

**“It’s Just Exhausting Sometimes”: Emotional Ambivalence and Digital Intimacy
Among Gen Z: a study of how dating app users construct and redefine
connection**

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, dating apps have significantly transformed how young adults initiate and negotiate romantic and sexual relationships. While existing academic research has examined technological affordances and social dynamics of dating apps, few studies have centered the perspectives of Gen Z dating app users in a European context. Therefore, this thesis addresses that gap by exploring how Gen Z dating app users in the Netherlands experience and interpret digital intimacy in this platformized world. The central research question guiding this study is: how do Gen Z dating app users in the Netherlands perceive the role of dating apps in shaping digital intimacy? The study is led by a theoretical framework that combines Bauman’s (2003) theory of liquid love, Giddens’s (1992) theory of confluent love, Gibson’s affordance theory and De Ridder’s (2021) datafication of intimacy amongst other academic findings. The research investigates how intimacy is mediated by both technological design and evolving cultural norms. Additionally, the study integrates recent literature on gendered affordances and digital affective practices (Comunello et al., 2021). Methodologically, the research adopted a qualitative approach that used as a data collection method, semi-structured interviews. The sample consisted of ten participants ranging from 18 to 25 years old living in the Netherlands that actively use dating apps. The data analysis method applied was thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and contradictions. Four key themes emerged from the collected data such as (1) ambivalence and affective contradictions; (2) digital affordances and the performance of self; (3) barriers to digital intimacy and (4) the emergence of fluid intentions and redefining connection. The findings revealed that Gen Z users critically navigate dating apps, by balancing a desire for genuine connection with a clear awareness of the superficial interactions and gendered pressures that come with using the platforms. Despite this, participants have expressed agency by not sticking to the normative expectations of finding sexual partners. Their use of apps results in alternative outcomes such as friendships, queer kinship and identity exploration. Overall, this thesis contributed to academic debates on digital intimacy by centering Gen Z perspectives and revealing how digital platform cultures are reshaping emotional relationships. Beyond its academic contribution, this research offers broader societal relevance by shedding light on how dating apps shape emotional wellbeing, digital intimacy and gendered interaction among young adults.

KEYWORDS: *digital intimacy, Gen Z, dating apps, affordance theory, liquid love, emotional labor and qualitative research*

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, there has been a "digital revolution" in courting, dating, and contemporary romance. Social media has altered social dynamics, especially for the youth. How young adults initiate, maintain, and experience romantic relationships has significantly strayed away from the traditional norms of marriage and long-term relationships. Nowadays, digital platforms facilitate the exchange of social interactions between individuals that belong in different social circles. Individuals no longer date people who are in their immediate circles but rather outside of their network (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018, p. 59).

Dating apps such as Bumble, Hinge, Tinder, and Grindr, alongside other social media platforms like Instagram, have enabled this shift in courtship. These apps introduce users to what seems like infinite possibilities for connection at users' fingertips. This development is emblematic of a broader transformation in which aspects of social and emotional life are increasingly structured by platform logics and algorithmic affordances (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018, p. 59).

Dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble and Hinge dominate Western markets and are primarily catered to people who express heteronormative sexual tendencies. In contrast, platforms such as Grindr target queer individuals and prioritize sexual explicitness and anonymity. Grindr has played a distinct role in shaping LGBTQ+ identity and intimacy within their community which enabled a rapid growth of the company (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018, p. 59). Tinder and its counterparts on the other hand provide a more intimate and conversational experience that is frequently more pleasurable (Suenzo, 2024, p. 1).

Overall, the dating app ecosystem has become increasingly monopolized, as the most popular dating apps are owned by a bigger conglomerate that owned up to 45 dating app sites in 2022, positioning itself as a central force in the global dating market (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 907). These dating apps participate in large data markets, gathering and commodifying users' data, which helps them create algorithms (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 907). This not only shapes the digital dating experience

but also reinforces particular cultural norms around attractiveness, desirability, and relationship formation (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 907).

Despite this commercialization, dating apps have also created spaces for people with mainstream and non-mainstream sexual orientations to express their sexuality, seek connection, and meet each other safely. These platforms provide unprecedented access to potential partners, fostering new forms of digital intimacy where romantic and emotional connections are increasingly mediated through technology (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 907).

The societal relevance of this topic is reflected in the omnipresence of dating apps in everyday life. In the UK, where digital adoption is high, young adults increasingly rely on these platforms to navigate their romantic lives, which creates an addictive relationship for dating app users (De Ridder, 2021, p. 594). According to Statista, it's estimated that at least 4.4 million adults in the UK use online dating services or platforms, where approximately 25% of users pay for the services, making the UK the third-largest dating app market in the world after the US and China and bringing in £150 million annually (Boyle, 2024). We can safely conclude that in current times, dating has been commodified and is estimated to be a very profitable industry (Boyle, 2024). In 2021, it was estimated that the dating industry was valued at 3.06 billion US dollars, with a predicted growth of 10.87 billion dollars in 2026 (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 906). These figures reflect not only the profitability of the dating industry but also the increasing normalization of mediated romance.

While dating apps offer expanded opportunities for connection, research paradoxically indicates that Gen Z and Millennials are engaging in less frequent sexual activity compared to previous generations (Fry, 2023). In the US, studies in 2021 reveal that American Millennials and Gen Z were having less sex with fewer partners than the generation of their parents and grandparents (Fry, 2023). This contradiction raises critical questions about the promises of dating apps to facilitate intimacy, love, or even casual sex. Are these platforms truly expanding emotional and sexual fulfilment, or are they merely increasing feelings of alienation, performativity, and choice paralysis?

According to Bandinelli (2021, p. 907), dating apps reproduce current societal structures of power, mimicking the world vision of their creators. However, certain dating apps, such as Grindr, can defy cultural norms and the status quo. They provide individuals who identify with untraditional sexual orientations (in terms of sexual preferences, kinks, and gender) a space where they can meet each other. Grindr was one of the first dating apps to be created; it was launched shortly after the GPS location was enabled by Apple on iPhones in 2009. It has digitalized the practice of cruising, a term employed by gay men that refers to how men pick up other men for spontaneous sexual interactions, a vital part of gay culture, a way to discover one's sexuality, connect with the community and find companionship (Grindr, 2024). The company has recently repositioned itself as the world's biggest LGBTQ+ social networking app due to observing that a large portion of their users use the app for nonsexual activities on the app. Grindr refocused its advertising as a "broader gay lifestyle platform" that makes it easier to engage in "socializing" and "traveling" (Byron et al., 2020, p. 499).

However, following Bandinelli's logic, dating apps that target mainstream heterosexual audiences, such as Tinder and Bumble, reproduce more rigid cultural and sexual scripts. For example, certain cultural codes that tend to be sexist or racist are transferred in traditional dating apps' algorithms and affordances, ultimately reproducing status quo hook-up culture (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 907).

According to Hanson (2021), heterosexual college students reproduce gendered expectations when using dating apps collectively (p. 895). They often perform gender identities in ways that reproduce heteronormative gender roles. Since heterosexual college students integrate their peers in their dating life, peers and matches shape how dating app users reconcile their intrapsychic desires with interpersonal sexual scripts and existing cultural scenarios. It appears that heterosexual dating app standards reinforce rather than challenge prevailing social structures because of the way that men and women collaboratively act gender within peer groups. To put it briefly, the "tragedy of heterosexuality" is maintained by heterosexual joy (Ward et al., 2022, p. 370). Men support one another's masculine identities at the expense of women and exhibit emotionally distant masculinity. Heterosexual women seek each other out because of the sexual harassment they endure. Additionally, research indicates that women of color struggled to connect with their white colleagues and find partners, suggesting that racial bias is embedded in platform design and user behavior (Ward et al., 2022, p. 370).

While many scholars have researched topics such as hook-up culture, sexual risk behaviors and biased algorithms, fewer have focused on how dating apps are reshaping cultural understandings of love and intimacy. This study aims to contribute to this emerging field by examining the current culture of love and how digital intimacy is shaped by dating apps through the lived experiences of young adults in the Netherlands.

Given that dating apps have significantly changed the culture of love in less than 20 years, we must examine love through its technological aspects; one can concentrate on the contingent principles that shape the culture of love, influencing and forming the subjectivity of lovers; such an endeavor seems especially relevant now (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 906). This study centers on the concept of digital intimacy, which refers to how people develop, sustain, and experience closeness through digital communication, often shaped by the affordances of dating apps such as instant messaging, algorithmic matchmaking, and location-based connections. The scholarly discussion of digital intimacy is intricate and multidimensional, addressing topics ranging from how personal relationships have changed social media platforms to how they have contributed to the development of new forms. It goes beyond romantic relationships to include friendships and family ties, all of which are impacted by the digital revolution in different ways. The investigation of how LGBTQ+ adolescents use dating apps to discover community and ensure safety in addition to finding romance further demonstrates the variety of ways that digital platforms may be used to build close relationships (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 27).

Digital intimacy, while offering convenience and accessibility, can also raise societal and psychological concerns. As dating platforms become more sophisticated in predicting compatibility due to the algorithm, they bring an additional aspect to the conversation that centers on how algorithms and data analytics influence close relationships. The idea that digital technology might be used to engineer or improve intimacy draws attention to the junction of human emotion and mathematical reasoning, providing insights into how interpersonal relationships change in a time when digital involvement is pervasive.

Important issues concerning the genuineness and depth of relationships cultivated under the impact of algorithmic mediation are brought up by this interaction between technology and intimacy (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 28). Beyond romance, digital intimacy has been studied in contexts such as transnational families and international students who rely on digital tools to maintain emotional proximity across geographical distances. There remains a lack of knowledge of digital intimacy from a culturally comparative standpoint (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 29). Therefore, highlighting the relevance of understanding how digital intimacy operates in the Netherlands, particularly among young individuals navigating emerging adulthood, is especially relevant. This research seeks to address the academic gap by exploring how Gen Z in the Netherlands engages with dating apps and how they perceive these platforms' impact on emotional and sexual connection by considering their advantages and drawbacks. The following central research question guides the analysis:

“How do Gen Z dating app users in the Netherlands perceive the role of dating apps in shaping digital intimacy?”

This question invites reflection on both the enabling and constraining aspects of dating apps. It foregrounds user perceptions and interpretations, recognizing that dating app experiences are not rigid but shaped by diverse gender identities, sexual orientations and cultural norms.

It is crucial to understand Gen Z's perceptions regarding the influence of dating apps on their romantic relationships and digital intimacy, as we live in an era where many aspects of life are mediated by technology. Gen Z was born between the late 1990s and early 2010s; the demographic is labelled as digital natives due to their coming of age in a fully digitalized world (Joyce et al., 2022, p. 35-36). It makes them uniquely positioned to navigate and critique the dynamics of dating apps. Unlike older generations, Gen Z often does not distinguish between online and offline modes of connection; for them, digital communication is a default, not an alternative (Joyce et al., 2022, p. 35-36). This cohort is also marked by high levels of gender and sexual fluidity, critical awareness of societal challenges, and mental health challenges associated with digital life. Their intimate experiences are shaped by both the promises of infinite choice and the disillusionment that comes with algorithmic dating cultures, making them a critical group to study (Joyce et al., 2022, p. 35-36).

Choosing to focus on the Netherlands moreover presents an interesting cultural context for our research due to its progressive and open attitudes toward contemporary dating (Bartelink & Knibbe, 2022, p. 23). Despite the high digital penetration rate and growing popularity of dating apps like Tinder and Bumble, there is relatively little academic research that captures how these platforms intersect with Dutch cultural norms.

Understanding how Gen Z users in the Netherlands negotiate digital intimacy within this environment can reveal how cultural values shape, enable, or constrain romantic expression in the digital age. While previous research has extensively examined behavioral patterns, algorithmic matchmaking, and negative psychological effects such as loneliness, there remains a gap in understanding how dating apps shape broader societal norms around emotional connection, intimacy, and sexual scripts (Ward et al., 2022, p. 369). Therefore, by adopting a qualitative approach, this research contributes to media and communication studies and digital culture research, offering insights into the intersection of digital affordances and emotional well-being and relationship expectations in romantic relationships.

2. Theoretical framework

To answer the central research question, this study will draw on affordance theory (Gibson, 1979), liquid love theory (Bauman, 2003), confluent love (Giddens, 1992) and the datafication of intimacy (De Ridder, 2021) to critically examine how Gen Z perceives the impact of dating apps on their romantic lives. Through these theoretical lenses, this research will explore how dating apps shape digital intimacy.

2.1 Sociological and historical perspective on dating

Digital transformation of courtship practices

The following section will discuss how courtship practices have been altered by the digital transformation. The following theoretical concepts seek to understand this phenomenon. The concept of confluent love, as theorized by Giddens (1992), has deep historical roots shaped by socio-cultural transformations in the 20th century. Early developments in female emancipation, combined with the third sexual revolution, reshaped traditional norms surrounding intimacy and relationships (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 272). Post-war economic prosperity reinforced the breadwinner-housewife model, yet

this era also saw a rise in premarital sex and a dramatic increase in divorce rates, reflecting shifting moral values around romantic and sexual freedom (Larsen, 2024, p. 1–289).

By the 1960s and 1970s, cultural movements like Playboy's promotion of sexual liberation and second-wave feminism's call for "free love" further challenged conventional notions of intimacy. Sex began to be valued not only as a means of emotional bonding but also as a form of self-realization and personal fulfillment. These evolving ideals undermined the stability of traditional marriage patterns; people began marrying later, divorcing more frequently, and embracing non-monogamous forms of intimacy.

Confluent love, characterized by individual autonomy, mutual benefit, and contingent commitment, gained prominence as a preferred relational model, particularly among women seeking alternatives to domestic roles. However, the emphasis on convenience, flexibility, and self-interest also contributed to increased rates of singledom, casual relationships, and emotional ambivalence. This model aligns closely with the market logic seen in today's dating apps, where relationships are often assessed through optimization and personal gain, echoing neoliberal values in the realm of intimacy (Larsen, 2024, p. 1–289).

These ideological shifts provide the critical historical context for understanding how modern dating apps operate not just as tools of connection but as platforms that embody and accelerate the principles of confluent love in a digital, data-driven environment (Larsen, 2024, p. 1–289).

As previously mentioned, modernity has had a significant impact on love, sex, and intimacy in Western societies. This modernity is conceptualized as liquid modernity, which is characterized by the increase of consumerism, globalization, and individualism (Suenzo, 2024, p. 3). It places social bonds and connections as a commodity whereby individuals are increasingly perceived as disposable. Consumer culture values, such as individualization and freedom of choice, have permeated personal life, and choosing a partner is now seen through the prism of consumer logic, which also contributes to partnerships' lacking stability and commitment (Suenzo, 2024, p. 3).

This cultural shift toward mass consumerism and the digital transformation has altered courtship practices. For example, dating culture is marked by the formation of low-effort and disposable relationships that quickly appear and disappear such as the one-night stand, the fling, friends with benefits (Suenzo, 2024, p. 4). These bonds are often devoid of emotions, containing a form of intrinsic hedonism with the sexual act as its main and only goal. This has become a sociological phenomenon where digital platforms allow for greater opportunities to create emotional bonds, however current sentiment around dating has enabled the non-formation of bonds (Suenzo, 2024, p. 4).

Let's further look into how the technological modernization of society has altered current courtship practices. The digital transformation of courtship and intimacy is characterized by technological progress that has transformed courtship practices by moving from family-supervised traditional interactions to digital-first connections, according to Timmermans & Courtois (2018, p. 59). Dating looked very different for people from previous generations; nowadays many single adults

reside in metropolitan cities where there's wider access to different networks via the algorithms of their phones. Smartphones have become social intermediaries where they have taken on the role of matchmakers by replacing the matchmaking role that family and friends used to take on (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 272).

The primary ways in which we interact with others are evolving because of the recent and extensive integration of Internet and mobile communication technology into our daily lives (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016, p. 138). The popularity of mobile dating applications like Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge allows people to adopt an individualized and commercialized way of dating by prioritizing ease of use along with immediate results from a wide selection of potential partners. This transformation aligns with the "Liquid Love" theory because contemporary relationships emerge and end quickly. Aligned with the broader impact of digitalization on intimacy (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 272), dating apps function as social intermediaries by taking over the traditional matchmaking functions that family, friends, and communities used to perform (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 272). The features of these platforms, which include mobility, location-based matching, and algorithmic suggestions, transform how people find both companionship and sexual and romantic relationships.

Scholars question whether dating apps improve romantic relationships or contribute to an environment where people treat relationships as disposable (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 274). These digitalized courtship practices have influenced sexual and romantic norms.

Changing romantic norms and scripted sexuality

Sexual and romantic norms have changed due to the transformation of courtship and dating practices; as briefly mentioned, previously scholars defined our current dating culture as confluent love. There is evidence of an increasing preference for confluent love in the culture of dating apps, which enables young adults to engage in situationships, casual relationships, and hookup culture (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018, p. 60). The change of sexual and romantic norms has been translated into gendered sexual scripts. These reflect the current culture's expectations for how women and men interact in courtship and romantic relationships. According to Ward et al. (2022), passivity and appearance are the societal expectations demanded from women, whereas for young men, it's assertiveness and emotional detachment. These societal expectations are heavily influenced by Western norms. Femininity in the Western world is focused on passivity, caretaking, emotionality, and appearance. Whereas masculinity is focused on stoicism, competition and aggression. Individuals are encouraged to engage in these types of behaviors, eventually getting rewarded. According to scholars, sexual behavior is similar to any other social behavior: it's scripted.

We can understand sexuality by using the script theory conceptual framework that is rooted in the field of critical sexuality studies. These sexual scripts function like blueprints. They emerge from specific social contexts and situations, and they help understand an individual's internal states. These

scripts help people negotiate specific sexual behaviors, by evaluating new circumstances, establishing boundaries for sexual responses and relating interpretations from non-sexual aspects to the realm of sexual interactions (Suenzo, 2024, p. 5).

Scholars view scripted sexuality on three levels. The first level of scripted sexuality is cultural scripting, referring to the semiotic systems as well as the predetermined norms and expectations influenced by different institutions such as the media. These institutions have established the limits of what is seen as acceptable and unacceptable as well as what is proper and wrong. Second, interpersonal scripting enables role adaptation for every situation and social interaction. It helps navigate the sexual experience by highlighting the shared conventions that may be in jeopardy. Third, specific sexual ideas, wishes, desires and fantasies are referred to as intrapsychic or personal scripting. They act as a bridge between individual preferences and societal norms. People connect their wishes and desires to societal meanings through this scripting (Wu & Liu, 2024, p. 3). This suggests that even personal preferences are also shaped by society (Suenzo, 2024, p. 5). They occasionally create a complex network of subtle meanings rather than a clear narrative. According to scholars, every phase of the sexual scripting process helps meaningfully contextualize the others. Typically oriented toward casual hook-ups, dating apps are both prone to and shape certain scripting processes (Suenzo, 2024, p. 5). For example, Grindr's influence is seen with the app orienting individuals towards the production of encounters as soon as possible. It leads to fast sexual gratification with a no-strings-attached attitude that doesn't include a relational follow-up according to Licoppe et al. (2016) (p. 2548). However, these dating behavioral patterns have a historical precedent in the homosexual male community. The framing of sexual encounters with strangers is not a recent phenomenon but rather reflects conventions and practices common to gay culture in the 20th century and were extensively documented during its latter half.

The findings from the study conducted by Christensen (2020), highlight the development of a novel concept "hybrid hookup script" related to sexual scripting and technological affordances. This multilevel script reintegrates traditional dating practices.

2.2 Dating apps as instruments positively shaping digital intimacy

The affordances of dating apps and their influence on romantic relationships

Sexual scripts are mediated through digital interactions; these can be examined by looking at their technological affordances (Wu & Liu, 2024, p. 4). Gibson (1979) notes that the affordance theory states that technology can shape human action by enabling certain behaviors while restricting others

(Timmermans & Courtois, 2018, p. 60). The term affordance refers to the possibilities for action that are present in the environment. It is defined as “the mutuality of actor intentions and technological capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action” in the context of media studies (Wu & Liu, 2024, p. 4). As a researcher, it is important to consider the relational approach to technological affordances. Affordances pertain to the relationship between the individual and their perception of the environment rather than representing an asset of the environment or the individual. Therefore, we can adopt three criteria for defining affordances. First, the affordance is neither the observed media “artifact” nor the “artifact” itself (Wu & Liu, 2024, p. 4). Second, an affordance might be connected to multiple outcomes but is not defined as the outcome of media consumption. Third, an affordance is unpredictable and is defined by its variability; it is dependent on the artifact and can be greater or lesser (Wu & Liu, 2024, p. 5). It is therefore relevant to use the above-mentioned criteria to understand the effect of the affordances from dating apps on feminine sexual scripts. When overviewing the literature on dating applications, four affordances stand out and affect the broader dating experience. Firstly, visual affordance, where profiles are mostly feature-driven, leads to superficial attraction without emphasis on deeper compatibility (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018, p. 61). Second, immediacy and mobility, where users can communicate and contact potential partners for meetings instantly, may further enhance impulsive behavior and decrease levels of commitment (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018, p. 60). Third, proximity affordance—the readiness to match on a casual basis with people in close proximity—effectively enhances what scholars refer to as “mobile intimacy” (Boyle, 2024). In addition, algorithmic filtering is another dimension of dating apps that explains that matches are made from self-reported data and can foster selective dating practices as well as mathematical intimacy (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022, p. 424). This ties in with the following theoretical concept of the datafication of intimacy.

The datafication of intimacy in modern romance

Aligning with the most profound change in romance today is the datafication of intimacy the transformation of romance into a relationship that can be predicted algorithmically (De Ridder, 2021, p. 593). For example, dating apps reduce attraction and even compatibility to mere data points, essentially commodifying human interactions. The digitalization of dating has greatly transformed the concept of romance into ‘datafication of intimacy,’ where romantic compatibility is calculated through a prediction algorithm (De Ridder, 2021, p. 596). Online dating platforms treat their clients as ‘customers’ to whom they sell romantic relationships while incorporating personal data to match people with potential suitors. This mathematical approach makes dating highly predictable and calculative, which can work to the advantage of some couples while destroying spontaneity and may even serve as a placebo for deeper emotional issues. Dating apps present relationships to people as the best ‘optimized’ choices, resulting in users seeking a ‘better chance’ all the time, thus damaging relationships which people already have (De Ridder, 2021, p. 606).

The important question remains whether dating apps these days encourage authentic intimacy or if they merely serve as a platform where one gets stuck in a never-ending cycle of hunting for the next partner. While dating apps provide convenience, they also contribute to romantic ambivalence. The result is a paradox of choice, where the abundance of options leads to dissatisfaction and emotional burnout. However, De Ridder et al. (2021) have concluded in their research that the threat to authentic intimacy isn't at the center of the collective stakes of mobile dating apps, as prior to the datafication, intimacy was already entangled in social norms and institutions (p. 595).

Additionally, people appear to be adept at utilizing the features offered by mobile dating applications in a variety of ways that are relevant to their unique needs, expectations, and identities. Datafication does not appear to take away from the collective power over the process of forming deep human connections. As desires, expectations, ideals, and worries are powerful experiences that can teach us important lessons about intimate coexistence with technology and others, mobile dating applications actually provide users with hidden opportunities for significant reflection. However, these collective stakes do not result in experiences that can be applied generally; rather, they are contingent upon the subject positions and settings of individuals. Therefore, our qualitative research fills in the academic gap of how individuals interact with dating apps as symbolic forces and essential components of daily life experiences (De Ridder, 2021, p. 607).

While the datafication of intimacy commodifies relationships and promotes a culture of optimization, it also influences user behavioral patterns. The ease of connecting with multiple people simultaneously, in combination with algorithm-driven matches, can lead to the disposability of relationships, which normalize ending relationships without closure, defined as ghosting (Šiša, 2022, p. 1-2)

Digital intimacy

Parsakia and Rostami (2023) explore the concept of digital intimacy, examining how technology shapes friendships and romantic relationships. Through qualitative analysis, they identify seven key themes: formation of digital intimacy, maintenance of relationships, challenges of digital intimacy, benefits of digital intimacy, navigating digital and offline worlds, evolution of digital intimacy, and characteristics of digital intimacy. Their findings highlight the complex interplay between digital and physical interactions, emphasizing communication patterns, trust-building, privacy concerns, and the dual nature of digital intimacy as both enriching and challenging.

Key insights relevant to this study include how dating apps foster initial romantic connections through frequent messaging, emojis, and digital expressions of affection, while also creating challenges such as emotional disconnection, boundary management, and miscommunication.

Additionally, the study underscores how digital platforms enhance accessibility and inclusivity, particularly for marginalized groups, while also requiring users to navigate the blurred

lines between public and private interactions. By integrating Parsakia and Rostami's (2023) framework, this research situates digital intimacy within dating app culture, analyzing how Gen Z perceives these platforms as tools for connection, emotional expression, and relationship maintenance, while also grappling with issues of authenticity, commitment, and trust in a technology-driven dating landscape.

Digital intimacy can also be viewed from the lens of accumulating social capital whereby digital intimacy can be exploited to expand users' networks with the intent of gaining certain benefits (Ratna Noviani et al., 2024, p. 45). Technologies have enabled new ways of experiencing relationships and a sense of belonging. This phenomenon has been proven even further with the past COVID 19 pandemic whereby the only way for individuals to stay connected was through communication technologies. Social distancing policies and decreased physical mobility have significantly changed intimacy. Conventional in-person personal relationships are gradually giving way to so-called virtual or digital intimacies (Ratna Noviani et al., 2024, p. 46). People used dating apps during the pandemic mainly to find affective connections, such as friendships and sexual relationships, in order to get over the loneliness brought on by less in-person interaction. Furthermore, some instances demonstrate that dating apps are being utilized to create transactional connections in order to obtain financial or business advantages. Others demonstrate how relationships formed through digital intimacy may be transformative, particularly for those who hold non-dominant positions regarding gender, race, sexuality, and other social inequalities (Ratna Noviani et al., 2024, p. 46).

According to Lomanowska & Guitton (2016), it is crucial to think about how interpersonal intimacy in the setting of online social interaction may affect health and well-being results in the digital age. Social-structural conditions (such as cultural and socioeconomic factors) and social network features (such as size, density, and reciprocity) have an upstream effect on health and well-being, while psychosocial mechanisms of interpersonal behavior, such as intimate interactions, have a downstream effect. In the end, these effects come together at behavioral, psychological, and physiological pathways that are more closely associated with specific outcomes related to health and well-being (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016, p. 138). In a similar vein, the social contexts of the Internet can be viewed from a variety of angles, ranging from the expansion in social connectivity made possible by online social networking programs to encounters that encourage intimate self-disclosure and interpersonal disinhibition. Increased connectedness does not always equate to more meaningful social ties, even though online social networking might boost one's social capital.

As a result, a variety of factors could affect how users express and perceive intimacy in online interpersonal interactions. There are still a lot of unanswered issues about how these elements affect the sense of online intimacy because this field of study is still relatively new.

For example, how frequently does intimacy occur in various online circumstances, and how is it different from how it occurs in traditional offline ones? What role do interaction modalities and media diversity from text-based to immersive play in the emergence of online intimacy? Does interacting with people we already know in real life have a different intimacy experience than interacting with those we meet online? (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016, p. 139).

2.3 Dating apps as instruments hindering digital intimacy

Risk of authenticity in online dating

Researchers have wondered if it would be feasible to develop close relationships through the Internet since its inception. It is now clear that friendships and romantic relationships are frequently formed and maintained online, and that these connections can be comparable to traditional offline relationships in terms of their intimacy, meaning, and durability (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016, p. 139). The characteristics of various platforms, such as the quantity of participants (social parameters), the modes of interaction (text, audio, video, etc.), or whether they promote communication and the development of new relationships between strangers or the preservation of preexisting offline relationships, determine how different online contexts are. Moreover, different online platforms embody specific imaginaries and cultural schemas. For example, Grindr emphasizes sexual explicitness, directness and a visible, impersonal approach. Conversely, Tinder provides a more private and covert experience focused on conversing and building stronger relationships. The results demonstrate that these expectations are linked to particular scripts and presentations that appear to be a component of each app's idioms. Users' preferred online surroundings and methods of interacting with others online can also be influenced by individual characteristics (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016, p. 139).

According to the participants' descriptions, they are aware of the behaviors and communication styles that are required on each platform, and they learn the script and follow the guidelines to stay out of trouble. Anonymity, nudity, and different user-defined tribes are common on Grindr. The classification system is criticized by some users, though, because it might stifle individual expression and foster divisiveness (Suenzo, 2024, p. 14).

The data demonstrates that when people look for more intimate relationships among a plethora of possible mates, repetitiveness in online chats is widespread. In order to sustain involvement and interest, interviewees described how challenging it may be to keep conversations going. This is in line with studies that indicate an "affective mood of boredom" is produced by dating apps. In order to find and obtain pleasure and prevent becoming immobilized by certain circumstances, people

actively employ and arrange their media repertory. According to the findings, Instagram provides areas that encourage interactions that are seen as genuine and enjoyable. Real flirting is made possible by its vibrancy, interaction, and ability to relate to people's everyday lives (Suenzo, 2024, p. 14).

According to the study, each platform has unique expectations, symbolic boundaries that go along with them, and social repercussions for noncompliance. Furthermore, the study reveals common practices among interviewees in promoting interactions and presenting themselves while pursuing intimacy, underscoring the significance of interpretive scripts. Lastly, this study sheds light on the personal scripts that direct people's goals and ambitions, especially when it comes to finding pleasure and fostering relationships. Future research should investigate the interconnectedness of these three levels within a more comprehensive semiotic framework of dating and courtship, which are context- and time-specific, given the inherent constraints of this study (Suenzo, 2024, p. 14).

The stories highlight the variety of experiences, the existence of unique and frequently conflicting imaginaries and relationships, and the sexual media repertoire while also admitting the impact of market logic on interviewees' experiences. The respondents in this study still exert physical effort to find meaningful connections in and around dating apps, which runs counter to the notion that hookups or one-night encounters are defined as partnerships without expectations of emotional mutuality, relationality, or projection in the future. The study's participants demonstrate that even in the digital age, happy, fulfilling relationships may still exist, even if dating apps perpetuate unhealthy relationship dynamics (Suenzo, 2024, p. 15).

Impact on emotional well-being associated with ghosting

One of the notable effects of dating app culture is the increased frequency of ghosting, which refers to a situation where someone abruptly ceases communication with another person without any explanation (Wu & Olajide Bamishigbin, 2024, p. 446). According to Wu and Bamishigbin (2024), ghosting is becoming more common because relationship expectations are ambiguous, as previously seen with the concept of liquid love, where relationships appear and disappear quickly, and digital spaces make it easy to avoid confrontation. Their investigation covers great detail on how those being ghosted tend to suffer psychologically, at times leading to low self-regard and confusion around issues of closure. In addition, the research claims that ghosting has become a sociocultural practice that is framed by the new technological environment of dating apps, indicating an unwillingness to deal with conflict, where people choose silence instead of interaction (Wu & Olajide Bamishigbin, 2024, p. 445-446). Ghosting is viewed by Pira & Casagrande (2024) as a sign of commitment anxiety and emotional paralysis that affects many modern structures. The phenomenon's profound cultural and societal influence is only highlighted by the mainstreaming of the practice and establishes ghosting as a legitimate relationship management technique. All of this should be viewed as a shadow of contemporary social interactions, exposing the contradictions and

complexity of an increasingly individualistic and mediatized society. This approach seeks to provide a critical viewpoint for examining interpersonal relationships as well as the larger power and technological institutions that influence society (Pira & Casagrande, 2024, p. 149). What is meant by the shadows of the social are the ambiguous and gray areas that exist in the extremities of interpersonal relationships. These social shadows are present in everyday interactions, viewed through the lens of anonymity or distance. They create invisibility that has a visible and significant effect on relational dynamics (Pira & Casagrande, 2024, p. 149).

The article by Šiša (2022) explores the ambiguous practice of ghosting which is enabled by the gamified nature of dating apps. It also examines how ghosting creates a false sense of control. Therefore, the practice of ghosting allows the emotionally taxing task of ending a relationship with technology. Overall, the findings provide an original perspective on modern dating behaviors. It also places the study within a wider academic intersection between media studies and dating app research (Šiša, 2022, p. 1)

Viewing these various relationships in the social context provides insight into the positive and negative impacts of dating apps. Although they grant access to potentially limitless new partners, they also create problems, for example, in emotional engagement, commitment, or even wellness (Wu & Olajide Bamishigbin, 2024, p. 447). The consequences of such platforms go beyond single people's experiences, they affect social attitudes toward relationships and the concepts of intimacy and connection.

The theoretical framework highlights the complex role that dating apps play in shaping Gen Z's romantic experiences. While these platforms offer access to potential partners, they also introduce new challenges related to emotional satisfaction, commitment, and mental well-being.

This theoretical framework also helps us understand the various functions that dating apps serve as social intermediaries and commercialized matchmaking tools and facilitators of digital intimacy. Their affordances, such as visual-based attraction and proximity-based matching, redefine how Gen Z engages in romantic connections (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 27-30). On the one hand, these platforms offer convenience and a myriad of dating opportunities; they also contribute to relationship disposability, emotional ambivalence, and shifting commitment norms (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022, p. 423-425). The datafication of intimacy raises questions about authenticity in emotional connections; additionally, dating apps shape communication patterns, normalizing ghosting and reflecting a broader societal trend in digital avoidance (Wu & Olajide Bamishigbin, 2024, p. 446).

Furthermore, by understanding how Gen Z perceives dating apps, this research contributes to broader discussions on digital well-being, relationship dynamics, and the future of intimacy in a tech-mediated world.

3. Research design and methods

3.1 Description and justification of the method

To ground the study, we posed the following as the central research question: “How do Gen Z dating app users in the Netherlands perceive the role of dating apps in shaping digital intimacy?”. By posing a question of this nature, we aimed to investigate how discourses and sentiment about dating apps of young adults in the Netherlands were formed. This question addresses a phenomenon that is deeply personal, socially embedded as well as constantly evolving through subjective interpretation. Given the exploratory nature of the inquiry and the emotional complexity involved, this research employed a qualitative approach which is best suited to uncover meaning in lived experiences and interpersonal dynamics (Flick, 2018). Qualitative research aims to comprehend and provide an explanation for social processes from the inside in a variety of ways, such as by examining an individual’s experiences (Flick, 2018).

Therefore, this study seeks to understand the lived romantic experiences of Gen Z who use dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr. A qualitative approach is adopted to explore how young adults in the Netherlands perceive the role of dating apps in their romantic relationships. Given the subjective nature of lived experiences and perceptions, qualitative methods are well-suited for capturing in-depth insights. If we would have chosen quantitative methods the nuanced and contradictory emotions of the user’s experience wouldn’t have been captured. For example, quantitative surveys lack the flexibility to follow up on emergent emotional themes such as swiping fatigue or emotional labor both of which arose unexpectedly in the interviews. This research takes a constructivist epistemological stance, assuming that knowledge and meaning are co-created between the researcher and participant; this is especially relevant when exploring emotional and relational experiences like intimacy (Johnson, 2001). As the interviewer, I acknowledged my own position as a member of Gen Z and as someone familiar with the dating app landscape. This insider status helped build rapport but also required reflexivity to avoid over-identifying with participant’s experiences. Reflexive journaling was kept after interviews to minimize bias.

Conducting semi-structured interviews ensured plurality, and individuals were able to express freely their views and perceptions about their intimate lives. This ensured consistency in identifying key thematic areas and enabled a deeper exploration of individual attitudes, behaviors, and interpretations of digital relationship experiences, which are crucial for addressing the research question (Johnson, 2001). Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible framework where participants can elaborate on their thoughts while maintaining focus on predetermined themes such

as the use of dating apps, perceptions of intimacy, and psychological well-being, which are some of the predetermined themes. This approach balances structure and openness, ensuring comparability across responses while allowing space for emerging themes and insights. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews facilitate rapport-building, encouraging participants to share raw and vulnerable personal anecdotes and reflections (Johnson, 2001).

3.2 Data collection and sampling strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit the participants from the sample, which consisted of ten individuals from Generation Z between the ages of 18 and 30 living in the Netherlands. This age group is relevant due to the early adoption of social media and digital technologies at a young age; they represent digital natives. To anchor the decision to focus on Gen Z participants, it's important to take into consideration recent trends indicating that this cohort is experiencing swiping fatigue (Milmo, 2024). By focusing on Gen Z in the Netherlands, this study is well-placed to explore how digital natives who have grown up with tech-mediated dating are now navigating emerging tensions: the appeal of the convenience of dating apps contrasts with a growing need for human connection (Milmo, 2024). This tension makes them a particularly informative sample through which to understand digital intimacy and changing romantic norms in the digital age. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure accurate representation across the various demographic groups (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Moreover, it helped to ensure that the quality of the sample is located without biases so as to increase the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). To capture a broader spectrum of experiences and perspectives the sample included individuals of diverse gender identities, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. The majority of the participants identified as cisgender and heterosexual. However, a few participants were queer identifying as pansexual or gay. The recruitment was conducted via Instagram, Whatsapp and university mailing lists. Posts included a short description of the research topic and the participation criteria such as having used dating apps at least five times in the past two years. The message was the following:

“Hey,

I'm currently working on my Master's thesis about dating apps and digital intimacy. I'm looking for dating app users that are Gen Z (between 18 to 30 years old) and who live in the Netherlands. The last criterion is to have actively used dating apps in the past two years meaning having created a profile on the platform, engaging with other users by swiping and chatting and lastly having gone on dates with other dating app users. The goal is to chat in a relaxed environment by having an informal interview (30-60 minutes) about your experiences and thoughts when using dating apps. Just think of it as a genuine conversation about modern dating and how technology might shape our connections.

Everything you share will be anonymous and handled with care. If you're comfortable reflecting on your dating life and open to talking about it with me, I'd love to hear from you.

Message me if you want to know more. Feel free to share this with friends too, the more perspectives, the better!

Thanks so much! 

Emanuela “

The use of dating apps was characterized by actively being present on the platform, having made a profile, engaging with other users, and going on dates. In addition to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was used as a supplementary recruitment strategy. Also referred as a convenience sampling method (Naderifar et al., 2017, p. 2), this method saves time but also gives the researcher the chance to interact with the samples more effectively, as participants are acquaintances of the first sample (Naderifar et al., 2017, p. 2). Where initial participants recommended peers that met the study's criterion, snowball sampling was particularly appropriate for this research due to its focus on dating and digital intimacy as a socially situated and emotionally nuanced topic. These themes often involve personal disclosures, vulnerability and reflections that participants may only feel comfortable sharing if approached through trusted interpersonal connections

While incentives weren't offered, the study's relevance and the casual tone of communication encouraged participation. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews allowing for both guided questions and the flexibility for participants to share their experiences and insights freely. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in casual settings such as cafés, participant's houses or at the park. Each interview lasted between 30 to 120 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions guided by five key subjects such as the following: 1. Use of dating apps, 2. Perceptions of intimacy, 3. Emotional and relational outcomes, 4. Digital vs offline dynamics and lastly 5. Cultural or personal factors. Some of the questions asked were:

“What are you generally looking for when you use a dating app (e.g., friendship, hookups, long-term relationships)?”

“Have you experienced any frustrations when trying to build intimacy online?”

“Do you think digital intimacy can complement in-person intimacy?”

The interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature of dating app usage and digital intimacy. Some key areas of inquiry in the interview guide included the role of technology in initiating and maintaining relationships, perceived benefits and challenges of digital intimacy, and strategies used to navigate digital and offline boundaries (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 29-30). The flexibility of this format allowed participants to recount narratives, reflect on contradictory feelings and explore cultural influences on their behavior. While 10 participants might appear to be a modest number, thematic saturation was reached as no new insights emerged after the ninth interview (Johnson, 2001). The sample size is aligned with other in-depth qualitative studies that prioritize depth over breadth in understanding complex social phenomena.

Moreover, strict adherence to ethical principles was maintained, including getting participants' informed consent asked prior to the interview, maintaining participant anonymity, and anonymizing all personal information. As topics involved romantic relationships and emotional vulnerability, participants were reminded that they could pause or end the interview at any time.

3.3 Operationalization of relevant constructs

By examining participants' perspectives toward the function of dating apps in their romantic lives, including their motives and frustrations, the idea of dating app perception will be investigated. Discussions on how dating apps help or hurt meaningful connections will be used to evaluate the development of romantic relationships. Examining how virtual interactions influence both physical and emotional proximity would help us better understand digital intimacy. Questions concerning emotions of fear, reliance, or contentment resulting from extended usage of dating apps were also be used to examine psychological impacts. While leaving space for spontaneous conversations, the interview questions were designed from the body of existing literature. These questions helped render operational the key concepts while maintaining a flow in the interviews.

Perceptions of dating apps

This concept captured the positive and negative perceptions of dating apps such as user motivations, expectations, frustrations and perceived roles of dating apps in romantic life. Grounded in Bandinelli's (2022) critique of dating platforms as instruments that commodify desire and reproduce power structures, participants were asked about how the interface, matches, and app cultures shaped their experience (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 912).

Digital intimacy

Drawing on the concept of digital intimacy as outlined by Parsakia and Rostami (2023), this referred to feelings of closeness and emotional connection mediated through app-based interaction. Participants were asked how they express affection, vulnerability, and trust on dating platforms, and how these compare to offline intimacy. The affordance theory (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018) guided the understanding of how certain app features enabled or constrained these expressions.

Romantic and sexual relationship formation

This was analyzed using Giddens' (1992) notion of confluent love, emphasizing negotiated, short-term, mutually beneficial bonds. Participants discussed situationships, flings, and long-term transitions and reflected on how app-based dating influences norms of commitment and relational depth. Bauman's (2003) theory of liquid love also informed questions about the ephemerality and disposability of modern relationships (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 273).

Authenticity and self-presentation

Participants described how they constructed and curated their profiles. The tension between authentic self-expression and social desirability was examined in relation to societal scripts around gender and sexuality (Ward, 2020; Wu & Liu, 2024). Questions about ideal self-presentation, pressure to conform to standards, and profile aesthetics were linked to datafication and algorithmic visibility.

Emotional well-being and psychological impact

Emotional effects such as anxiety, rejection, ghosting, and validation-seeking were explored through the lens of platform capitalism (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022). Participants reflected on the psychological costs of gamified dating, the burden of constant availability, and the paradox of choice. Ghosting was analyzed as a structural outcome of liquid connections and an avoidance of emotional labor (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2024).

This multi-theoretical operationalization allowed the study to move beyond surface-level interpretations of app use, toward a critical understanding of how technological, cultural, and interpersonal factors shape Gen Z's digital romantic experiences.

3.4 Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the primary data gathered from 10 interviews was examined using thematic analysis. This required a thorough coding method in which preliminary codes were generated and compiled into possible themes using Atlas Ti. These themes or patterns were examined and improved upon until a logical pattern of results became evident. In order to ensure a thorough examination of the subject, the analysis sought to achieve theoretical saturation at which point no novel concepts or insights appeared from the data (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 29-30). This approach entails finding recurrent themes and patterns in the responses of participants, which enables the development of significant insights. Thematic analysis offers a methodical yet adaptable way to code and analyze data, making it ideal for investigating intricate social phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six-step framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed in the analysis process: (1) getting to know the data by reading the transcripts several times; (2) initial coding to find pertinent textual segments; (3) theme-finding by grouping related codes; (4) reviewing themes to make sure they are coherent and consistent; (5) defining and naming themes to capture the essence of the data; and (6) creating the final report with thematic interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To enhance reliability and validity, member checking was employed, where selected participants reviewed preliminary findings to ensure that their experiences were accurately represented. To ensure reflexivity, a reflective diary was maintained throughout the process. Furthermore, direct quotes and contextual details were inserted to ground the analysis in participant voices.

4. Results

The primary data collected from the 10 semi-structured interviews conducted have revealed a consistent tension between the desire for genuine emotional connection and intimacy and the structural limitations imposed by dating app platforms. The first group included 5 participants who have actively used dating apps to develop and maintain friendships and romantic relationships. This group was diverse and included 3 females and 2 males with ages ranging from 20 to 25 years old reflecting a wide spectrum of digital communication experiences. Through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with involved individuals, we've identified three key themes that sum up how digital intimacy and the use of dating apps are perceived by Gen Z living in the Netherlands. The high number of codes (1,518 across 10 interviews) reflects the rich and multi-layered nature of the data and the exploratory scope of the study. These codes were carefully refined, grouped into thematic categories, and iteratively reviewed to ensure analytic clarity and coherence.

Theme 1: Ambivalence and affective contradictions

This theme represents the emotional paradox that Gen Z dating app users experience.

Overall, dating apps are often perceived as both liberating and alienating. From one side they offer convenience and accessibility to potential connections. Participants have felt temporary validation and ease of access. However, these positive effects are short-lived and later on they lead to emotional fatigue and superficiality. This theme is grounded in sociological theories that explain how contemporary dating is shaped by technological mediation and emotional uncertainty. Notably, Bauman's (2003) concept of liquid love, Giddens's (1992) theory of confluent love and De Ridder's (2021) framework of datification of intimacy help unpack how digital platforms structure brief encounters and contradictory emotional states (p. 594). These dynamics are further shaped by technological affordances (Gibson, 1979), which shape how users interact with dating apps both emotionally and functionally.

1.1 Validation seeking vs disillusionment

A common narrative across interviews was the pursuit of emotional validation through dating apps. Participants admitted to opening apps like Tinder, Hinge or Bumble not necessarily to meet someone but to experience the momentary high that comes with being liked, matched or desired. Dating apps offer an interface where likes and matches temporarily boost the user's self-esteem and confidence (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 907). This momentary validation aligns with Bauman's (2003) description of modern relationships characterized by being fluid, commodified and lacking commitment (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 273). One of the technological affordances enabled by dating apps is the ease of swiping, which allows quick and low-effort interactions and supports the consumption of attention as a form of emotional currency (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 912).

However, the emotional fulfilment is temporary and fleeting. This form of engagement is deeply connected to what Illouz (2007) describes as the commodification of emotional life under digital capitalism (De Ridder, 2021, p. 595). Dating apps become mechanisms for seeking micro-validations that simulate intimacy but rarely fulfill deeper emotional needs. Participants were self-aware about this effect such as participant 6 commenting: "Sometimes you're just looking for a bit of confirmation. Like how many people like me? Just makes you feel better sometime.

According to De Ridder (2021), this short-lasting effect leads to disappointment or emotional disillusionment as critiqued in the datafication of intimacy (p. 596). When attraction and connection are rationalized by being reduced to data points and compatibility scores. Rather than building sustained emotional bonds, users are drawn into a cycle of short-lived validation followed by ambivalence (p. 595).

This validation was often described as short-lived and shallow, contributing to a feeling of emotional fatigue. Such as participant 4 saying: “It boosts your self-esteem, but just for a moment. Then it’s like...okay, next.” Which eventually led to a burnout of the app, users returned to apps seeking emotional affirmation but left feeling unfulfilled. This finding revealed the affective contradiction embedded in digitally mediated romance. We can say that in the context of navigating dating apps, romantic interactions are commodified where attention becomes transactional (De Ridder, 2021, p. 603).

The phenomenon reflects back on the findings from De Ridder (2021), arguing that emotional dynamics of dating apps reflect broader shifts toward gamified affection and impersonal interaction (p. 602). The result is a paradox: users engage in platforms designed to facilitate intimacy but often experience them as alienating and emotionally shallow.

1.2 Love hate relationships with dating apps

Participants frequently expressed contradictory feeling toward dating apps, moving back and forth from enjoyment and detachment. This contradicting feeling is captured by most participants such as participant 9 saying: “They’re kinda silly, but I still use them. It’s just what everyone does now.” And participant 4: “I love it, I like it. But I fucking hate dating apps.” Many apps like Hinge, Tinder and Bumble serve as temporary distractions or tools for emotional regulation rather than intentional instruments for romantic connection.

All participants have expressed that they feel dependent on dating apps however they still heavily critique them. While they acknowledged the role of these platforms in modern social life, they also criticized their effects on emotional wellbeing and social interaction. These findings echo the paradox of digital intimacy: the same technology that facilitates connection can also alienate (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018, p. 65).

Giddens’ (1992) concept of confluent love is particularly useful here. It describes relationships based on mutual satisfaction, flexibility and conditional commitment (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 273). In the context of dating apps, the infrastructure of confluent love is exaggerated: users engage as long as the interaction is satisfying and disconnect at the first sign of inconvenience. Dating apps, therefore become emotional marketplaces, reinforcing a neoliberal model where emotional labor is individualized (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 907).

The design of dating apps that include technological affordances such as swiping, the algorithmic pattern and the gamified features can facilitate this love-hate dynamic between users and the apps (Hanson, 2021, p. 899). According to scholars, affordances are the perceived possibilities for action that emerge from an object’s design in relation to user intention. In this context, the interfaces from dating apps encourage cyclical engagement through behavioural nudges by enabling features such as

notifications and likes. By engaging in a cycle of habitual checking and emotional ambivalence, they lead users to become dependent on dating apps (Hanson, 2021, p. 899).

This ambivalence reflects broader tensions in the platformization of intimacy, where dating apps become normalized as sites of romantic labor yet are rarely experienced as emotionally nourishing (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 907). Moreover, this emotional process is not individual but collective (Hanson, 2021, p. 904). Several participants noted that app usage was part of broader social practices, tied to peer behavior and cultural norms. As participant 5 noted, “Everyone around me is on them. So, it feels like I should be too even if I don’t like it all the time”. This sense of obligation points to the normalization of dating apps within youth culture, where non-participation can lead to feelings of social exclusion, despite widespread skepticism towards the platforms themselves. This illustrates how dating platforms produce contradictions: users feel both empowered and manipulated, connected and emotionally exhausted (Hanson, 2021, p. 894).

1.3 Boredom and habitual use

The interviews indicate that another major reason for dating app use was boredom. Dating apps were described less as tools for finding meaningful romantic relationships and more as a way of online entertainment such as other social media platforms like Instagram or TikTok. Multiple interviewees explained that they turned to the apps not out of romantic desire but because of boredom or passive curiosity. Such as participant 9 noting, “I have periods. Like, it depends on if I'm really bored or if I feel like I need attention”. This pattern reflects a form of habitual social media use that is rooted in the design that encourages constant engagement. Another participant (3) expressed a similar thought:

“I don't know. To me, it felt like Instagram in the sense that it's something you just regularly check sometimes. You swipe, you check up on your chats, you see what's new. It could be every day just a little bit, or every few days when you're really busy. Of course, you don't really have time for that. But as much as Instagram, I'd say. Not as much as in terms of periods of time I'd be on it.”

As previously mentioned in the theoretical framework, scholars have noted that the affordance theory states that technology can shape human action by enabling certain behaviors while restricting others (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018, p. 60). Therefore, this boredom-driven behavior is enabled by technological affordances. Such as participant 6 stating that:

“Well, it all started because I was bored, of course. And I guess it boils down to just being bored. And when I first moved here, I thought it was a nice way to meet new people, which I feel like a lot of people say that, but... You do meet people, but you know the purpose of meeting that person is not really to make a friend. I suppose. Maybe sometimes, but I guess the main reason is always a bit of

boredom, maybe you just broke up with someone or, like, something happened, and you just need a bit of validation.”

This theme also intersects with Bauman’s (2003) liquid love, when relationships are no longer grounded in ritual or community. They become disposable and transient, the habitual use of dating apps becomes symbolic of this liquidity, where users experience endless micro-interactions that rarely turn into long-term bonds (De Ridder, 2021, p. 595). This idea is reflected by participant 8:

“But it's like this most of the time, to be honest. But just because I noticed it's something really common on dating apps. For example, you like someone, then you match, and then nothing happens. So that's why I also lose interest because it's always the same thing repeated. It's like it's a pattern that goes on and on and on and on.”

Overall, the theme of ambivalence and affective contradictions highlights the paradoxical nature of digital intimacy as it unfolds through dating apps. Participants experience dating apps as spaces of emotional convenience and spontaneous affirmation but also as sites of disposability. These contradictions can be understood through the lens of liquid love and confluent love (De Ridder, 2021, p. 595). By adopting this lens we can frame intimacy as increasingly conditional and commodified. Meanwhile, the affordances of dating apps, their interfaces amplify the cycles of emotion experienced from excitement to fatigue. Finally, the datafication of intimacy ensures that affective experiences are shaped by algorithms reducing romance to calculable metrics (De Ridder, 2021, p. 603). Gen Z users do not simply reject or accept dating apps, instead they navigate them through a lens of reflexive doubt and habitual use. Participant 5 showed awareness concerning the idea of viewing other profiles as disposable and leading to fatigue with the following statement:

“For me, it's like, I'm bored. You know, it's fun. Swipe, swipe, swipe, whatever. I don't know. I wouldn't say often. My screen time is around three hours a day. So, I do try to keep it away always. But it is the, you know, just before you go to bed and you're bored or when you're on the fucking toilet. I don't know. Like, why not? It's so easy and accessible. But I'm also thinking like you can do it for so long, but you don't have to. Like, even if you use it for 10 minutes a day, like it was so easy for me to count to 100. I can do that.”

Theme 2: Digital affordances and the performance of self

This theme represents the influence of digital affordances on the user’s experiences with the interfaces of dating apps. These highly influence self-representation and performative behavior. Participants demonstrated high media literacy about the platforms they used, carefully managing their presentation of self. This supports Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical theory which conceptualizes

identity as a performance shaped by audience and setting (Diesen et al., 2025, p. 11). This theme is centered on how users strategically perform identity through profiles and how they negotiate authenticity within different dating app cultures such as Hinge and Bumble. Responding to the platform-specific affordances enables or limits these expressions (Wu & Liu, 2024, p. 7).

Drawing on affordance theory discussed by Wu & Liu (2024) and other scholars, this section will explore how the features present on dating apps, from profile prompts to match filters, enable and constrain forms of romantic expression (p. 7). At the same time, the idea of confluent love helps to illuminate how Gen Z's relationships are structured around flexibility and performance. These dynamics are functional and can be at times deeply emotional and are embedded in how individuals craft personas as well as evaluating others in order to build digital intimacy (Comunello et al., 2021, p. 1141).

2.1 Curation of profiles

Most of the participants have reported that when building their dating profiles they're highly intentional. The process as described by the participants involves selecting pictures, choosing clever prompts and well-crafted bios. These elements are perceived as means of shaping first impressions much like the "presentation of self" in Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management (Diesen et al., 2025, p. 11). Dating apps can operate as micro-stages where users tailor their profiles to maximize attention from others. Participant 6 reflected this idea by saying:

"Everyone's putting on stage performance. But I think it kind of captures them anyways in a way, you know? I wouldn't put pictures of me posing in a weird way, you know? I was trying to be a bit quirky and funny, you know? And it's still kind of me. Of course, not all the time, but still you need to grab someone's attention, right?"

Some participants have mentioned that input from their friends is part of the process of creating their dating profiles and is perceived as valuable. For example, this was the case for participant 9: "Since January, my friend downloaded it on my phone and created my profile." and participant 8: "Because I started it like as a joke with my friends, we were drunk, and we downloaded the app."

Users described their dating profiles as performances by curating their profiles online to attract attention and likability from fellow dating app users. Such identity work is directly shaped by the affordances of the platforms (Wu & Liu, 2024, p. 7). For example, Hinge's profile structure includes prompts that encourage users to showcase their personality and humor more than other dating apps such as Bumble and Tinder. Such as "Let's debate this topic..." or "My most controversial opinion is...". These features offer more self-expression that goes beyond the image-based swiping on Tinder. As Timmermans & Courtois (2018) note, visual-based affordances lead to superficial first impressions while textual prompts invite more considered engagement (p. 59).

Participants also noted that these performances are not completely inauthentic they actually reflect an optimized version of the platform's logic. This reflects Giddens's (1992) concept of reflexivity in late modern relationships: users are continuously adapting their identity presentation based on expectations and feedback (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018, p. 60). We can note that user's profiles become a site of both self-expression and strategic branding. However, this also creates pressure to perform in ways that match the perceived cultural norms of attractiveness. As participant 5 shared:

“I think that first dates are a performance, right? Like to put in that... I mean, I just finished my sociology course. There is... Every interaction is a performance and a play. But yeah, there are only so many people that you invite into your backstage. But yeah, it's certainly not because of a dating app. And it's certainly not because of social media. Like... Nothing on media makes me want to invite somebody. Like everything is a performance, obviously. Like even WhatsApp. I get to like really think about what I want to say. I can put the right commas, the right whatever. If I send like a quirky picture, like... Even if I think like, oh, this is real. This is me. Just a random selfie. And it's too ugly. Then I'm also like, maybe not. Let's do it again. So, everything about social media is a performance, I think.”

This negotiation between authenticity and performance reflects a broader cultural script of digital intimacy, one in which emotional connection is mediated through a carefully curated self-representation (Diesen et al., 2025, p. 11).

2.2 Platform-specific cultures shaping behavior

Most participants recognized the different online cultures of each app, aligning with the platformization literature that considers how design shapes interaction (Bandinelli, 2022, p. 907). Overall, most participants referred to Hinge as their favorite dating app due to the user-friendly interface, the crowd it attracts and it being perceived as a “cool” app. For example, participant 1 perceived Hinge to be a desirable and “cool” dating app:

“I feel like it was a variety, but maybe it was, like, Bumble, then Tinder, then Hinge, actually, because I feel like I didn't go on that many dates through Hinge. Yeah. Even though I feel like there were maybe even the most interesting people on Hinge. Like, I feel like on Hinge, there are also more alternative people, and then on, like, Tinder, for example, there are also a lot of those. I don't want to like categorize any people, but it's also, like, a lot of those typical Dutch student people, you know,

like, a little bit basic. Just not really that interesting. I don't know how to say it. Like, not really edgy people, you know what I mean?"

A lot of participants shared the same opinion concerning Hinge's desirable format and the dating pool that the app creates as well as their preference for Hinge over other dating apps such as participant 10 saying: "I just think, like, the format on Hinge is just more appealing. And I think the quality of people, I think, on Hinge have been better than on Bumble." And participant 9: "Bumble just felt kinda of corny. Too many prompts that don't really mean anything." These app cultures aren't random but are created from the design, aesthetics and underlying algorithms, all core components of affordance theory (Wu & Liu, 2024). Participant 6 further expanded on this idea by noting:

"I've been using the most Hinge, and then I used Bumble also. And I tried another one called Breeze, but I didn't like it. Because I feel like all of them, there's like different types of people who use them. I would say it kind of seems to me that on Hinge, people with a higher cultural capital are on there. But also the way the app is structured and everything, it just feels like way more engaging."

This differentiation of platform cultures aligns with Bandinelli & Gandini's (2022) view of algorithmic intimacy, each platform subtly filters and shapes user behavior by presenting a specific mode of relating. Tinder and Bumble's interfaces reinforces visual filtering and quick judgements often leading to short-term engagements. In contrast, Hinge's design centers around genuine prompts and mutual likes on answers, encouraging more conversational and personality-driven connections (Suenzo, 2024, p. 3).

These platform affordances also impact how users perceive emotional potential. For example, users described feeling more hopeful about deepening connections on Hinge, while Tinder was associated with hook-ups or low effort interaction (Suenzo, 2024, p. 3). This perception influences how seriously users take their conversations and how much emotional energy is invested.

"I feel like Hinge, there is more that, like, conversation aspect than Bumble. I feel like Bumble, a lot of the times, like, it goes to, like, two, three, four messages, and then that's about it. I feel like, in my experience, like, Hinge has led to more, like, long-term-ish conversations than Bumble."

Grindr was perceived solely as a hook-up app, where queer people can find sexual relationships rather than deep and sentimental connections that can be found on Tinder, Bumble or Hinge as mentioned by participant 3:

“Grindr, I say it's more of a hookup app than a dating app. In the gay community, Grindr is really only used for hookups. If you're really looking for love, you don't go on Grindr... Grindr meetings usually are which is straight, raw hookups. But in the queer community, Grindr is usually used for hookups, Tinder is used for love. I think Grindr is not tailored towards building a sustainable relationship. The culture within Grindr is also to usually have a hookup and then ghost each other which, yeah, I feel like on Tinder unlike Grindr, you actually have a conversation. Let's start with, hello, how are you? What happened to hello, how are you? That's how Tinder works. As you understand, you probably also use it. I also use Hinge. Well, used. Yeah, Hinge is a level higher than Tinder, I would say. It's a bit more sophisticated. Hinge asks you more questions, more personalities in your profile, so I think it's even more genuine and authentic than Tinder and Grindr. But on Tinder you have conversations, you share pictures of, rather than your body and nudes, there's pictures of your hobbies, your friends, things you like, your clothes.”

This distinction shows how users strategically adapt their behavior to each app. In doing so, they actively participate in constructing and interpreting the platform's culture which alludes to the assertion that affordances are relational rather than fixed (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016, p. 139).

Overall, the theme of digital affordances and performance of self reveals how dating app are not neutral spaces for connection but active shapers of how Gen Z users perform, perceive and pursue intimacy (Suenzo, 2024, p. 3). Through the lens of affordance theory, we see how features such as profile prompts, bios and platform design structure the emotional and strategic behaviors of users. These affordances shape what is possible and feels desirable in regard to digital romance. Simultaneously, theoretical concepts like confluent love and datafication of intimacy underscore the emotional labor and performative strategies users adopt to remain visible and appealing in increasingly competitive romantic marketplaces (De Ridder, 2021, p. 598). Authenticity is sought after and is managed which creates tensions that participants have to navigate in their daily lives.

Eventually, Gen Z users are not shaped by these platforms, they play an active role in shaping them through selective engagement. This reveals the deeply relational nature of digital intimacy and the subtle ways technology can mediate individual's emotional lives (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 28).

Theme 3: Barriers to digital intimacy

While dating apps are widely adopted by Gen Z as legitimate tools for starting romantic and sexual connections, many participants in this study have expressed the barriers that impact their capacity to foster genuine emotional intimacy. The dating platforms introduce new forms of distance, distrust and emotional fatigue. Such barriers don't provide a smooth pathway to closeness (Suenzo, 2024, p. 13). This theme explores how the platform architecture and the culture present on dating apps shape barriers to intimacy regarding emotional and relational dynamics.

The analysis draws on affordance theory (Wu & Liu, 2024, p. 2), which helps us understand how the design of digital platforms both facilitates and restricts emotional communication. In parallel, concepts like liquid love and confluent love provide insight into why commitment often feels uncertain in digital relationships (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 273). Moreover, the datafication of intimacy explains how emotional connections are filtered and fragmented through algorithms that in turn create environments of disposability and distrust (De Ridder, 2021, p. 604).

3.1 Distrust and Inauthenticity

One of the most recurring obstacles to intimacy reported by participants was a fundamental sense of distrust. This included suspicion toward other's intentions, concerns about catfishing or misrepresentation and an overall feeling that online personas weren't reflective of real selves. Participants were aware that dating app profiles often limited to a few photos and brief bios can leave much room for deception, participant 4 noted the following:

"No, but I heard a few stories from friends of mine. And I really don't want to have that kind of experience. Like, meeting up with a girl. She only had old photos of herself on the social media platform. And it's a little bit harsh to say, but she became really fucking fat. And didn't look at the pictures at all. He sent me a picture and showed me the account. And it was like two different people. That's something I really wouldn't like. It costs time and effort. Yeah, and I heard a few of those stories. Things that look like that story. So I'd rather not experience something like that."

Participant 2 also experienced deception but because the chemistry didn't translate offline as well as it did online:

"Because you feel like you invested time in something, and it was a loss. And then like a lot of people on these dating apps, they've been texting for like quite some time. Like, how frustrating is it if you've been texting to this guy for one week, you thought it was amazing. I've actually had this happen. I

forgot about this guy, even like this is how I don't care about it anymore. But I was talking with this guy for like a week. It was an amazing conversation. Like he was checking the same interests. And then I met him and I was just like, you're so not it, which was like such a waste of time. And it's also kind of like, how do you know because we had such a nice conversation online but then it wasn't a match."

This sense of inauthenticity resonates with the concerns raised by De Ridder (2021), who describes how the datafication of intimacy reduces potential partners to algorithmically curated profiles. Because dating apps rely heavily on visual and textual data inputs (e.g. hobbies, bios, photos). Users are reminded to present idealized versions of themselves leading others to question the truth of what they see. To alleviate this, several participants reported using social media platforms like Instagram or LinkedIn to do some background research on them in order to verify their matches. Such as participant 1 said: "and I feel like what also always helped me is, like, getting someone's Instagram, for example because then, I feel like Instagram says a lot about a person also it's like a background check.". This behavior highlights how digital trust is outsourced to other platforms, suggesting that dating apps alone aren't perceived as reliable spaces for accurate presentation of self. It also points to the previously analyzed concept of liquid modernity, in which relationships are increasingly subject to consumerist logic.

3.2 Texting as emotional labor

Another prominent barrier to digital intimacy was the perceived emotionally draining task of texting people on dating apps. While dating apps offer low-stakes communication channels, many participants have expressed that maintaining conversations online is counterproductive to forming meaningful connections. They were often characterized as shallow and exhausting as well as being a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction. Participant 5 reflected upon this by mentioning the following:

"But if you don't feel the need to like reach out to me by calling or like I know texting is also a modern way of communication and social media. But you know, like I still see these Instagram posts of my closest friends because when they go on vacation, they either send me the pictures or I ask for them. And it's not, I can, like I don't feel overwhelmed. Because it's so much. Yeah. And that's also how I feel about texting. Like it's just you wake up, you see your phone and then obviously we all feel overwhelmed."

These feelings allude to concerns established in digital intimacy research (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023), which show that while digital tools afford new forms of emotional connection (emojis, gifs, images), they also restrict depth and nuance. According to Wu & Liu (2024), digital affordances like

asynchronous messaging can encourage multitasking and emotional detachment. These in turn can weaken the possibility of maintaining an emotional connection via the dating apps. This disconnect reinforces Bauman's (2003) theoretical concept of liquid love. In a culture of speed and surface-level connection, relationships become ephemeral and labor-intensive. A large amount of emotional effort is required to maintain interest and build trust via text is rarely reciprocated leading users to fully disengage with other individuals and with the apps. Participant 3 articulated this thought quite well with the following:

“It's draining, and there's a whole culture that goes with online dating, you need to know how to text, you need to know how to not be perceived as awkward or weird, or if you say one ha too much, you're a freak. Like, you need to be like, you need to know how to type like a Gen Z and be funny and witty while simultaneously cultivating the most attractive perfect profile that makes you look funny, interesting, down-to-earth, but still like you have something going on for yourself. It's kind of hard to create authentic connections on dating apps. So, it's hard to find someone and vibe with them after that too. It happens once in a blue moon, you know.”

Participant 5 talked about the broader implications of dependency on social media and her discomfort with it with the following statement:

“I mean, after coming back from New York, I kind of realized how my phone and social media... Like, I don't have a healthy relationship with it. And I feel like you can only be on your phone that much on these apps and the social medias if you don't think about it too much. Like, if you disassociate, which I don't like doing. And then sometimes when I become aware of what you're doing, it does make me feel weird. Like, if you think about these concepts of like, you keep just like swiping. And it's also kind of rude. You're like, being like, no, like first picture, whatever. You're like, no, skip, skip, skip. And sometimes I would, just for fun, count to like a hundred or something. And I would have said like, no, to a hundred guys. Can you imagine doing that in a room? And also, just the ability to even see a hundred prospective guys is insane to me. So, for me, it makes me feel kind of uncomfortable if I think about it too much. Like, I can only do it if I, yeah, disassociate in a way. If you have like a superficial relationship. It's like... This is the worst.”

This emotional and swiping fatigue can also reflect the over-saturation of profiles on the apps, there's an abundance of potential partners that creates a paradox of choice that discourages long-term investment in one interaction or connection. As a result, users treat chats as disposable (De Ridder, 2021, 602).

3.3 In-person as real start

For most participants, digital intimacy wasn't considered enough until they met someone in person. Participant 4 expressed this "because I think it's shit, you just need to meet people in person. But it's a nice stepping way to meeting someone in person. But I mostly like the second half, and not really the texting part.". Other participants perceived digital intimacy as complementing well offline intimacy. However, this wasn't the case for everyone. Such as participant 1 who talked about how digital intimacy helped her maintain a connection with someone:

"I feel like it's easier to build an emotional connection when you actually see someone because I feel like you can read a lot about a person from their face. Yeah. And the way they interact with you and how they carry themselves. But I feel like I could also get, like, low-key emotionally attached to someone, like, through texting or looking at their pictures of someone else coming to you. But I feel like I could also get attached to someone through text, based on, like, also their pictures and, like, what I think of them, like, how they are, and. So, you paint an image of the person in your mind, and then when you meet them, it's different. Yeah, it could be different. I'm just saying, I could get emotionally attached to someone through text that is possible."

While dating apps were valued for their convenience and reach, users insisted that meaningful emotional connection built up from physical presence. Pointing to the limits of digital affordances in replicating the embodied and affective dimensions of intimacy. Here, the online gateway is useful for access but insufficient for depth. This result aligns with Lomanowska & Guitton's (2016) findings, that digital intimacy can lack key psychological cues like facial expressions, tone and gesture. These non-verbal and verbal styles of communication are essential in building trust and empathy. Here, offline interactions were described as more emotionally fulfilling and easier to navigate. Such as participant 6 who said: "For me, I need this kind of like physical presence. Yeah. And, in a way, I think every human needs it." Participants also described app-mediated communication as linear and rigid, lacking the spontaneity and flow of real-life interaction. Moreover, digital misinterpretation such as reading too much or too little into a text was cited as a frequent barrier to progress. This inability to accurately read emotional attention online can further delay the process of building trust which is foundational to digital intimacy (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023).

Overall, this theme illustrates the emotional and technological constraints of pursuing intimacy through dating apps. While these platforms can provide access to potential partners they also create emotional roadblocks at the same time. These range from superficial profiles to emotionally draining routines and algorithmic ambiguity. By drawing on affordance theory, we see how the technological design of the apps can both enable interactions and limit the forms that intimacy can take. At the same time, participant's experiences reveal the shortcomings of datafied intimacy where romantic

potential is reduced to metrics and curated profiles. The result is a persistent sense of emotional disconnect and relational distrust. Within the theoretical frameworks of liquid and confluent love, these dynamics aren't accidental but systemic (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 272). We can say that intimacy has become more contingent and transient; this mirrors broader shifts in how relationships are created and later abandoned in late modernity.

Theme 4: Fluid intentions and redefining connection

In contrast to traditional models of romantic pursuit, which often emphasize linear trajectories, from dating to commitment, many Gen Z users articulate an openness to ambiguity, evolving intentions and alternative forms of intimacy. This theme reveals how dating app users approach relationships with fluid expectations, not necessarily seeking defined outcomes but instead embracing flexible bonds such as situationships and emotionally charged connections that can defy romantic codes.

Participants commonly described their use of dating apps as exploratory, often avoiding strict labels like relationships. Instead, Gen Z's like to embrace a go with the flow mindset that emphasizes openness to multiple outcomes. These behaviors embody the principle of confluent love, where emotional investment is dependent on mutual benefit. For Gen Z users, this conditionality reflects a broader skepticism toward rigid romantic scripts. Rather than committing to a predefined goal, participants allow emotional dynamics to unfold gradually, a behavior that maps onto the liquid characteristics of contemporary intimacy (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 272).

Moreover, technological affordances such as swiping and filtering support this ambiguity. As Timmermans & Courtois (2018) note, apps like Tinder and Hinge are structured to allow for low-barrier entry points which foster casual interactions that may or may not evolve into deeper bonds.

4.1 Situationships and ambivalence

Many participants described situationships, where emotionally intimate but non-exclusive connection is part of their dating app experiences. Participant 6 opened up about his current situationship:

“I think actually two times now. Like not serious, serious relationship types, but like longer times of dating, you know. Yeah. One time, it was like two months of really intense dating, which kind of led to a heartbreak on my side. And then another time, still going on a bit, you know, dating for four or five months, you know. So, but like in a chill way, you know, nothing super intense, but just a kind of good situationship, I would call it, you know.”

Such fluid arrangements reflect Bauman's (2003) idea of liquid love wherein emotional ties are maintained with low commitment to permanence (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 272). These bonds are not necessarily less meaningful; they simply exist outside traditional relationships scripts. Diesen et al., (2025) argue that such arrangements are often misrepresented in academia because of the tendency to valorize long-term monogamous outcomes (p. 2). In contrast, the participants in this study validated the emotional richness of these fluid bonds even as they acknowledged their transience. Participant 6 further explained that situationships can be at times beneficial if they are the following:

“For me, a good situationship is like, not a lot, like if there's this kind of common trust. So, first of all, a good situationship for me is if you like can talk with this person about everything, you know. Yeah. And then, of course, in this kind of, if you can talk about everything, you can set up your own rules, you know. So, a good situationship can also be that I'm seeing someone, but I'm also able to see other people. Yeah. But for me, a situation should be also committing to just one person without saying, hey, we are going to get together, you know.”

4.2 Exploration and queer affordances

Queer participants emphasized that dating apps were spaces of identity exploration and self-discovery. This aligns with Diesen et al., (2025) call to center overlooked populations in digital intimacy research, especially queer and non-heteronormative users whose engagement with platforms includes different goals than romantic goals (Suenzo, 2024, p. 4). Participant 1 who identifies as bicurious opened up about her sexual exploration with dating apps with the following:

“And also, girls as in dating. That's also... maybe I'm not sure about my sexuality. Like, I could be, like, bi also, but, like, you know, like we said yesterday, like I couldn't see myself being in a relationship with a girl. But, like, I don't know. In, like, different constellations. So, yeah, I don't know what my sexuality is. Yeah, because, like, through the dating apps I also figured out that I, like, I don't really want to be in a relationship with a woman, you know? Like, I'm in a relationship now with my boyfriend. I don't want that.”

In this specific situation, dating apps can function as digital third spaces for queer individuals. They use Grindr and other apps to build and belong in the queer community.

This enables affective connection and solidarity where these interactions don't always conform to algorithmic goals such as matching (Suenzo, 2024, p. 4). However, it does represent meaningful digital intimacies. Diesen et al., (2025) stress that scholars must expand the conceptual bandwidth of intimacy to include these forms of connection, ones that are communal and identity-affirming.

4.3 Friendship and alternative bonds

The last finding that challenges common dating app narratives is the significance of non-romantic relationships formed through these platforms (Newerla & Van Hooff, 2023, p. 8).

Multiple participants described long-term friendships that began with romantic intentions but have developed into emotionally platonic bonds. Participant 8 talked about his experience with cultivating friendships from dating apps: "We matched, had a few dates, and realized we weren't into each other like that. But now she's one of my best friends." Participant 3 also had a similar experience:

"I think I was always open towards whatever it could become. I've made some good friends off of Tinder. Like Enqua invited me for their birthday literally like a week before we matched. They were like come to my birthday next week. And I just came. We stayed friends. I also met another friend. Sobaida who we met up with didn't fuck or anything. We just chilled at a park. I also use it for friendships. I guess I'm open to whatever connection it brings as long as it feels good. I think also for queer people it's kind of a good way to expand your community because it's hard to meet queer people in daily life."

These relationships are often overlooked in both app design and academic research, which typically evaluates success based on romantic outcomes. However, Newerla & Van Hooff (2023) argue for a broader definition of intimacy that includes digital companionship and affective reciprocity not tied to the process of getting into a romantic relationship (p. 11). This idea aligned with participant 6 when they first moved to Rotterdam and wanted to meet new people:

"I wasn't even out for like anything, like a relationship or whatsoever. I was just like out to meet people, and if something happens, nice. If nothing happens, also fine, you know? It would be cool if at least maybe some platonic friendship comes out of it, yeah."

From a theoretical lens, these friendships are made possible by dating app affordances such as prompts about shared interests, geographic proximity and sustained chat histories. In this sense,

dating apps aren't only matchmakers but affective platforms that support a wide range of emotional outcomes (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 32) and (Newerla & Van Hooff, 2023, p. 13).

Participant's ability to reframe dating apps as friendship generators also reflects the agency that users possess in reinterpreting technological tools. While the app may be designed to facilitate romantic matches, some users have found the apps to be a place where emotional support, social discovery and belonging were fostered which are all core elements of digital intimacy (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 27).

This theme reveals that Gen Z users experience dating apps not as deterministic algorithms but as affective ecosystems, environments where romantic goals and relational experimentation are constantly being shaped (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 28). Participants have embraced ambiguity and valuing emotional resonance over rigid labels. This mode of engagement aligns with the theoretical concepts of confluent love where intimacy is perceived as conditional on mutual benefit and liquid love where relationships are defined as being fast, flexible and constantly being shaped (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 273).

Simultaneously, dating apps serve as temporary digital structures for a plurality of relational experiences such as situationships, friendships and identity exploration (Newerla & Van Hooff, 2023, p. 8).

These forms of connection emerge from the platform's affordances such as app design and personalization which make it easier to initiate emotionally varied interactions but harder to sustain fixed outcomes (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 272).

Crucially, this section calls reinforces call to reorient research on digital intimacy. Rather than measuring app use by its alignment with traditional relationship scripts, we must account for the diverse, evolving and sometimes contradictory ways users pursue closeness (Diesen et al., 2025, p. 12). Nowadays, intimacy is not only about romance or sex, but it can also be about emotional proximity, validation, expression of identity and the collective co-creation of new norms (Diesen et al., 2025, p. 4).

Conclusion

This thesis explored how Gen Z users in the Netherlands perceive the role of dating apps in shaping digital intimacy. Using a qualitative approach that focused on semi-structured interviews, the study examined not only how these young users navigate dating platforms but also how they interpret their emotional, social and cultural experiences of connection within app-mediated spaces. The general aim for the study was to expand scholarly understanding of intimacy in the platform era and contribute empirical insight to the evolving field of digital affective labor.

After carefully conducting qualitative interviews with a diverse group of young adults and proceeding with thematic analysis, four key themes emerged. The first key theme was about

ambivalence and affective contradictions, the second key theme about digital affordances and self-performance, the third key theme about barriers to emotional connection and the last key theme about the fluid intentions and the redefinition of intimacy.

These findings have helped to enrich the current theoretical understandings of digital intimacy by shedding light on how young adults negotiate their identity and agency within the possibilities and constraints present on dating apps. The thematic analysis has confirmed and built upon the theoretical concepts previously discussed in the theoretical framework. Drawing on Bauman's (2003) liquid love, Giddens's (1992) confluent love and Gibson's affordance theory as well as integrating recent studies on digital intimacy and gender scripts (Comunello et al., 2021).

Participants expressed a recurring sense of emotional ambivalence. They were drawn to dating apps for potential connections and external validation. But they also experienced negative effects such as swiping fatigue that overall led to emotional fatigue and feelings of disappointment and disconnection. This paradox resonates with Bauman's (2003) framing of liquid love where relationships are increasingly transient and commodified. This ambivalence is not merely personal and can be seen as structurally embedded, as Comunello et al. (2021, p. 1142) argue technological affordances from the apps can encourage reductive representations and emotional labor that often reinforce dominant gender scripts. Participants recognized this tension, noting that swiping and hookup culture foster detachment and performative engagement rather than fostering authentic emotional investment.

The platforms' features shape users' behavior and emotional strategies, and influence the online cultures present on the apps. These affordances mediate how users perform desire and identity (Comunello et al., 2021, p. 1142). They also reinscribe gendered expectations. As Comunello et al. (2021), point out men are expected to initiate conversations. Such scripts can persist across platforms even in supposedly feminist spaces like Bumble (p. 1146).

These experiences highlight the mutual shaping of technological affordances and gender scripts. As noted by scholars gendered affordances aren't neutral, they suggest and constrain actions based on culturally embedded assumptions (Comunello et al. 2021, p. 1141). Yet, participants also subverted these expectations using deliberately ambiguous profiles to disrupt normative frames. This negotiation reflects the term de-inscription where users selectively rewrite dominant scripts (Comunello et al. 2021, p. 1152).

Despite the ease of access that dating apps offer they often fail to facilitate emotionally charged connections. Participants have described difficulties in forming sustained conversations via texting and the frustrations with ghosting. These limits align with findings from Comunello et al. (2021) who argue that asynchronous and inconsistent online communication can undermine emotional resonance (p. 1141). There's a wider state of emotional uncertainty in digitally mediated romance. We can note that there's an absence of social accountability and embodied presence can destabilize trust and authenticity. Moreover, this erosion of authenticity and trust is related to this pressure to perform and to stand out from a sea of matches. This adds emotional labor to already fragile exchanges (Newerla

& Van Hooff, 2023, p. 3). Dating apps such as Hinge and Bumble attempt to address this through structured prompts and interesting conversation starters. However, the findings suggest that these features cannot replace “real” chemistry. The findings also suggest that many participants rely on moving to other platforms to further expand a connection, such as using Instagram and WhatsApp or meeting quickly offline to avoid stagnation.

The final theme emphasized the fluidity of intentions and the diversity of outcomes that dating apps afford. Participants have expressed that they often used the apps without fixed goals embracing the ambiguity as part of the process. This reflects Giddens’s (1992) model of confluent love where relationships are based on emotional fulfillment rather than social obligation. This ambiguity of relationship goals is described by the participants as outcomes beyond romance. These can be friendship, identity exploration and community-building especially among queer participants. This observation is aligned with Diesen et al., (2025), who argue that intimacy has to be conceptualized as situational and multifaceted (p. 9); apps can enable emotional encounters that result in being meaningful even when they do not lead to traditional relationships. These alternative intimacies challenge the romance-centric framing of dating apps and align with Comunello et al.’s. (2021) call to recognize how users negotiate and expand intimacy scripts (p. 1152).

Overall, we can conclude that the thesis has shown that Gen Z users in the Netherlands approach dating apps with critical awareness, emotional perplexity and willingness to challenge normative expectations. However, the overarching sentiment toward dating apps is negative because Gen Z in the Netherlands prefer offline intimacy rather than digital intimacy. Participants have expressed that digital intimacy isn’t emotionally fulfilling enough to sustain relationships by itself. However, it does complement offline intimacy and paired up it can maintain healthy relationships. Rather than simply enabling hookups, dating apps serve as arenas for negotiating identity and connection (Newerla & van Hooff, 2023, p. 3).

By integrating theoretical insights from Bauman, Giddens and affordance theory with empirical findings, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital intimacy (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 271). It suggests that intimacy in the platform era is not diminished but transformed: fractured and flexible and shaped by both socio-technological structures and user agency.

Academic contribution

This research contributed to current academic literature in several ways, first it centers Gen Z voices, an underrepresented group in dating app research within a European and specifically Dutch context. While much research has been focused on Millennials, this study has provided a generationally specific view of how digital intimacy is perceived, negotiated and narrated. Second, it has bridged the gap between theorizing intimacy at a macro-level and the user perspectives at a micro-level. Which helped to demonstrate how sociotechnical structures intersect with everyday affective practices. Third, it brings in dimensions often sidelined in dating app discourse such as the

exploration of queer identity, alternative intimacies and the emotionally damaging effects of the habitual use of app engagement (Comunello et al. 2021, p. 1152).

On a societal level, the thesis offers valuable insights into how technology mediates emotional connection, especially for a generation navigating dating and identity in an era marked by both hyperconnectivity and disconnection. Dating apps have become normalized not only as tools for connection but as cultural intermediaries that can mediate desire, psychological well-being and gender scripts (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016, p. 139). Understanding how Gen Z perceived and critiques these apps is crucial for addressing broader conversations around mental health and self-worth. For example, the normalization of ghosting and emotional detachment signals a need for new educational frameworks around digital communication and emotional responsibility. Similarly, the research noted that there's a pressure to perform socially that is eroding how human beings create friendships and relationships. This reinforces the need for platform design to reconsider inclusivity, emotional safety and other user intentions (Šiša, A., 2022, p. 1). The findings can inform platform design and digital literacy education by emphasizing the importance of emotional authenticity and relational complexity in digital life.

The study also shows how dating apps are resisting traditional narratives surrounding romantic and sexual norms. This has been perceived by many participants that have been redefining what counts as a connection (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016, p. 139). By embracing friendship, queer kinship and affective experimentation as valid outcomes. However, these alternative intimacies have been more prominent in queer dating app users who haven't found representation or safety in conventional dating scripts (Suenzo, 2024, p. 15). This redefinition expands what intimacy can look like and suggests that dating apps not only serve as a digital place for romantic exchange but also as platforms for identity work and self-discovery.

Evaluation of method

The study's qualitative method also provided rich and context-specific insights. Interviews offered space for participants to reflect critically on their practices and articulate contradictions in their app usage. This depth of narrative detail would have been missed in purely quantitative studies. In this way, the research aligns with recent calls for a more nuanced and affect-centered approach to digital intimacy that moves beyond binary metrics of success such as hookups vs relationships but toward a fuller spectrum of user-defined meaning (Comunello et al., 2021, p. 1153).

Limitations and future research

Nonetheless, the research has limitations such as having a small sample size that was sufficient for thematic saturation, was relatively small and homogeneous in terms of cultural context. A broader sample could capture deeper complexities, such as among non-Western users or individuals from marginalized groups. Similarly, future research should continue to explore how different identities (e.g. poc, neurodivergent or disabled users) experience and reshape digital

intimacy. A comparative study with two different cohorts such as Gen Z and Millennials. Such a study could reveal generational differences in the negotiation of intimacy, technology adoption and swiping fatigue. Since Gen Z have been exposed to digital technologies at an earlier age, Millennials could carry different emotional expectations, norms and strategies when engaging with dating apps. This comparison could yield key insights into how digital intimacy evolves across generational cohorts and how platform use reflects broader sociocultural shifts (Diesen et al., 2025, p. 2).

Lastly, the emotional costs of platformized romance deserve deeper attention especially in terms of mental health and emotional resilience. Understanding how young people navigate love in a datafied world requires ongoing and intersectional inquiry (Diesen et al., 2025, p. 2).

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

- Purpose statement
- Informed verbal consent
- Ensure participants have no discomfort

Introductory Questions

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself (age, gender identity, occupation/student status)?
- How long have you been using dating apps for?
- Which dating apps do you use most often? (Bumble, Tinder, Hinge, Field, Breeze)

1. App usage and motivation

- What initially motivated you to download a dating app?
- How often do you use dating apps?
- In what ways do you use dating apps (e.g., chatting, dating, browsing)?
- What are you generally looking for when you use a dating app (e.g., friendship, hookups, long-term relationships)?

2. Forming and Maintaining Digital Intimacy

- How do you define a meaningful connection?
- Can you describe a meaningful connection or relationship you've formed through a dating app?
- How do you express affection when communicating through apps? (maybe ask later)
- How do you express closeness when communicating through apps?
- How do you express trust when communicating through apps?
- Do you feel you can be emotionally vulnerable through digital platforms?
- Do you feel you can be authentic through digital platforms?

3. Benefits and Challenges of Digital Intimacy

- What do you find positive about connecting intimately through apps?
- Have you experienced any frustrations when trying to build intimacy online?
- How do issues like ghosting affect your experience?

4. Digital vs. Offline Interactions

- How do your digital interactions compare to face-to-face ones in terms of emotional connection?
- Have your online relationships transitioned into offline ones? If yes, how did that go?
- Do you think digital intimacy can replace in-person intimacy?
- Do you think digital intimacy can complement in-person intimacy?

5. Personal and Social Perceptions

- How do you feel dating apps shape or influence your idea of love?
- Do you think dating apps affect your sense of self-worth?
- Do you think dating apps affect your emotional well-being?
- How do your peers talk about dating apps?

6. Final Reflections

- If you could redesign dating apps, what would you change to improve digital intimacy?
- Overall, do you think dating apps help or harm your ability to form meaningful romantic connections?

Appendix B: Code book

| Theme | Definition | Codes | Example |
|---|---|---|--|
| Ambivalence and affective contradictions | Investigates how user's emotions and opinions fluctuate concerning dating apps, ranging from ambivalence to contradictory feelings. | Validation-seeking Ego boost Disillusionment Emotional push-pull Emotional fatigue Boredom Habitual use | “Well, it all started because I was bored, of course. And I guess it boils down to just being bored. And when I first moved here, I thought it was a nice way to meet new people, which I feel like a lot of people say that, but... You do meet people, but you know the purpose of meeting that person is not really to make a friend. I suppose. Maybe sometimes, but I guess the main reason is always a bit of boredom, maybe you just broke up with someone or, like, something happened and you just need a bit of validation.” |
| Digital affordances and the performance of self | Investigates how users manage their self-presentation through platform specific features, how they engage with gendered expectations on apps and how user's behaviors change across different apps. | Self-expression Strategic performance Platform-specific cultures Inauthenticity Gender norm navigation | “Everyone's putting on stage performance. But I think it kind of captures them anyways in a way, you know? I wouldn't put pictures of me posing in a weird way, you know? I was trying to be a bit quirky and funny, you know? And it's still kind of me. Of course, not all |

| | | | |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|
| | | | the time, but still you need to grab someone's attention, right?" |
| Barriers to digital intimacy | Investigates the many obstacles to intimacy and digital intimacy perceived by dating app users. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distrust Inauthenticity Swiping fatigue Emotional labor Texting culture Offline intimacy Ghosting | <p>“It’s draining, and there’s a whole culture that goes with online dating, you need to know how to text, you need to know how to not be perceived as awkward or weird, or if you say one ha too much, you’re a freak. Like, you need to be like, you need to know how to type like a Gen Z and be funny and witty while simultaneously cultivating the most attractive perfect profile that makes you look funny, interesting, down-to-earth, but still like you have something going on for yourself. It’s kind of hard to create authentic connections on dating apps. So it’s hard to find someone and vibe with them after that too. It happens once in a blue moon, you know.”</p> |

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| Fluid intentions and redefining connections | Investigates the changing romantic norms and scripts and the alternative trajectories to romantic connections that dating app users experience. | Emotional ambiguity Non-exclusive connection Situationships Ambivalence Identity exploration Self-discovery Community building Alternative non-romantic relationships | “ We matched, had a few dates and realized we weren’t into each other like that. But now she’s a close friend.” |
|---|---|--|---|

Appendix C: Participants

| Participant Number | Age | Background | Gender | Sexual Orientation | Relationship status | Dating app usage |
|--------------------|-----|----------------------|--------|---|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | 23 | German | Female | Cisgender/Bicurious | In a relationship | Used to be active |
| 2 | 22 | French and Congolese | Female | Cisgender/heterosexual | Single | Active |
| 3 | 23 | Dutch and Curacao | Male | Cisgender/homosexual | In a relationship | Used to be active |
| 4 | 21 | Dutch | Male | Cisgender/heterosexual | Single | Active |
| 5 | 23 | Dutch | Female | Cisgender/Bicurious | On and off relationship | Active |
| 6 | 25 | German | Male | Cisgender/heterosexual but open to experiment | In an open situationship | Active |

| | | | | | | |
|----|----|----------|--------|------------------------|--------|-------------------|
| 7 | 22 | Italian | Male | Cisgender/heterosexual | Single | Active |
| 8 | 24 | Italian | Male | Cisgender/heterosexual | Single | Active |
| 9 | 21 | French | Female | Cisgender/pansexual | Single | Used to be active |
| 10 | 23 | Romanian | Female | Cisgender/heterosexual | Single | Used to be active |

Appendix D: AI Declaration

I confirm that AI tools were used only for activities explicitly permitted under the 2024-2025 academic policy. All uses were supplementary, non-substantive, and did not involve the analysis of private or sensitive data.

Thesis Question Refinement:

I used ChatGPT to help refine the wording of my research question, in order to gain better academic clarity.

Prompt used:

“Can you help me come up with an outline for the following research question: How do young adults perceive the role of dating apps in shaping digital intimacy?”

Idea Generation:

ChatGPT was used in the initial research stages to help with the brainstorming of themes that could help with the coding process. No private data was used.

Prompt used:

“What are key themes that arise when gathering the following interview summaries from these ten participants?”

Grammar and Clarity:

Grammarly was used in non-analytical sections of the thesis to improve the grammar and reader clarity. The sections include the abstract, introduction, and discussion. No original ideas were generated by AI, only refinements.