participants often described how their relationships move between different platforms. For instance, they met someone on a dating app, continued talking on Facebook, or strengthened their connection through WhatsApp.

However, this fluidity is often overlooked in how media and academic narratives depict online relationships. These discourses draw strict delineations between friendship

and romance, social media and dating apps, and between online and offline relationships. While it is essential to recognize the distinct characteristics of dating app design and functionality, over-specialization risks obscuring the experiential overlap and continuity across platforms and relationships.

7.3.5 Medium

This work suggests that, from an individual's perspective, the material characteristics of the medium are not always central to their lived experience. Study 1 shows that the specific medium or slight variations in what it enables and how it operates do not necessarily make a significant difference in the meaning assigned to mediation or online relationships. While some experiences are more pronounced in dating apps, particularly due to their goal-oriented and gamified design, participants' accounts primarily reflected a broader perspective on relating online.

A similar observation arises from Study 2. Media discussions mainly focused on dating apps, especially Tinder, while other forms of online interaction received much less attention. More emphasis was placed on the fact that people could find a partner on a specific app, rather than on how this practice fits into wider cultural changes in relating. Coverage mainly highlighted issues such as relationship management, safety, and self-presentation, but paid less attention to the medium's unique characteristics. Moreover, little consideration was given to the broader context in which people now date, including societal and environmental structures that prioritize consumerism, productivity, and the capitalization of time and skills.

Consistent with these findings, the analysis of Study 3 indicated that the specific affordances or features of dating apps, while occasionally shaping user expectations (e.g., gamified swiping, enhanced self-presentation), are not always central to the lived relational experience. Participants' stories highlighted broader themes of negotiating

closeness and distance, managing relational trajectories, and reflecting ambivalence toward the efficiency and constraints imposed by platforms.

These findings highlight a broader tension in user accounts and academic analysis, where we either focus too much on the medium, overemphasizing its role in shaping relationships, or too little, reducing intimacy to dyadic, individual dynamics or sociocultural context. Researchers tend to favor certain analysis levels over others, focusing on the materiality and workings of the medium, or overlooking broader culture, emphasizing individualistic perspectives, or offering ahistorical explanations without much sociotechnical context (Baxter, 2011; Rodrigue, 2023).

Nonetheless, while a medium's affordances may not always be consciously perceived, they still shape relational experiences, influencing self-presentation, disclosure, relationship development, and users' behavior more broadly. Participants felt an unnatural or forced trajectory in relationships, affected by how dating apps function and the expectations that are common online. They also expressed discomfort with what they saw as overly specialized or binary systems (e.g., swiping yes/no), which limited complex relational possibilities to a narrow set of outcomes. Others, however, appreciated the clarity and efficiency of these designs, which may help explain why Tinder was evaluated more positively than an online forum in Study 3. Such ambivalence shows how meaning-making arises at the intersection of user expectations, sociotechnical design, and broader cultural discourses (Orlikowski, 2007), and cannot be fully understood through any single dimension.

7.3.6 Historical Reflections

In Study 1, participants often reflected on how their relationships have changed because of technological progress. Many recalled their early experiences with online communication, such as email, forums, and messaging platforms, highlighting how new media introduced innovative ways to connect. Earlier platforms like webchat, MSN

Messenger, and MySpace, once popular for flirting and building relationships with both known and unknown people, closely resemble today's social networking sites. Unlike today's platforms, which are often viewed pessimistically, these earlier sites are rarely perceived as harmful or socially problematic, demonstrating how the meanings we assign to media evolve and how similar concerns often shift to a new medium.

Media discourses in Study 2 revealed a comparable temporal pattern, but with a more explicit anchoring in Irish cultural narratives. Articles frequently contrast dating apps with earlier practices such as matchmaking, dating agencies, singles' events, and advice columns, presenting these as more authentic, socially meaningful, and successful ways of meeting a partner. This nostalgia is particularly meaningful in the Irish context, where rapid social change, from a historical influence by the Catholic church and limited partner choice to a liberalized, individualized, and technologically advanced culture, has occurred within a relatively short period. From this perspective, dating apps are better understood as consequences and amplifiers of these changes rather than as primary drivers of modern, liberal relationships.

Study 3 found that traditional methods – those not specifically designed for online partner meetings – were not consistently rated as more positive by participants. Consistent with other research (e.g., Johanis, 2024), these findings suggest that, as online dating has become more mainstream, it is increasingly seen as a viable way to form lasting relationships, even though nostalgia for alternative methods persists. As these alternatives become more niche, their cultural standards as superior ways to meet partners may also decline.

While it has been argued that dating apps accelerate processes of meeting and selecting partners, they also render more visible long-standing social rituals, including impression management, strategic self-presentation, and selective disclosure, that had previously been more implicit. From sociocultural and historical viewpoints, this

continuity challenges a strict divide between 'new' and 'old' types of technology, as they do not replace earlier forms but instead build on them. For example, the shift from letter writing to texting, or from matchmakers to algorithmic matching, may differ in speed and scope of interaction but still maintain some of the emotional meaning and mediated processes.

7.4 Key Takeaways for Research on Online Dating

Taken together, the findings of this thesis contribute to existing research on technology-mediated relationships in three main ways.

First, it moves beyond platform-specific or outcome-focused approaches by demonstrating that, from users' perspectives, the meaning of online dating is not primarily organized around particular applications or affordances, but around broader experiential processes such as negotiating proximity and distance, authenticity, legitimacy, and relational trajectories. In doing so, it contributes to sociocultural and phenomenological approaches to mediated communication by empirically showing how technological mediation becomes meaningful in lived, relational time.

Second, by combining lived experience, media discourse, and implicit associations within a mixed-methods design, the thesis connects levels of analysis that are usually studied separately. Existing research typically focuses either on individual behavior, cultural representations, or attitudes. The present work shows how these layers interact and sometimes diverge, or recede, thereby offering an empirically grounded account of how social representations and technologies are taken up, resisted, or reinterpreted in personal meaning-making.

Third, the thesis proposes a temporal and relational model of technological mediation that conceptualizes online dating not as a fixed environment but as a dynamic process unfolding across the life course of relationships and within shifting sociocultural contexts. This responds to calls within relationship research (e.g., Baxter,

2011; Rodrigue, 2023) for frameworks that can accommodate relational development, historical change, and technological materiality simultaneously.

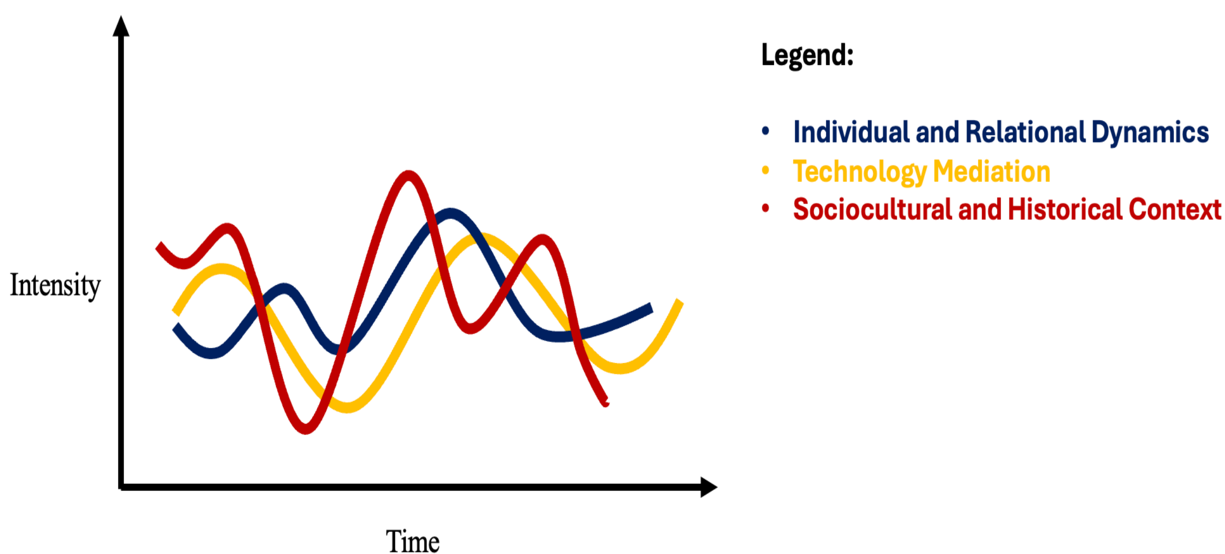
7.5 Conceptual Synthesis

Building on the findings and theoretical perspectives discussed in this thesis, this final section synthesizes key elements into a conceptual model to understand the lived experiences of individuals who date and form online relationships. This integrative model aims to capture the multidimensional complexity of how technology shapes, mediates, and is also influenced by its social and intimate uses and purposes. It highlights how cultural discourses, technological materiality, and personal meaning-making processes intersect and develop over time. Doing so contributes to a more holistic view of online relationships and will hopefully stimulate theoretical integration and research from technical, relationship studies, and cultural approaches.

The proposed model (Figure 7.1) brings together three interdependent dimensions identified as central to this experience: (1) the individual and relational dynamics; (2) the mediating and material role of technology; and (3) the broader sociocultural and historical context within which relationships are formed and experienced. These three dimensions are dynamically entangled, sometimes merging, diverging, and constantly unfolding within the irreversibility of time.

Figure 7.1

Triadic Model of Online Relationships



This model is rooted in phenomenological approaches, emphasizing that individuals' sense-making and relational experiences are situated within a sociotechnical and historical context. Our findings showed that individuals' lived experiences of dating, technology, and broader sociocultural context shift depending on the relationship stage, medium used, and evolving norms, thereby providing a dynamic context in which they position what is satisfactory, appropriate, or undesirable. This context also changes with the development and societal appropriation of technology, representing the evolution of the sociotechnical dimension, which subsequently mediates individuals' experience.

As stressed, the salience of these dimensions is not static, and it unfolds over time, changing which dimensions become active or absent in the person's lived experience. The temporal axis, therefore, represents the unfolding of a relational trajectory in lived, irreversible time rather than a chronological scale. 'Time 0' marks the analytical entry point into a relational experience, while sociocultural and technological conditions predate this point and continue to evolve beyond it.

To further explain the connection between dimensions, we extend the points of contact between the person, technology, and world – the mediated model proposed by

Dorrestijn (2012) and discussed in Chapter 2 – by proposing that these meeting points differ in quality and intensity, which can be best described by the concept of *friction*. Depending on the situation, contact points might create seamless integration or moments of friction and rupture when interactions with technology, the Self, and the world are disrupted. Similar to Heidegger's distinction between 'ready-to-hand' and 'present-at-hand' modes of being with technology, we see touching points as either transparent, when technology recedes into the background, or disruptive, when it becomes an object of focus or a source of breakdown (Dotov et al., 2010).

In the following section, we present the three dimensions as distinct yet interconnected layers of the technological mediation of online relationships. Next, we examine how these dimensions converge at various touchpoints and how such moments may evolve, both in sociohistorical contexts and throughout a relationship.

7.5.1 Single Dimensions of the Model

The **individual and relational dynamics** dimension concerns the person, their relational dynamics, and the meanings they construct as relationships unfold. It can include self-presentation, self-disclosure, meeting others, developing relationships, experiences with technology, and other processes. As discussed, this dimension exists as a fluid and dynamic process, marked by subjective ruptures that prompt reassessment of the relationship and open new trajectories. These trajectories, visible as bending points in our model, can be mediated by technology or amplified by cultural scripts; themes explored in the section on touching points.

The **technology dimension encompasse**s the material characteristics of dating apps in facilitating the search for romantic or sexual partners. Features such as availability, editability, and the ability to match with numerous individuals change how relationships are initiated. This thesis builds on the understanding that the essence of the technology dimension lies beyond its mechanical or instrumental workings. It is a

repository of values, norms, ethical assumptions, and pressures. Technology's agency is especially evident in its fast development, with new artefacts arriving, creating new communities, leaving some behind, and reshaping societies and identities. Very often, the other two dimensions fall behind or battle to keep pace with technology.

Sociocultural and historical dimension focuses on the broader cultural, social, and historical contexts that guide our understanding and practices of relationships, technology, and technology-mediated relationships. Culture provides the frame for how to relate to and use technology, as well as what these activities should mean to individuals engaging in them.

The same tool, affordances, and behaviors can have vastly different meanings in different cultural, geographical, and historical contexts, showing how people's experience of online dating is never purely individual.

None of these experiential dimensions is static or reversible; they instead unfold and evolve within irreversible and pervasive time. Time is never a static, fixed, or unchanged entity, but it is lived and experienced differently depending on the context, culture, and past experiences. Time binds experience where meanings are constructed on the boundary between the known and the subsequent unknown (Molina et al., 2017).

7.5.2 Contact Points Between Dimensions

The concept of touchpoints in conjunction with the open-line framework helps to identify the moments when two or more dimensions come into active contact, shaping one another and producing qualitatively distinct experiences and, broadly, significant cultural and technological changes. At other moments, one or more dimensions may fade into the background, becoming weak, transparent, or even momentarily absent. A user may, for example, engage with a dating app purely as a tool (technology–individual), without being concerned with the broader cultural norms (sociocultural), or they may reflect on cultural ideals of romance and technology

without those ideas being activated by their experience at that moment. In this way, *contact points* help us move beyond a stable triangle of mediation and toward a more temporal, socially, culturally, and historically situated understanding of how relationships are shaped over time.

This point of contact can be characterized by friction, understood as experiences of difficulty, resistance, or unexpected events in interactions with technology, or with the social and material world as mediated by technology. Attending to friction across individuals' lived experiences, technological design, and broader social representations allows us to better understand processes of technological mediation and the ways artifacts can be both empowering and disempowering.

In this sense, a moment of friction becomes a valuable unit of analysis. It provides an entry point for exploring how and why frictions emerge, and what they signify for individuals. These insights could have broader implications, inform design underpinnings, and shape the cultural narratives we construct about technology and online dating.

7.5.3 Technology and the Individual Intersection

The contact points between individuals and technology are dynamic, varying from seamless integration to more disruptive experiences. At certain moments of experience, technology becomes embodied and transparent, seamlessly integrated into interaction and in the person's connection with the world and others. At other times, technology fails to provide a satisfactory relational experience, causing friction in interactions between individuals.

Much of satisfactory engagement is taken for granted, yet the affordances and constraints and affordances of technology always structure it. When friction arises, however, the limitations or negative workings of technology become more visible. Because these moments stand out, they may serve as a *representativeness heuristic*,

shaping how the evaluation of technology is disproportionately focused on salient shortcomings. In turn, this can contribute to a broader negativity bias in our perceptions.

There is a strong motivation in technological design to create a frictionless, seamless experience, which is increased by the need to generate profit through a larger user base and/or longer engagement. Dating apps promise relationships to their users – chat, dates, matches, friends, soulmate – as they grow their business and add new features. Recent innovations focus on providing more positive and successful experiences, such as safety and authenticity verification, interaction prompts suggesting opening messages, or self-presentation prompts that highlight desirable qualities.

On the user end, common experiences with engaging in dating apps cause friction with Self, others, and the tool. Browsing through many profiles feels like the tiring 'endless swiping,' where users can easily feel rejected based on superficial criteria, making them feel like an object online or a cog in the capitalist technology machine, constantly judged, evaluated, and rejected. Numerous prompts rarely make communication easier and more often lead to unnatural interactions, where one is criticized for not being genuine or for not putting enough effort into crafting their messages. Consequently, users may feel fatigued, disappointed, frustrated, and confused by the overall experience, revealing a gap between the intended design and how the final product is experienced.

Dating apps are mainly designed to facilitate access to others and to help with the selection process, but the aspects that come after or during the date, or after unsuccessful matches, have been overlooked. The lack of consideration for time and relational trajectory results in an ahistorical design, even though user experience is built on past experiences and future expectations. The experience is developmental, shaped by past disruptions and future desires, and it is key to how users interpret the technology

and their relationships. Integrating this dimension into technological design might reduce the friction during the engagement.

7.5.4 Individual and Sociocultural Intersection

This intersection captures how individuals draw on, internalize, negotiate, or resist broader sociocultural discourses as they make sense of their experiences with online relationships. While individuals are embedded in culture and inevitably participate in shared representations, their interpretations are not mere reflections of shared meanings. As demonstrated in the qualitative analysis, there is often a disconnect between dominant social representations of online dating and individuals' relational goals and lived experiences. Take, for example, the common belief that Tinder and dating apps are used for casual relationships, yet many users turn to these platforms for long-term, meaningful relationships. In such cases, what Tinder or a dating app means culturally and what it represents to an individual are markedly different, and can make people feel bad about themselves or their relationships.

Importantly, sociocultural discourses often exceed the life course of the individual. People carry ideas and assumptions from cultural narratives predating their direct experience with online dating and technology. For instance, some participants felt nostalgia for pre-technological modes of relating, despite never having experienced them directly. These pre-existing discourses form the broader symbolic pool within which people interpret their relationships, desires, and decisions. Representations cannot adapt that fast nor as fast as technology develops, while individuals' experiences can change significantly, contributing to the discrepancies.

7.5.5 Technology and Sociocultural Intersection

The intersection of technology and culture is particularly pronounced in globalization and the neoliberal market economy, where financial forces drive

technological development. As technological development accelerates, cultural narratives and social norms often lag behind, producing a temporal disjunction in which individuals and cultures struggle to reconcile new practices with their long-standing values.

Scholars have highlighted how technologies are never neutral solutions, but generate new challenges alongside the problems they seek to address (de Saint-Laurent, 2024). At the same time, our cultural imaginaries of technology are increasingly tied to powerful corporations that promise disruption and innovation while shaping how we imagine the future (Crofts, 2024).

Technology companies have long been criticized for lacking concern for individuals, humanity, and the environment, with the primary and ultimate goal of creating wealth, even when other dimensions are at stake (Crofts, 2024). Pollution, overwork, data protection, ethical concerns, and the widening divide between the privileged and the marginalized are all very relevant and real issues, but remain difficult to regulate, in part because of the immense economic and political power these companies hold and the novelty of harm they produce (Moses, 2011), but also because we continue to use and develop these products. We worry about how companies exploit personal data, but we still upload photos, update statuses, and routinely ignore privacy regulations (Kokolakis, 2017).

This sociotechnical intersection is particularly evident in tensions we have with online dating. As profit-driven platforms, they organize dating through subscription models, algorithms, and engagement metrics. This helps explain the persistent ambivalence in users' experiences: while apps are criticized as impersonal and data-driven, they are also expected to deliver more efficient, optimized matches.

7.5.6 The Tri-Dimensional Meeting Point

The convergence of technological, cultural, and individual dimensions reveals a point where developments in one domain profoundly reshape the others. This meeting point is not merely about dating apps or specific technologies, but about a more profound transformation in how individuals and societies think, relate, and behave, brought about by ongoing technological mediation.

Our communication is always already technologized, inseparable from the tools through which it occurs, whether or not we are consciously aware of them. This raises the question of how long it takes for a medium to shift from being seen as disruptive or new to becoming normalized – perhaps at least until it reaches all generational cohorts or even multiple generations. For younger generations, online dating has become a normal and expected way to start relationships, and there are plenty of platforms catering to different types of users, while for many older generations, it still feels unfamiliar or even alien. These generational divisions suggest that the cultural normalization of online dating is still ongoing. Whether it will ultimately remain a dominant method for initiating relationships, and how its representations will change, are questions that still need answers.

At the same time, frictions and cultural movements remind us of the tensions in this converging point. We observe adjacent examples in areas such as social media and phone use in schools, where legislation has reshaped practices, prompted companies to reevaluate their outreach and comply with the law, and sparked discussion of users' needs and rights (McCoy & Marcus-Quinn, 2025). In other online spaces, too, frictions emerge, for instance, a legal demand for age verification and the desire for anonymity, where users often circumvent these restrictions and articulate their own priorities, and technologies are pressured to provide new solutions to meet legal requirements (Jarvie & Renaud, 2024).

7.6 Practical Implications

The findings have practical implications for users, platform design, and public discourse.

For users, pronounced ambivalence suggests that many negative experiences should not be understood as resulting from personal failures or broader relational instabilities. Rather, they emerge from tensions between relational expectations, platform design, and broader cultural norms. Recognizing this can reduce self-blame and support more reflective engagement with dating apps. Importantly, numerous issues that are inseparable from a technological design do not mean that relationships fostered this way cannot be satisfying and of good quality. The findings from the literature and Study 3 indicate that the stigma has diminished, and that it is widely believed that relationships formed online can be lasting.

The findings also remind us that relationship formation is a temporal process that extends beyond the initial match. Applications can facilitate contact, but they cannot replace the time required for trust, intimacy, and compatibility to develop. A more realistic understanding of this trajectory may help users manage expectations, protect themselves from fatigue associated with prolonged swiping and reward-matching design, and disengage when platforms no longer support their relational goals.

Equally, despite the negative connotations surrounding superficial relationships, it is worth remembering that they have social and relational value. They can be seen as reflecting greater individual autonomy in partner selection, changing gender dynamics, and more diverse forms of romantic relationships. From this perspective, online dating can be understood as a process of emancipation and empowerment, valued for the opportunities it offers for connection, rather than feared as a source of deterioration.

For platform designers and providers, the analysis highlights the importance of supporting relational trajectories rather than focusing almost exclusively on matching

and initial contact. Features that facilitate post-match interaction, transitions between stages, respectful user disengagement, and reflection on in-person meetings may be more closely aligned with users' lived experiences. Greater transparency around algorithmic claims and the limits of matching systems could also foster trust without necessarily undermining commercial sustainability. From this perspective, profitability and sensitivity to users' relational experiences are not mutually exclusive but require a shift from engagement-maximisation alone toward longer-term relational value.

For media and public discourse, the persistent negativity bias identified in Irish coverage suggests the need for more balanced representations that acknowledge both risks and ordinary, successful experiences associated with online dating. A narrow focus on individual responsibility or on technological harm obscures the broader structural conditions shaping contemporary relationships, including mobility, work patterns, gendered safety concerns, and changing social spaces for meeting partners. More nuanced reporting could therefore help reduce stigma and support more informed public debate.

For research, the findings suggest the importance of moving beyond problem-oriented starting points that assume technological harm or relational decline. While a critical approach remains important, a persistent focus on negatives, risk, and moralised comparisons with 'traditional' relationships may itself reproduce the negative discourses that shape users' experiences. Approaches that attend to ambivalence, continuity across relational forms, and the temporal development of relationships are better suited to capturing the complexity of technology-mediated relationships.

Finally, the proposed **model** offers a way to study online dating as a dynamic process rather than a fixed environment. It allows researchers to examine when technological, relational, and sociocultural dimensions come to the fore or recede into the background, and how moments of friction emerge across relationship stages. This

makes it possible to investigate not only what technologies afford, but also when and for whom those affordances become meaningful, without assuming the constant-determining presence of any single dimension and instead treating technological mediation as situationally emergent. Future research can use this model to trace how these shifting patterns shape relational trajectories, for example, by combining longitudinal interviews with analyses of platforms and sociocultural contexts.

7.7 Limitations and Future Research

This thesis has several limitations, primarily related to sampling in Study 1, data access in Study 2, and the instruments used in Study 3. It also raised new, unforeseen questions, pointing to future research directions.

First, **Study 1 (Interviews)** was based on a relatively small, self-selected sample, limiting the findings' generalizability. While the depth of the interviews allowed for rich insights, future research could benefit from a larger and/or more demographically focused sample, especially across specific cohorts. This would allow a deeper understanding of how tensions and themes identified may vary across age, gender, sexuality, or cultural background.

Another limitation is the potential discrepancy between what participants report and their actual behavior, a common challenge in self-report-type research. Future studies could address this issue through triangulation**,** combining self-reported data with diary methods, behavioral observations, or digital traces (e.g., message logs, app usage patterns) to capture more objective measures of technology use. More observational approaches, such as directly observing how people engage with dating platforms and technology in their daily and relational lives, could provide a richer and more ecologically valid understanding of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, a dyadic approach involving both partners could provide deeper insights into technological mediation. By examining how relational tensions and

representations are negotiated within the couple, we can better understand self–other dynamics and how individual narratives either fit together or conflict within a shared relational space. A longitudinal approach can also help clarify how tensions and meanings evolve across different stages of relationships.

The main limitation in Study 2 (Media Analysis) is its focus on mainstream newspapers, which may no longer be the primary source of information and discourse for many users, especially younger demographics who are more active on dating apps. Including additional media sources such as social media platforms, television, or popular movies could have provided a broader and more current view of public narratives. Additionally, the visual format of media items limited opportunities for in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis. As more advanced image-to-text recognition tools develop, future research could incorporate these formats more effectively. Despite these limitations, the study still offers a valuable overview of cultural narratives in widely circulated public media discourse.

One limitation of **Study 3 (Story Completion)** involves the positive design of the story prompts, which may have been overly optimistic and focused on the likelihood of a committed relationship. Although they were intentionally designed to assess participants' views on the potential for committed relationships across different media, the lack of ambiguity could have restricted the variety of responses. Future research might consider more neutral or open-ended prompts to capture a broader range of associations. Additionally, regarding story design, all examples feature heterosexual romance, which limits the generalizability of the findings and excludes queer populations. It is advisable to include a representative portion of queer participants, conduct a parallel study, or use story formats that explore scenarios beyond heterosexual relationships.

Additionally, the study included an online forum and Tinder as two online methods for forming relationships. In Study 1, participants spoke positively about online groups based on shared or niche interests as meaningful ways to meet others. However, in the story completion task, these online groups were associated with more negative outcomes than other methods. This inconsistency may result from online forums being more niche, with many participants potentially not engaging with them. Future research could explore more mainstream platforms, such as social media, and newer types of online dating, including those facilitated by artificial intelligence (AI).

While the relationship evaluation items showed strong face validity, their internal consistency was limited. Similarly, high variability in participants' reported relationship durations may have reduced the statistical significance of the results. Future research could include more standardized measures and explore how people understand or assess typical relationship lengths.

Finally, the method's hypothetical nature, while helpful in revealing implicit associations, may also distance participants from their lived experiences. Combining story completion with follow-up interviews or observational methods could bridge this gap.

7.8 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to describe the lived experiences of individuals who date online, the broader social discourses that shape and reflect those experiences, and the implicit associations individuals have regarding different online and offline forms of relationship initiation. Using a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative interviews, media analysis, and experimental design, this work provides a multidimensional understanding of how technology mediates romantic relationships and how individuals make sense of these experiences.

In all three studies, a key finding was the intense ambivalence about the role of technology in relationships. While benefits, such as increased access, convenience, and connection, were also acknowledged, participants and media discourses emphasized the challenges, showing a clear tendency to focus on the negative aspects of technology in social lives. This bias is also evident in academic research on social media, where studies often focus on demonstrating harm, despite the lack of rigorous research that would support those concerns.

This thesis ultimately shows that technology's effects are not reducible to design or affordances alone. Instead, this mediation becomes meaningful through how it is interpreted and lived in time, shaped by social discourses, and woven with identities and personal histories. Crucially, technology carries different meanings across relational moments, where it becomes highly visible and loaded with significance at times, and at others, fades into the background, allowing for effortless connection.

Study 3, employing an implicit and experimental approach, showed that people do not judge digital platforms solely by their affordances, as their views are also influenced by symbolic and cultural meanings. These meanings shape how they experience the medium and the relationships it fosters. Future research should continue to explore how these meanings relate to specific platforms and how they influence expectations and judgments in relationships.

Together, these findings show the value of attending not only to how people use technology but also to how they imagine, narrate, and evaluate it. People's perceptions are shaped as much by broader discourses and collective imaginaries as by their own experiences. Based on these insights, researchers and society should move beyond polarized narratives and pay closer attention to how technology is experienced and used by the perso

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Appendices

Appendix A

Information and Consent Form for Study 1

SRESC TEMPLATE

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Purpose of the Study. I am Melane Pilek, a doctoral student, in the Department of Psychology, Maynooth University.

As part of the requirements for my doctoral degree, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr. Michael Cooke.

The study is concerned with experiences of adults who are currently and/or were in the past engaging in intimate online relationships. Online relationships are any type of intimate relationships, including friendships and romantic relationships that are primarily taking place in virtual, cyberspace environments. This research will also explore the factors that contribute to the difference between online and in-person relationships through the role of technology.

What will the study involve? The study will involve taking part in a one-to-one, in person interview with an approximate duration of 60-90 minutes. You will be asked questions about your experiences and perceptions of engaging in online relationships.

Who has approved this study? This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part? Prospective participants invited to take part in this research are adults, over the age of 18, who have, or previously had, an experience of having intimate relationships primarily occurring in online environment. Intimate relationships that are being maintained as a combination of online and face-to-face meetings are not considered as online relationships. If you are currently experiencing significant emotional and psychological difficulties in your life, it may not be safe for your wellbeing to participate in the research, given the potentially sensitive nature of this study.

Where will the research be carried out?

The research will be carried out in Ireland, in the form of in-person, one-to-one interviews. The interview location will be agreed between you and the researcher. It is important that the location is in a public, comfortable and quiet space and easy to find. Some examples of possible places for the interviews are a room at the University, public library, parks, or quiet hotel lobbies. Particular attention will be given to your choice, privacy and convenience.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. You are invited to participate in a one-to-one interview with a researcher. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the research findings are analysed, which is planned to be over the course of next 6-9 months. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not have any implications for you.

What information will be collected? Some demographic information, about your gender, relationship status and age will be collected in addition to your experiences of online relationships. The term online relationships is referring to your dating experiences, long-term romantic relationship, casual relationships and friendships that are primarily occurring online. The types of questions that you will be asked are about your history of online relationships, motivational, behavioural, emotional and attitudinal experiences regarding your online relationship. You may be asked some intimate questions about your relationship dynamics, sexuality and use of technology. Some topics may cover changes in your perception of intimacy and relationships as a result of online experiences, as well as the dissolution of relationships and infidelity. Please note that we do not have to talk about topics that may be too personal or non-relevant to you, while you will still have an opportunity to discuss other topics. In advance of our meeting, I will share a summary of questions with you.

Will the interviews be recorded?

Yes, for the purpose of data analysis, the interviews will be audio-recorded on the researcher's phone, used solely for a purpose of this research. The recording will be uploaded and transcribed on a PC and deleted from the phone within 24 hours after the interview. The recording and transcription will be password-protected, encrypted and stored on a secure server at Maynooth University.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No names will be identified at any time. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researchers' place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by the researcher, Melane Pilek, and her supervisor, Dr. Michael Cooke.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

What will happen to the information which you give? All the information you provide will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. The data analysis will be completed by the 1st of April 2023. After ten years, all data will be destroyed. Manual data will be shredded confidentially and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by the researcher in Maynooth University.

What will happen to the results? The research will be written up and presented in my doctoral thesis, and may be published in scientific journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? It is possible that talking about your experience may cause some distress.

What if there is a problem? At the end of the interview, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. I will contact you, with your permission, 2-3 days after the interview to follow-up on your interview experience and answer any questions that you might have. If you experience any distress following the

interview you may contact the free counselling service, The Samaritans, on the phone number: 116 123. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Michael Cooke, on the Michael.Cooke@mu.ie if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me: Melane Pilek, email: melane.pilek.2022@mumail.ie or on my research phone number: 0852260131.

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Consent Form

I……………………………………agree to participate in Melane Pilek's research study titled A qualitative study of technology mediated relationships.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily.

☐

I am participating voluntarily.

☐

I give permission for my interview with Melane Pilek to be audio-recorded.

☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating.

☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to the end of data analysis, June 2023 ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet

☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

☐

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

☐

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects

☐

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects

☐

Signed……………………………………. Date……………….

Participant Name in block capitals ……………………………………………...

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature

and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed……………………………………. Date……………….

Researcher Name in block capitals …………………………………………...

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at dataprotection@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI

Appendix B

Call for Participants for Study 1

Appendix C

Topic Guide for Study 1

Online Relationships

If you have, or previously had, an experience of online relationships, this study may be for you

A Qualitative Study in Technology Mediated Relationships
Maynooth Univerisity, Department of Psychology

Motivation and history of online relationships

What is your experience of online relationships?

Have you ever been in an online relationship?

What are your expectations of online relationships?

What does an online relationship mean to you?

What attracts you to online relationships?

Have you ever used the Internet to meet potential partners?

What are your experiences of online dating?

What information did you share about yourself?

What attracted you to someone online?

Have you ever gone on a date with someone you met on dating apps/online?

Beliefs and attitudes about online relationships

Can online relationships be intimate?

What are the main concerns of being in an online relationship?

What are the benefits of an online relationship?

What negative perceptions did you have about people who use the Internet as a way to find potential mates?

What do important others in your life think about online relationships?

Is it possible to find real love on the Internet? Is it easier to find sexual partners online?

What is different in online dating compared to traditional, off-line dating?

How long are/were you in this online relationship?

How do you express your affection in an online relationship?

How do you experience sexual desire and satisfaction online?

Do you think it was easier to maintain a romantic relationship in an online context?

How do you maintain online relationships?

Have you ever dealt with a conflict with your partner online?

Transition of online relationship to offline context

Have you ever met your online partner in person?

Have you ever had an offline relationship that initially started online?

How soon do you decide to meet someone in person?

Based on what experiences, do you decide to meet them in person?

Relationship dissolution

Have you ever broken up an online relationship?

Is it easier to break up online?

What media do you use to interact in your online relationships?

What is your favorite interactive app or website and why?

What annoys you about these types of technologies?

How has technology changed your relationships?

Appendix D

Thematic Analysis for Study 1

Main Theme	Subtheme	Example of Codes
1. Opportunities and Constraints	Easy access, but shallow relations	boredom online, superficial profiles, casual online chats, parasocial relations, transient friendships
	Being selective, but not knowing the other	selective of others, can't know someone in two dates
	Easy to choose, but risk of being rejected	burden of choice, blocking, ghosting
	Reduced risk, but less real	avoid vulnerability, safer but not genuine, reduced cues
2. Authenticity – Staginess	Self	authentic self online, commercial self, conflict between self-parts
	Others	assessing other's authenticity, comparing with others, fake persona
	Strategies for resolving the tension	meet soon, be upfront, test for consistency
3. Safety – Risk	Physical safety	public meeting place, fear of violence, comfort is key
	Online fraud	Money scam, catfishing, false profiles, checking background
	Emotional safety	emotional withdrawal, ghosting, boundaries, past trauma

4. Proximity – Distance	Emotional closeness	being available, constant messaging, comfort in silence
	Imagined – Real	imagined connection, idealized other, reality check in first meeting

Appendix E

Information and Consent Form for Study 3

[To be presented online via Qualtrics]

Study title: Exploring adults' perceptions of romantic relationships using a story completion method

Purpose of the Study

Thank you for your interest in this research study.

I am Melane Pilek, a PhD student in the Department of Psychology, Maynooth University.

As part of the requirements for my doctoral degree, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr Constance de Saint Laurent.

This study aims to explore perceptions related to romantic relationships, including the quality of relationships and future outcomes.

Who has approved this study? This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why am I doing this research? By participating in this research you are helping us to understand the dynamics of modern romantic relationships.

Why have you been invited to take part? You have been invited to take part because you are over 18 years of age.

What will happen if you decide to take part in this research? This online survey will present you with some stories about characters at the very beginning of their romantic relationships. You will be asked to write you own continuation of the story, and answer questions about potential outcomes of relationships. Additionally, you will

be asked a few questions about your age and related relationship topics. Participation will take approximately 10 minutes.

What information will be collected? Some demographic questions regarding your age, relationship status, level of education, profession, history of online dating use, and sexual orientation will be collected.

How will your data be used? The anonymous data will be collected through an online survey platform and stored electronically on their database. It will be deleted from this server after one year. The downloaded data will be stored on an encrypted computer for an indefinite period. It will be seen by members of the research team and may be uploaded to an online data repository where it can be downloaded by others. These data will be entirely anonymous, and can never be linked with your identity or used to identify you.

How will your privacy be protected? The data you provide will be entirely anonymous, and cannot be used to identify you or linked back to you in any way. You will be identified by an anonymous ID code only, and no identifying information will be collected. We will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the write-up. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the write-up will be entirely anonymous. However, it must be recognized that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

What are the benefits of taking part in this research study? There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study, but we hope you will find it interesting and enjoyable.

What are the risks of taking part in this research study? There are no inherent risks associated with participating in this study. However, it is possible that talking about relationships may cause some distress. If you experience any distress following the study, you may contact the free counselling service, The Samaritans, on the phone number: 116 123.

Can you change your mind at any stage and withdraw from the study?' Participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from this study now or after you begin. After you submit your data, it will be anonymized and cannot be withdrawn.

How will you find out what happens with this project? The results may be published in a research article in a scientific journal or described in the media. No clues regarding your identity will appear in any published results.

Contact details for further information: Please contact Melane Pilek via email at melane.pilek.2022@mumail.ie if you would like any further information about the study.

You may also contact the supervisor of this study, Dr Constance de Saint Laurent, at constance.desaintlaurent@mu.ie if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Consent Form

If you agree to take part in the study, please click **I Consent** below to begin the survey, acknowledging that:

- You understand the purpose of the study and are participating voluntarily
- You are aware that you can withdraw any time during the survey, but not after you submit your answer.
- You understand that your anonymity will be ensured

- You understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet
- You understand that your data in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications

Appendix F

Characteristics of Participants in Study 3

Participant Characteristics by Gender, Relationship Status, and Dating App Use

Gender	N (%)	Relationship Status	N (%)	Dating Apps Use	N (%)
Female	191	Couple	265 (72.30)	Yes	45 (12.3)
Male	171	Single	102 (27.8)	No	322 (87.7)
Non-binary/Other	5			Past Use	
				Yes	199 (54.2)
				No	123 (33.5)

Appendix G

Story Stems for Study 3

1A) Meeting in an online community, female character version:

Maya, a 28-year-old writer from London, joins an online creative community to connect with fellow writers and artists. There, she meets Adam, a 30-year-old artist from Birmingham, and they quickly bond over their shared love for storytelling and artistic expression.

As Maya and Adam discuss ideas for stories and character development, Maya discovers an admiration for Adam's creativity and passion for art. Their interactions extend beyond the forum as they exchange messages, emails, and even handwritten letters, sharing personal anecdotes, artistic inspirations, and literary recommendations. Maya finds herself drawn to Adam's imagination, wit, and vulnerability, leading to deep and intimate conversations about their life experiences and philosophical thoughts. Over six weeks of constant communication, Maya and Adam realized that they have developed feelings for each other.

1B). Meeting in an online community, male character version:

Adam, a 30-year-old writer from Birmingham, joins an online creative community to connect with fellow writers and artists. There, he meets Maya, a 28-year-old artist from London, and they quickly bond over their shared love for storytelling and artistic expression.

As Adam and Maya discuss ideas for stories and character development, Adam discovers an admiration for Maya's creativity and passion for art. Their interactions extend beyond the forum as they exchange messages, emails, and even handwritten letters, sharing personal anecdotes, artistic inspirations, and literary recommendations.

Adam finds himself drawn to Maya's imagination, wit, and vulnerability, leading to deep and intimate conversations about their life experiences and philosophical thoughts. Over six weeks of constant communication, Adam and Maya realized that they have developed feelings for each other.

2.A) Meeting on Tinder, female character version:

Maya, a 28-year-old writer from London, matched with Adam, a 30-year-old artist from Birmingham on the dating app Tinder while she was travelling for work. After Maya returned to London,

they started a conversation and quickly bonded over their shared love for storytelling and artistic expression. Their interactions extend beyond Tinder as they exchange messages, emails, and even handwritten letters, sharing personal anecdotes, artistic inspirations, and literary recommendations. Maya finds herself drawn to Adam's imagination, wit, and vulnerability, leading to deep and intimate conversations about their life experiences and philosophical thoughts. Over six weeks of constant communication, Maya and Adam realized that they have developed feelings for each other.

2B). Meeting in-person, male character version:

Adam, a 30-year-old writer from Birmingham, matched with Maya, a 28-year-old artist from London on the dating app Tinder while he was travelling for work. After Adam returned to Birmingham, they started a conversation and quickly bonded over their shared love for storytelling and artistic expression. Their interactions extend beyond Tinder as they exchange messages, emails, and even handwritten letters, sharing personal anecdotes, artistic inspirations, and literary recommendations. Adam finds himself drawn to Maya's imagination, wit, and vulnerability, leading to deep and intimate conversations about their life experiences and philosophical thoughts. Over six

weeks of constant communication, Adam and Maya realized that they have developed feelings for each other.

3.A) Meeting in-person, female character version:

Maya, a 28-year-old writer from London, met Adam, a 30-year-old artist from Birmingham, at a creative writing workshop in London. They interacted very briefly during the initial introduction and exchanged contact.

After the workshop ended, they continued to share ideas for stories and character development. Their interactions extended beyond the workshop activities, as they exchanged messages, and even handwritten letters, sharing personal anecdotes, artistic inspirations, and literary recommendations.

Maya found herself drawn to Adam's imagination, wit, and vulnerability, leading to deep and intimate conversations about their life experiences and philosophical thoughts. Over six weeks of constant communication, Adam and Maya realized that they have developed feelings for each other.

3.B) Meeting in-person, male character version:

Adam, a 30-year-old writer from Birmingham, met Maya, a 28-year-old artist from London, at a creative writing workshop in London. They interacted very briefly during the initial introduction and exchanged contact.

After the workshop ended, they continued to share ideas for stories and character development. Their interactions extended beyond the workshop activities, as they exchanged messages, and even handwritten letters, sharing personal anecdotes, artistic inspirations, and literary recommendations.

Adam found himself drawn to Maya's imagination, wit, and vulnerability, leading to deep and intimate conversations about their life experiences and

philosophical thoughts. Over six weeks of constant communication, Adam and Maya realized that they have developed feelings for each other.

4.A) Tinder-assisted date in-person, female character version.

Maya, a 28-year-old writer from London, matched with Adam, a 30-year-old artist from Birmingham on the dating app Tinder while she was travelling for work. They decided to meet for coffee while she was in Birmingham, and during their conversation, they discovered their shared love for storytelling and artistic expression.

After Maya returned to London, they continued to share ideas for stories and character development through messages, emails, and even handwritten letters. Their communication evolved into deep and intimate conversations, exchanged messages, and even handwritten letters, sharing personal anecdotes, artistic inspirations, and literary recommendations. She found herself drawn to his imagination, wit, and vulnerability. Over six weeks of constant communication, Adam and Maya realized that they have developed feelings for each other.

4.B) Tinder-assisted date in-person, female character version.

Maya, a 28-year-old writer from London, matched with Adam, a 30-year-old artist from Birmingham on the dating app Tinder while she was travelling for work. They decided to meet for coffee while she was in Birmingham, and during their conversation, they discovered their shared love for storytelling and artistic expression.

After Maya returned to London, they continued to share ideas for stories and character development through messages, emails, and even handwritten letters. Their communication evolved into deep and intimate conversations, exchanged messages, and even handwritten letters, sharing personal anecdotes, artistic inspirations, and literary recommendations. She found herself drawn to his imagination, wit, and vulnerability.

Appendix H

Supplementary Data Analysis for Study 3

Over six weeks of constant communication, Adam and Maya realized that they have developed feelings for each other.

A word frequency analysis used Python's collections—counter library to identify dominant themes and terms. By aggregating words, we could highlight the most frequent terms associated with each condition. The results of this analysis are presented in Table J1.

Table J1

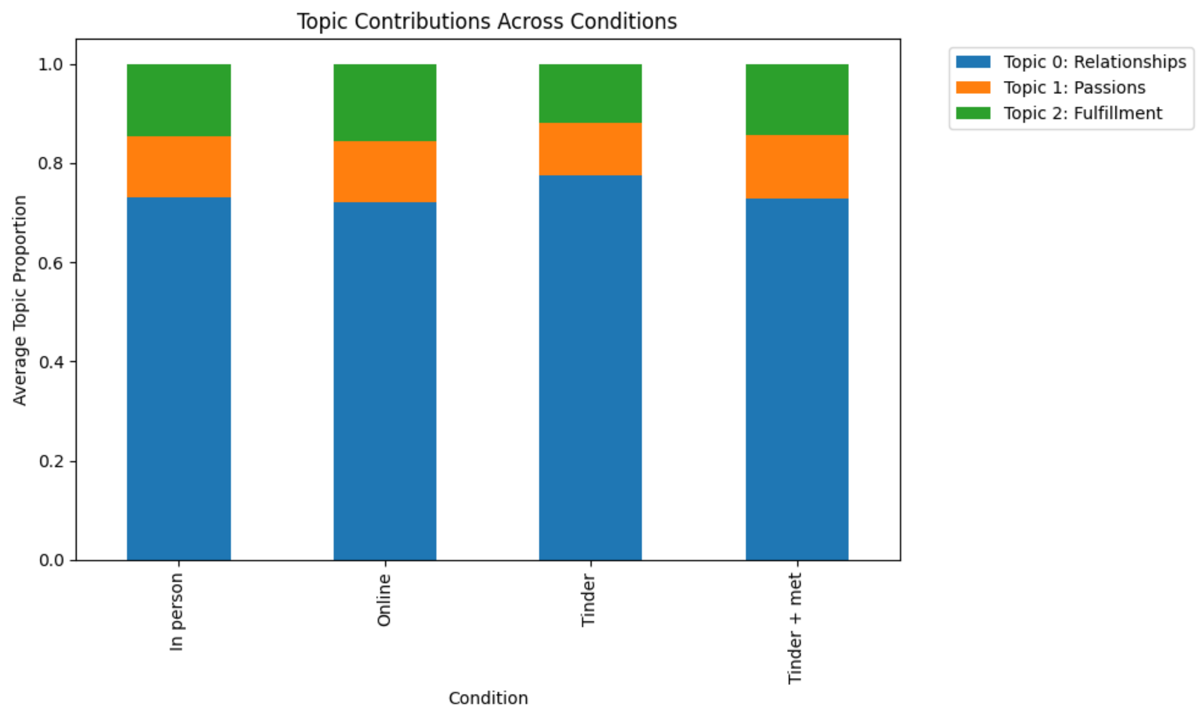
Word Frequency Analysis: Top words per condition

Condition							
In person	Count	Online	Count	Tinder	Count	Tinder + met	Count
Maya	131	Maya	133	Adam	110	Maya	118
Adam	123	Adam	133	Maya	105	Adam	116
Decided	58	Meet	88	Meet	92	Decided	80
Relationship	50	Date	50	Time	66	London	60
Meet	48	Feelings	47	Decided	59	Meet	59
Date	43	Relationship	45	London	51	Relationship	57
Feelings	36	Decide	43	Person	43	Time	48
Time	34	Art	36	Relationship	39	Feelings	36
Went	27	Time	32	Date	31	Love	33
London	23	Perso	30	Decide	28	Distance	30

Additionally, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was applied to identify the underlying topics within the data. The LDA analysis revealed three primary topics: Relationship, Passions, and Fulfillment. These topics were then analyzed across different experimental conditions, and their distribution is presented in Figure J1.

Figure J1

Theme Distribution per Condition



The themes identified in the topics reflect key aspects of the narratives: Relationships, focusing on romantic connections and pivotal moments (e.g., "date," "feelings," "relationship"); Passions, highlighting the role of shared interests and personal pursuits (e.g., "food," "books," "story"); and Fulfillment, emphasizing happiness and stability through love and family life (e.g., "happily," "children," "house").

The results of the ANOVA for the distribution of each theme across conditions indicated no significant differences: Relationship (F (3, 569) = 1.83, p = .14), Passions (F(3, 569) = 0.544, p = .652), and Fulfillment (F(3, 569) = 1.16, p = .326). Therefore,

the analysis revealed no significant effect of experimental conditions on the topics of the stories.

Next, to assess the emotional tone of each story, sentiment analysis was performed using the 'TextBlob' library in Python, which calculates a polarity score ranging from -1 (negative sentiment) to +1 (positive sentiment). The results are presented in Table J2.

Table J2

Sentiment Analysis Results Across Conditions

Condition	Sentiment	Group differences
In person	.138	$F(3, 569) = 0.37$; $p = .773$
Online	.158	
Tinder	.139	
Tinder + met	.144	

The results show general positivity in the provided stories, with no differences between groups. Based on the sentiment score, we categorized each story as 'Positive,' 'Negative,' or 'Neutral.' A Chi-Square test was performed to examine differences in sentiment distribution across experimental groups, yielding insignificant results: $\chi 2 = 8.94$, $p = .177$.

Exploratory Analysis

The Effect of Gender and Sexuality on Relationship Outcomes and Qualities

The effect of participants' gender was analyzed using a series of one-way ANCOVAs. The analysis revealed no significant main effect of gender on **positive outcomes,** $F(3, 569) = 0.56$, $p = .640$, $\eta p2 = .003$, on **negative outcomes**, $F(3, 569) =$

1.62, p = .183, $\eta p2$ = .008, on **positive quality**, F(3, 569) = 0.13, p = .940, $\eta p2$ <.001, or on **negative quality**, F(3, 569) = 0.41, p = .748, $\eta p2$ = .002.

An ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect of gender on duration in months, F(1,569) = 3.50, p = .015, ηp^2 = .018. Tukey's HSD post-hoc comparisons showed that **non-binary participants (M = 364.50, SD = 454.88, n = 4)** reported significantly longer relationship durations than both **men (M = 90.87, SD = 177.64, n = 282),** p =.011, and women (M = 83.71, SD = 169.39, n = 285), p=.009. No other pairwise comparisons reached significance.

ANCOVAs revealed no significant main effect of sexual orientation on Positive Outcomes, F(4, 568) = 0.79, p = .533, ηp^2 = .006, Negative Outcomes, F(4, 568) = 1.53, p = .191, ηp^2 = .011, Positive Quality, F(4, 568) = 0.62, p = .650, ηp^2 = .004, or Negative Quality, F(4, 568) = 0.88, p = .478, ηp^2 = .006. Similarly, no significant main effect of sexual orientation was found for relationship duration (in months), F(4, 568) = 1.27, p = .281, ηp^2 = .009.

Finally, we analyzed the effects of the gender of the story characters and the study participants in a two-way ANCOVA. A significant main effect of story gender was found for **Negative Outcomes**, F(3, 565) = 6.72, ***p* = .01**, ηp^2 = .012. Participants rated negative outcomes as more likely when the story featured **male characters** (M = 2.94, SD = 0.91, n = 282) compared to **female characters** (M = 2.74, SD = 0.92, n = 291). There was no significant effect of the interaction for any of the variables: Positive Outcomes (F3, 565) = 0.24, p = .869, $\eta p2$ = .001), Positive Quality (F (3, 565) = 0.68, p=.566, $\eta p2$ = .004), Negative Quality (F (3, 565) = 0.50, p =.682, $\eta p2$ =.003).

A two-way ANCOVA was conducted to examine the effects of story gender and participant gender on relationship duration (in months). The analysis revealed no significant main effect of story gender, F(3, 565) = 0.18, p = .671, ηp^2 < .001. A significant main effect of participant gender was found, F(3, 565) = 3.51, ***p* = .015**, ηp^2

= .018. The interaction between story gender and participant gender was not significant, F (3,565) = 0.19, *p*=.900, ηp2=.001.

Tukey's HSD post-hoc comparisons indicated that **non-binary participants** (M = 364.50, SD = 454.88, n = 4) reported significantly longer relationship durations than both **men** (M = 90.87, SD = 177.64, n = 282, ***p*=.011**) and **women** (M = 83.71, SD = 169.39, n = 285), *p*=.009). No other pairwise differences were significant.

Experiences with Dating Apps

Table J3

ANCOVA Results for the Effect of Online Dating Experience on Outcome Variables

Outcome	Dating App (DA) Past use	DA Current use	DA Experience	Experimental Condition
Positive Quality	F(1,566) =0.91, *p* = .341; ηp^2 = .002	F(1,566) = .015, *p* = .699; ηp^2= .000	F(1,566)=11.99, ***p* = .001;** ηp^2=.029	F(1,566)= 1.82, *p* = .142; ηp^2 = .01
Negative Quality	F(1,566) = .38, *p* = .054; ηp^2= .001	F(1,566) = 0.21, *p* =. 648; ηp^2 =.000	F(1,566) = 2.78, *p* = .096; ηp^2 = .005	*F(3*,566) = 6.305, *p* <.001; ηp^2 = .032
Positive Outcomes	F(1,566) = 2.06, *p* =.152; ηp^2 =.004	F(1,566) = 2.81, *p* =.094; ηp^2 = .005	F(1,566)=6.54, *p* = .011; ηp^2= .011	F(3,566) = 1.22, *p* = .304; ηp^2= .006
Negative Outcomes	F(1,566) = 0.65, *p* =. 421; ηp^2 = .001	F(1,566)=0.24, *p* = .626; ηp^2 = .000	F(1,566)=4.18, ***p* = .041**; ηp^2 = .011	F(3,566)=0.68, *p* = .563; ηp^2 = .004

Table J4

Regression Analysis Results of Online Dating Variables as Predictors of Relationship Outcomes

Outcome	DA Past use	DA Current use	DA Experience	Constant (c)	R^2
Negative Quality	$\beta = -0.01, p = .064$	$\beta = -0.01, p = .95$	$\beta = 0.05, p = .12$	c = 2.55 ***p* = .001**	.006
Positive Quality	$\beta = 0.01, p = .386$	β=0.07,p = .438	$\beta = -0.1,$ **p = .001**	c = 3.5 ***p* <.001**	.027
Negative Outcomes	$\beta = -0.02, p = .31$	$\beta = -0.12, p = .275$	$\beta = 0.08,$ **p = .042**	c = 3.71 **p <.001**	.01

The results of the ANCOVA and regression analyses revealed that dating app experience was a significant predictor of relationship perceptions. Specifically, more negative) experiences with dating apps were associated with lower ratings of positive quality and higher ratings of adverse outcomes.