

**Navigating Agency and Adversity: Identity Exploration of Female-Identifying Students
on Dating Apps**

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Abstract

Identity development is a central task of emerging adulthood. As dating apps are becoming increasingly important tools for emerging adults to find potential partners, this thesis examines in what ways dating apps may be used to explore one's identity. Due to the unique and often negative experiences women have on dating apps, the present study focuses specifically on the identity exploration of individuals who identify as female. This thesis employs qualitative research methods in which participants were asked open-ended questions, the answers of which were inductively coded using thematic analysis and organized according to overarching themes. The sample consisted of 28 female-identifying first-year students with varied nationalities and sexual orientations, all studying at a Dutch university. Overall, four themes were found surrounding the topics of (1) exploration of preferences and attitudes regarding relationships, (2) gaining confidence in the online setting, (3) learning to set boundaries, and (4) barriers to identity exploration. Results showed that, while dating apps offer various opportunities for the identity exploration of female-identified individuals, they are held back by the reinforcement of patriarchal structures on dating apps. As this study was limited to one specific setting, future research may focus on examining these matters in different cultural contexts.

Keywords: Identity Exploration, Emerging Adulthood, Gender, Dating Apps,
Thematic Analysis

Navigating Agency and Adversity: Identity Exploration of Female-Identifying Students on Dating Apps

Dating provides one of various ways for emerging adults to explore their identities. Identity exploration describes the process of trying out different possibilities in regard to one's identity and makes up an important part of the life stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Interpersonal relations present a relevant venue for identity exploration and formation.

Therefore, seeing as dating apps are now becoming the “default option” for meeting potential partners (Bandinelli, 2022, p.906), exploring dating apps as a contemporary way of finding and connecting with potential partners is a valuable research area. Dating apps offer a variety of potential partners, and unique ways of interacting with others, and thus show new opportunities for emerging adults to explore their identities. People who identify as female often use dating apps in different ways from people who identify as male, as they more often seek meaningful relationships (Lopes & Vogel, 2019), and also experience more conflicts and negative incidents on dating apps (Thompson, 2018). However, present literature has primarily focused on the negative experiences of women dating online, and little is known about the role of dating apps in identity development. Therefore, this study explores the ways in which people who identify as female may use dating apps to explore their identities.

Emerging Adulthood

Emerging Adulthood is a life stage characterized by instability and self-focus. Established by Arnett (2000), this developmental stage describes the extended ‘in between’ phase which young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 now experience. During this time, emerging adults have the opportunity to explore different options related to life domains such as love, work and world views. Individuals do this by trying out many different versions of themselves before committing to a specific adult role and the associated responsibilities (Arnett, 2000). As opposed to 50 years ago, when adolescents and young adults would settle

into adult roles quickly, young adults now take more time to explore their options. This delayed onset of adulthood is reflected in societal and demographic changes such as an increasingly delayed age of marriage (Cohn et al., 2020), lower fertility rates (Roser, 2014), and a higher attendance of university in young people when compared to the 1970s (Hanson, 2022). According to Schwartz et al. (2013), the experiences of emerging adults are markedly heterogeneous seeing as individuals gain many different experiences which supports the central task of identity exploration in this life stage.

Identity Exploration

Developing a sense of identity is an essential task of emerging adulthood. Erikson (1959) defined identity as a sense that the self stays the same over time, and throughout different contexts. According to Marcia (1980), identity development occurs through the processes of exploration, which involves trying out a variety of identities, and commitment which involves committing oneself to a specific identity. Identity exploration includes different mechanisms, namely exploration in depth in which individuals evaluate the fit of a given identity commitment with the self, and exploration in breadth which refers to the exploration of alternative options to the current committed identity (Luyckx et al., 2006). Further, as there are virtually endless possible identity options, some people feel overwhelmed by the pressure of making the ‘right’ choice and end up exploring indefinitely which is referred to as ruminative exploration (Luyckx et al., 2008). On the other hand, identity exploration can also be experienced as positive, seeing as exploration in depth and in breadth is positively associated with openness to experience and curiosity (Crocetti et al., 2008, Luyckx et al., 2006).

According to Layland et al. (2018), identity exploration occurs when one is subjected to new experiences and ideas which individuals are then able to either commit to or reject. These experiences can be actively pursued (Schwartz, Côté, et al., 2005). For example, in the

context of leisure, Layland et al. (2018) found that emerging adults actively look for identity developing activities and “filter what experiences will be integrated into their identity through cognitive evaluation” (p.88). According to Schwartz, Côté, et al. (2005), emerging adults who actively explore their identities by seeking experiences and relationships have a clearer sense of identity than emerging adults who do not engage in identity exploration. Côté (2000) further highlights the active nature of identity exploration by using the term ‘developmental individualization’ to describe the ‘extensive deliberation on the alternatives and opportunities available in late modern society’ (p.33) that emerging adults engage in.

Another relevant aspect of identity exploration is that of interaction with one’s environment. Korobov (2014) proposes an interactional account of identity highlighting the importance of relational contexts in which identity is co-constructed. Morgan and Korobov (2012) highlight that through interacting with others, individuals find affirmation or resistance to their current identity commitments. Conflict can be an important factor for identity exploration, as it presents a “trigger for action” (Kunnen, 2006, p.170) and can lead individuals to re-evaluate or change their identity commitments (Kunnen, 2006). Especially in intimate relationships and while dating, these conflicts are created through continuously providing feedback to one another by which partners enable each other to reflect on current identity commitments. In line with this, it has been suggested that receiving feedback from others enables individuals to discover their own ‘blind spots’ (Luft & Ingham, 1955).

While limited research has been conducted regarding the link between dating and identity exploration, the relational domain was found to be the most salient domain regarding emerging adults’ global identity development (Vosylis et al., 2018). In addition, Shulman and Connolly (2013) note that a central goal of emerging adulthood is to “integrate their career paths and life plans with those of a romantic partner” (p.27) providing them with the ability to commit to long-term relationships. However, as pointed out by Willoughby and James

(2017), emerging adults have moved away from a goal of forming a relational identity with a partner and instead use dating to “[...] develop their personal identities, to explore likes and dislikes, and to refine characteristics and life goals” (p.15) highlighting the importance of dating for personal development. For example, Rageliené (2016) found that individuals explore their identities by differentiating their beliefs and identity from others in relationships and peer groups by forming their own opinions and boundaries on specific subject matters.

Dating Apps

Identity formation in the dating domain has been primarily studied in the offline context. However, dating apps are a common and increasingly popular way for individuals to connect with potential (romantic) partners. In 2021, as many as 75 million people were actively using one of the most popular dating apps, Tinder, each month, over a third of which were between the ages of 18 and 25 (“Tinder Revenue and Usage Statistics”, 2023). Online dating apps offer a quick and effective way of seeing a large variety of different partners from different cultures, beliefs, social statuses, among others. While this can be beneficial for collecting new experiences, the variety of potential dating partners can instill a sense of uncertainty in individuals. Criticizing this, Zygmunt Bauman (2003) coined the term ‘liquid love’ in which one feels the need to continuously look for new and better options than the current partner which may foster ongoing exploration and a lack of commitment.

Another way in which online dating differs from offline dating is the type of communication it elicits. When communicating online, people are able to more closely control what information they reveal of themselves. Saltes (2013) describes that people can ‘decide which aspects of the self will be revealed and when’ (p.99). This can lead individuals to recreate and try out new aspects of their identities (Yurchisin et al., 2005) highlighting the potential of online communication for identity exploration. Further, this also relates to self-disclosure which is essential for the building of intimate relationships (Willems et al., 2020).

Although early research found that online communication in groups can lead to more impersonal and antisocial communication (Siegel et al., 1986), more recent research on dyadic conversations found that these settings make people more willing to disclose intimate information about themselves (Finkel et. al, 2012) which encourages identity exploration.

Focusing on the Female Experience

Erikson hypothesized that identity development preceded the development of intimacy (1968). However, researchers now view this as an androcentric view finding that women are more likely to develop intimacy and identity in a parallel fashion (Hodgson & Fischer, 1979) which can also be related to the ways in which women use dating apps. Abramova et. al. (2016) found that women are more likely to use dating apps to pursue long-term relationships, while men often use them for short-term relationships and casual sex. Additionally, women were found to be more selective in choosing potential partners and had ‘more intimate and intensive conversations’ (Abramova et al., 2016). Their focus on making meaningful connections rather than short term acquaintances may lead to more identity exploration and reflection while using dating apps. This may also relate to differences in methods of identity exploration, as Hodgson and Fischer (1979) hypothesize that while men’s identity development revolves around competence and knowledge, women try to understand themselves in terms of their relations to others.

Gillett (2018) reviewed intimate intrusions in online dating finding that women experience abuse and sexual harassment more often than men. Further, it was found that they often experience misogyny and offensive behavior (Thompson, 2018) and, due to this, feel less respected while using dating apps (Lopes & Vogel, 2019). In line with this, women perceive dating apps as less safe (Hanson, 2021) and are more aware of their potential dangers (Lopes & Vogel, 2019). Further, this encourages women to engage in a variety of safety behaviors such as informing friends before going on dates (Pym et al., 2021), as well as

assessing risk when looking at potential partner's profiles (Albury et al., 2019) highlighting gender differences in how individuals navigate dating apps. As conflicts motivate individuals to reevaluate their current identity commitments (Kunnen, 2006), these experiences and perceptions could lead to more reflection on their behavior while using dating apps which may foster identity exploration and rethinking current identity commitments.

In the current paper, it is important to point out that aforementioned gender differences are viewed through a social constructionist lens. Therefore, gender is viewed not as a naturally occurring phenomenon but as a socially and culturally defined construct that may change with time (WHO, 2019). Further, the theory of gender performativity proposes that gender identity is constructed through performance of gendered acts (Butler, 1991). In line with this, the following study will take on a holistic perspective of "being a woman" and attempt to represent the experiences of anyone who identifies as a woman or presents and acts in ways that fit into the social expectations of a woman. This may then also include trans women who do not fit binary ideas of gender but may still present in a way that is societally perceived as 'female'. Due to this, they may therefore have similar experiences and be treated in similar ways as women.

Current Study

The aim of the present study is to examine how female-identified students use dating apps to explore their identities. This topic is relevant especially due to the various negative experiences people who identify as female have on dating apps which influences their behaviors while dating online. Specifically, the study focuses on strategies used to explore their identities, as well as what they learned about themselves. Using the qualitative method of thematic analysis, the written answers of 28 first-year psychology students at a Dutch university were coded inductively and organized according to overarching themes. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, no specific hypotheses were tested. Based on the literature

which highlighted that individuals have more control over their self-expression in an online environment (Saltes, 2013), themes surrounding agency were explored. Further, the role of negative experiences of people who identify as female on dating apps (Gillett, 2018, Thompson, 2018, Lopes & Vogel, 2019) and its potential relations to identity exploration were explored. Another relevant aspect of dating apps is the variety of partners accessible to individuals, therefore it was examined how this could affect the participants' identity exploration.

Methods

Materials

Demographics

Relevant demographic data was collected which included age, mother tongue, nationality, and relationship status. Participants were asked to provide these in an open answer format.

Measures of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

To assess gender identity and sexual orientation, scales provided by DeChants et al. (2021) were used. This measure included one long answer item giving the participants the opportunity to explain their gender identity and sexual orientation, respectively (e.g., "How would you describe your current sexual orientation in your own words?"). Further, the measure includes closed answer questions asking participants to provide a label for their identifications. In the case of gender identity, this included 6 possible answers (Female, Nonbinary, Genderfluid or Genderqueer, Questioning, Decline to answer, I prefer to use the term:___), while for sexual orientation 10 possible answers were provided (Straight, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Asexual, Pansexual, Queer, I am not sure, Decline to answer, I prefer to use the term:___).

Identity Development

To assess Identity Development, we used the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS) (Luyckx et al., 2008). The DIDS consists of 25 items inquiring about the levels of commitment making (i.e., “I know which direction I am going to follow in my life.), exploration in breadth (i.e., “I think actively about different directions I might take in my life.”), ruminative exploration (i.e., “It is hard for me to stop thinking about the direction I want to follow in my life.”), identification with commitment (i.e., “Because of my future plans, I feel certain about myself.”), and exploration in depth (i.e., “I think about the future plans I already made.”). Each of these constructs are assessed using 5 items which use a Five-Point-Likert scale (1: completely disagree - 5: completely agree).

Dating App Use

Participants were inquired about their dating app use. This included two questions about the number of hours they spend on dating apps each week, as well as which dating apps they used.

Open Questions

The participants were asked to provide answers to six open-ended questions which were used to examine the participants’ experiences with dating apps and how these may have helped them explore their identities. Specifically, the questions inquired about their reasons for and experiences with using dating apps, what they had learned about themselves and how dating apps supported this (i.e., “How has online dating “helped” you learn more about who you are as a person?”), as well as how they perceived themselves as different in online and offline dating settings. They were also asked to provide a specific experience while online dating which had an impact on how they viewed themselves (i.e., “Please describe a specific experience during online dating that had an influence on how you see yourself.”). All exact question formulations are provided in the Appendix.

Participants & Procedure

In total, 38 people participated in the survey, 10 of which were automatically excluded by means of the screening measure, or they did not complete the survey. The 28 participants were first-year psychology students at an international University in the Netherlands which were recruited via the pool of the SONA website on which students collect credits for a first-year course by participating in a variety of research studies relating to psychology. The survey took place in an online setting via Qualtrics. It received ethical approval by the internal review board of the university. In total, it took the participants between 4.18 and 44.39 minutes to complete the survey. The participants first received general information about the study, its purpose, potential risks, and what will be asked of them. No deceptive measures were employed. Prior to starting the survey, participants were asked three screening questions which inquired whether the participants fit the screening criteria (female-identifying, between the ages of 18 and 25, has used dating apps before). If they met the criteria for participation, they were asked to provide informed consent. After this, the participants were asked to provide demographic data, as well as their sexual orientation and gender identity. Then, identity development was assessed. Following this, participants were asked about their dating app use, after which they were asked to answer the open questions regarding their experiences with dating apps. Finally, participants were able to provide feedback or thoughts on the study and were then once again informed of the purpose of the study and were provided with resources for any possible mental or emotional discomfort.

Data Analysis

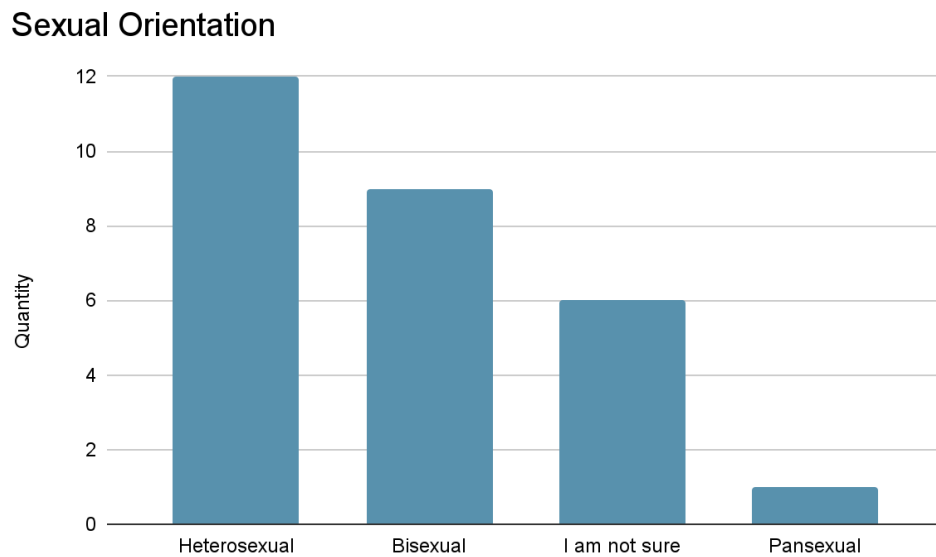
The responses of the participants were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method in which the responses of participants are inductively coded and organized according to themes. The data was first transferred from Qualtrics to the coding program Atlas.ti. After this, the author read through the data multiple times to become familiar with it. Following this, relevant excerpts

of text were chosen and codes were assigned inductively according to their content. The aim of this was to find overarching themes relating to identity exploration and dating apps, focusing on content as well as strategies of identity exploration. Other aspects that stood out during the analysis were also taken account of. The codes and themes that were found were repeatedly discussed and refined under supervision. Codes were adapted under consideration of whether they authentically represented the participants' voices, and whether they gave an accurate perspective on their experiences. It should also be mentioned that for purposes of presenting the results in the present paper, participants were identified by pseudonyms.

Results

Sample

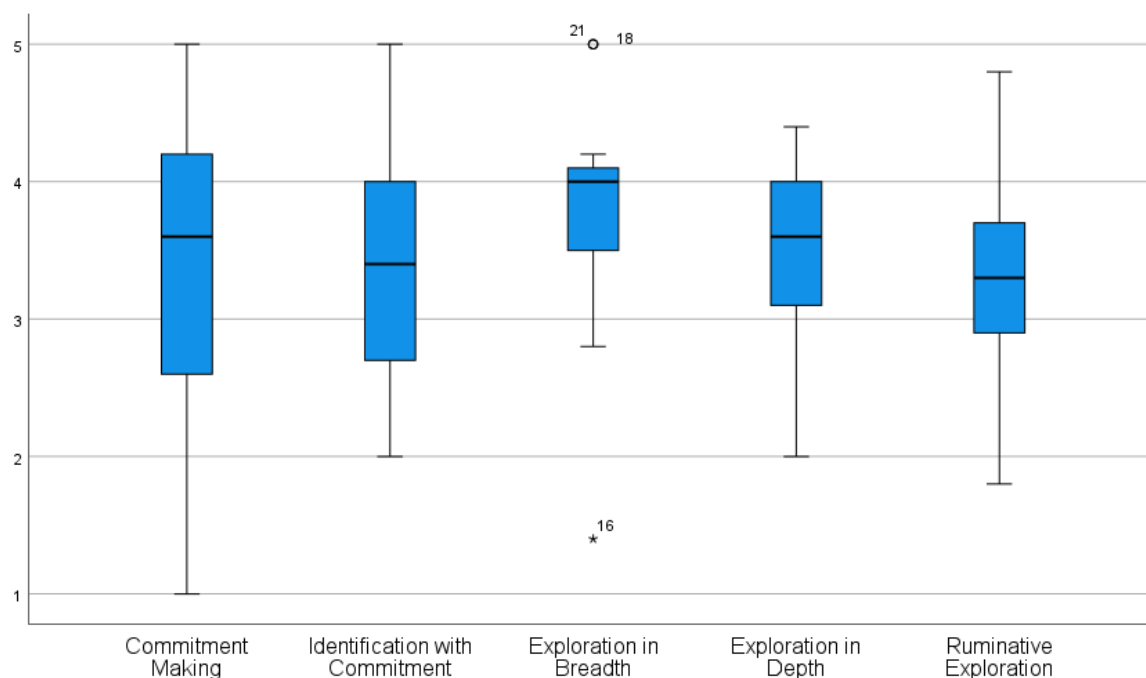
All of the 28 participants included in the study identified as female and were between the ages of 18 and 25 ($M=20.12$; $SD=1.57$). The students were from a variety of nationalities, namely German ($N=9$), Dutch ($N=7$), Romanian ($N=2$), American, Chinese, Lithuanian, Croatian, Singaporean, Indian, Polish-English, Irish, German-Brazilian, and Lebanese ($N=1$ each). Participants were of a variety of sexual orientations. Most of the participants identified as heterosexual ($N=12$) and bisexual ($N=9$). One person identified as pansexual (i.e., attracted to people regardless of their sex or gender identity) and six were not sure of their sexual orientation (see: Figure 1). The majority of participants described their relationship status as single ($N=17$), 3 of which indicated that they were recently out of a relationship. Some of the participants indicated that they were in long-term relationships ($N=7$), two described that they are in another type of relationship, and one person did not specify their relationship status. The participants had used a variety of dating apps, namely Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, OkCupid, Badoo, Kippo, Yubo and Turnup. The most used apps were Tinder (used by 18 participants) and Bumble (used by 9 participants). Seven participants had used two or more dating apps. Their current average usage of dating apps varied between zero to five hours a week.

Figure 1*Sexual Orientations of Participants*

As visible in Figure 2, participants showed the most variation in the domain of commitment making indicating that they formed stronger identity commitments than others. In contrast, participants varied less in the strength of the identification with their commitments ($Mdn=3.3$). Overall, the participants showed the highest scores for exploration in breadth ($Mdn=4$), as compared to the other exploration domains showing that participants explored many different identity options but explored their current commitments less ($Mdn=3.6$). Three outliers can be found regarding exploration in breadth; however, their responses do not stand out in relation to the themes. Compared to the other exploration domains, participants varied more in regard to ruminative exploration but, overall, experienced this less ($Mdn=3.3$).

Figure 2

DIDS Measures of Commitment Making, Exploration in Breadth, Ruminative Exploration, Identification with Commitment, and Exploration in Depth portrayed in Boxplots.



Thematic Analysis

Almost all participants responded to all questions. In two instances, participants did not reply to the 6th open question asking for a specific experience they had on dating apps. In other instances, participants indicated that they did not feel certain questions applied to them and/or were not able to recall specific experiences (e.g., “This didn't really happen for me”, Holly; “Question 6: Please describe a specific experience during online dating that had an influence on how you see yourself”). The answers varied in length, some of them being as short as one word (e.g., “Haven't”, Natalie; “Question 4: What, if anything, have you learned about yourself while online dating?”) while others provided multiple sentences in their responses. Further, participants engaged little with the 5th open question specifically, which inquired about how dating apps had helped individuals learn more about themselves. This question received short answers in nine cases (e.g., “not”, “not really no”, or “it has not”, Bonnie, Rina, Taylor). Following the analysis of the data, 19 codes were found and were organized according to four overarching themes which were named (1) ‘Exploring preferences and attitudes regarding relationships’, (2) ‘Gaining confidence in the online

setting’, (3) ‘Learning to set boundaries’, and (4) ‘Barriers to identity exploration’ (see Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of Themes

Theme	Description	Total number of occurrences (across k participants)
Exploring preferences and attitudes regarding relationships	Participants described that dating apps helped them reflect on their own preferences regarding relationships and potential partners, as well as their own behaviors and attitudes when navigating dating relationships.	59 (24)
Gaining confidence in the online setting	Participants described that texting in an online setting, as well as receiving compliments and matches made them feel more confident and outgoing.	39 (28)
Learning to set boundaries	Participants described that they learned how to set boundaries and expectations while online dating through experiencing conflicts of interest and other negative experiences.	31 (14)
Barriers to identity exploration	Participants described different barriers to identity exploration on dating apps such as concerns for safety, receiving unwanted sexual and rude comments, as well as not wanting to engage with dating apps much.	41 (23)

Exploration of Preferences and Attitudes Regarding Relationships

In total 24 participants discussed that through dating apps they were able to meet many different people and had a variety of people available to talk to. By meeting and talking to people in the online dating setting, the participants were able to explore their own preferences and attitudes towards relationships and potential partners. They mention that they

were able to find out about their preferred (physical) attributes of partners. For example, Phoebe (Heterosexual) found it “ [...] difficult [...] to be attracted to people with typical masculinity”, while another mentioned she found she does “not like conversation partners who just talk and talk and talk forever” (Veronica, Heterosexual). Nine participants attributed being able to clarify their preferences to the variety of partners that they met on the apps. As Leah (Heterosexual) said: “It did help me think about what I like and dislike in a guy because you ‘meet’ so many of them in a short time.”

Thirteen participants talked about learning about their preferred type of relationship. For example, as Veronica (Heterosexual) wrote she learned that she was “[...] not ready for a relationship”. However, participants differed in their realizations. Some realized they would prefer to have a causal relationship while others found they did not like short-term sexual relationships or expressed they wanted to find a committed relationship, for instance Olivia (Bisexual) describes that after going on multiple dates, the inability to find a meaningful connection was disappointing and through dating apps, she noticed that “[...] not being a relationship actually represents a big frustration of mine”. Further, three participants expressed that dating apps made them reconsider or explore their sexual orientation. For example, while Jane (bisexual) redefined her own sexual orientation while using dating apps (i.e., “I discovered I am into women as well”), while Isabelle (Questioning) started contemplating whether she is asexual, as seen in the following quote:

“ [...] maybe the lack of interest in talking to the people I see on the app is helping me understand that I am not currently interested in relationships or that I might actually be asexual.”

In addition to reflecting on preferred attributes of partners and relationships, 14 participants reflected on their own attitudes and behaviors in dating relationships, and their preferred way of meeting partners. For example, eight participants expressed that they realized they prefer to meet people in an offline setting or expressed a general dislike for dating apps (e.g., “i don't

have the patience to actually deal with dating apps”, Amanda, Bisexual). Eleven participants reflected on their own behaviors when navigating relationships and expressed what is important to them when forming connections with potential partners. For example, Mona (Bisexual) expressed this:

“I can not have sex or dates with anyone, I must really click with someone in advance to even consider this. Before dating apps I thought I would really easily meet and hang out with many people but that's not the case.”

Gaining Confidence in the Online Setting

Most participants ($N=25$) perceived a difference when online and offline dating while the remaining three participants noted they perceived themselves as the same person in either setting. Notably, 18 participants described that they were more confident, outgoing, and talkative in an online setting and that it was easier for them to present themselves online, such as Wendy (Questioning) who was “more playful and brave behind a screen than in real life” . Participants attributed this to the fact that there is more time to reflect when formulating answers on dating apps, thus creating less pressure and making online communication “easier” (Viola, Heterosexual), “less awkward” (Claire, Heterosexual), and “more comfortable” (Zoe, Heterosexual). Evelyn (Heterosexual) states she is “[...] more talkative and can take time to gather my thoughts than having to respond almost instantly.”. On the other hand, seven participants did not experience this increase of confidence and that they found it more difficult to present themselves online. They called themselves “dry” texters (Yvonne, Heterosexual) or indicated they “can't really get close to people through messages” (Jane, Bisexual).

Apart from feeling more comfortable expressing themselves, participants also gained confidence by receiving compliments and matches on dating apps, for instance, Zoe (Heterosexual) noted that receiving a lot of matches made her “become more confident and sure about my appearance”. Contrasting this, four participants described

that experiences in online dating made them feel more self-conscious, for example, as it led them to compare themselves to others or made them question their appearance. Such as described by Leah (Heterosexual) who describes how dating apps amplified feelings of insecurity when presenting herself to other people online:

“When meeting people online, I start questioning myself and my looks a lot e.g. ‘What if they dont like my looks? What if they have a different picture of myself in their mind?’. This makes me feel very self-conscious and puts a lot of pressure on myself.”

Learning to set Boundaries

Another theme that was found in the participants was that the experiences that participants had made using dating apps helped them set boundaries and standards for their future relationships. This is discussed here in two segments, first the conflicts and issues participants encountered, and secondly the strategies of boundary they employed following these experiences.

Three participants described that they encountered a variety of negative experiences when online dating such as being ghosted after sexual contact. Additionally, four participants mentioned conflicting interests in which they were looking for closer connections than their dating partners or that they had differing intentions for using dating apps, for instance, Georgia (Bisexual) who was using dating apps to find a relationship, describes that she was “[...] seeing someone here for 6 months, but it turned out that he only wanted sth casual”. Four participants described that these negative experiences had a lasting negative impact and that they found themselves ruminating on them for a prolonged period of time. Olivia (Bisexual), who was using dating apps to find a relationship, reflected on how a seemingly meaningful connection led to being ghosted unexpectedly, saying:

“I had been texting with this guy for quite a while, like months, we went on dates which went really well and I started to develop feelings for him. However, after we had sex, which also for me at least was a good experience, he ghosted me. That broke my heart and made me feel like I was not a real

person, but rather just a body. It made me spiral for weeks and I still haven't fully recovered.”

Eight participants described that going through negative dating experiences and experiencing conflicting interests helped them set boundaries and expectations. For example, participants were able to “respect [themselves] more” (Fiona, Heterosexual) or express that they learned to deal with these conflicts in more productive ways in the future. For example, after her negative dating experience (as described above), Georgia (Bisexual) reflects on what she learned from it:

“I leaned how to set boundaries about what i want out of that relationship and i learned how to make the right decision for yourself, like for example ending a situation that is not suiting you anymore [...]”.

Further, Yvonne (Heterosexual) described that experiencing relationships with suboptimal communication later helped her express her needs more easily, saying that “disappointments have helped me to view things a bit more calm and also to be okay with speaking my truth and not just acting as if everthing is fine when it's not”. Another (more avoidant) example of boundary setting represented by participants ghosting their potential partners, which is mentioned by Isabelle (Questioning) who found herself “disinterested” in someone and cut off contact suddenly making her feel guilty:

“I didn't know what to do when I wanted to stop communicating to this person so I just cut off contact completely. The person still proceeded to text me even when I stopped opening the messages. I felt bad for doing this but that is what was best for my mental health.”

Barriers to Identity Exploration

Barriers to identity exploration could be found in the participants’ answers. Some related to the way of using dating apps that the participants reported, such as that they used dating apps rarely or that they did not want to engage much with (people on) dating apps. Keira (Heterosexual) viewed dating apps as “not real like in reality, thus I take it

superficially” while Isabelle (Questioning) noted that she is not giving it her “ [...] fair shot when talking to people”.

Other barriers to identity exploration related to the behaviors of their potential partners which included rude and unwanted sexual comments (e.g., “ [...] Negatives would be extreme sexualisation for a lot of women on the app”, Daisy, Bisexual) which was reported by nine participants, as well as deception regarding age and intentions which was mentioned by three participants. For example, Leah (Heterosexual) describes a situation in which she “ [...] once texted a guy who said he was my age but later it turned out that he was already 43 years old and used photos from the internet”. Experiences like these caused feelings of unsafety and intimidation in seven participants, for example, Sarah (Questioning) “used to be scared of going on dates with men, due to safety reasons”. Concerns of safety were expressed also by three participants who did not personally have any negative experiences during their dating app use, as seen in Wendy (Questioning) who was “surprised” over her positive experiences because she “ [...] expected there to be a lot worse, especially being a woman”. Here, the participant attributes her negative experiences also to her gender. Eight participants also mentioned gender when highlighting men as the cause of their unsafe feelings by, for example, saying that “A lot of guys can be intimidating and very sexual in the way they approach one” (Leah, Heterosexual). Although both this and the foregoing theme mention negative experiences of participants, they may be differentiated on the basis that the experiences here are generally inhibiting participants from using dating apps to their full potential while the experiences in the previous theme helped participants in their personal development.

Not all participants experienced dating apps as unsafe, for example four participants found that dating apps felt like a safe environment in which they encountered no verbal harassment and/or that they were able to ‘unmatch’ and report people if necessary. For

example, Evelyn (Heterosexual) describes that these mechanisms helped them feel more in control of their dating app experience:

“Even though there were some creepy instances, I had the complete freedom to unmatch AND report certain accounts, and that did not even make me feel guilty.”

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine in what ways female-identified students use dating apps to explore their identities. Previous research has focused on identity exploration in offline relational settings. This study adds to the literature by exploring the unique attributes of dating apps which influence identity exploration. Based on the results, it can be said that participants reflected on their identities in regard to various preferences, and that exploration occurred due to an increase of confidence in the online environment, as well as through experiences of conflict. On the other hand, identity exploration was also inhibited by events that made participants feel unsafe. In the following, these results will be discussed focusing on the roles of identity content, agency and conflicts for identity exploration, as well as barriers to identity exploration and how these are specifically related to the female experience of dating online.

Identity Content

As has been documented in other studies (Willoughby and James, 2017, Coté, 2000), participants were better able to explore their personal preferences after using dating apps and took an active role in exploring their identities in the dating context. Dating apps play a unique role in this context as their design enables individuals to see a variety of different partners in a quick and efficient manner which makes identity exploration easier and more accessible. Although previous literature regarding dating and identity exploration focused on how dating helps individuals integrate one’s identity and life goals with that of a romantic partner (Shulman and Connolly, 2013), participants in the present study made a variety of

realizations about themselves which were focused on individual preferences and behaviors. This highlights the self-focused nature of these emerging adults' dating experience showing that finding a romantic relationship may often not be their main goal of using dating apps but that they more so use them for more self-oriented and personal aims.

The Role of Conflicts in Identity Development

Previous literature has highlighted the importance of conflicts for identity exploration in defining and differentiating one's identity commitments from others (Kunnen, 2006).

Participants in the current study described conflicting interests for using dating apps which often led to experiences of rejection and ghosting. In line with previous literature (Kunnen, 2006), participants used these negative experiences as opportunities to re-evaluate their current identity commitments and learned to define their relationship boundaries. However, apart from learning experiences, the unique types of conflicts on dating apps also led to less productive exploration. For example, in response to ghosting, some participants were unable to find closure and engaged in extensive reflections regarding the negative experiences.

Seeing as participants are unable to move on from these experiences, this hints at the role ghosting may play in ruminative exploration (Luyckx et al., 2008). This may occur due to the ambiguous nature of ghosting as individuals are left without an explanation for the break-up (Leckfor et al., 2023).

Agency

As found in the previous literature, individuals feel they have increased agency over information they disclose about themselves in an online setting (Saltes, 2013). This is in line with the results of the current study, as participants generally felt more confident to express themselves, and felt they had control over their self-expression. It is worth noting that participants did not express changing the way they presented themselves but rather recognized the mechanisms which make dating online 'easier'. Further, participants placed value on

presenting themselves authentically and expressed dislike towards aspects of online apps that made communication feel unnatural. This contrasts previous literature (e.g., Yurchisin et al., 2005, Ranzini & Lutz, 2016) focusing on the (in)authenticity of dating app users' self-presentation and deciding which aspects to reveal of themselves. The results of the present study show that participants more so appreciate the ways in which online communication aids their self-presentation but are less interested in presenting themselves in different or new ways.

Barriers to Identity Exploration

In line with previous research (Gillett, 2018, Thompson, 2018, Lopes & Vogel, 2019), the participants of the present study had a variety of negative experiences such as unwanted sexual comments as well as deception. Importantly, even participants who did not have experiences like these, still had expectations or were concerned of being put in unsafe and uncomfortable situations. This shows an underlying distrust of dating apps explaining the hesitations to engage with dating apps of participants. Seeing as the participants frequently described being sexualized by men, it is visible that patriarchal structures are reinforced on dating apps. As found in feminist literature (Bartky, 1990), objectification reduces women to their bodies and turns them into an object to men's desire. This process is likely amplified in the online dating environment when people who identify as female present themselves to many potential partners, therefore risking the receipt of objectifying comments. As seen in the results, being aware of this risk inhibits female-identified individuals from using dating apps to their desired extent.

Implications

Looking at these findings, a number of implications may be highlighted. Mainly, it is visible that online dating for female-identified individuals includes more risk and therefore a different type of engagement with dating apps. Many opportunities to engage with one's

identity are provided, in that dating apps present an environment that can make self-expression more comfortable for women, and it offers opportunities to more closely define their relationship boundaries and preferences. However, compromised feelings of safety due to misogynistic behaviors of dating partners prevent female-identified individuals from exploring their identities on dating apps. Based on this, it is important to encourage female-identified individuals to speak out about their negative experiences and to call out and draw attention to misogynistic occurrences on dating apps. This may help raise awareness of patriarchal structures in online dating environments and discourage further such behavior, thus creating a safer environment in which female-identified individuals feel empowered to express and explore their identities.

Limitations & Future Directions

This study also had some limitations, one is presented by the context of the study, as dating and online dating differs across countries and cultures. For example, people in America were found to be more accepting of casual dating while Chinese individuals are less open and view dating as a precursor to marriage (Tang & Zuo, 2000). Similar results found in other studies (e.g., Delevi & Bugay, 2013, Argyle et al., 1986) were attributed to differences between collectivistic and individualistic countries. Although the present study includes participants from a variety of different countries, all currently live in the Netherlands which is an individualistic country accepting of casual dating and online dating (Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2011). Therefore, they may be more able to explore their identities on dating apps than people in collectivistic countries. Looking at this, future research may focus on potential differences in ways of using dating apps across cultures and how this could affect the individuals' methods of identity exploration.

Another limitation relates to the specific city in which participants of the study are living. Although it is a comparably small city, about a fourth of it is made up of students with

varied international backgrounds. This means that dating app users likely have a wide variety of potential partners available to them making dating and meeting many different people easier. Therefore, it may be that the results of the present study are not generalizable to emerging adults in rural areas since there may be less opportunities available to explore their identities. However, while it remains unexplored in the current study, dating apps may still present an important resource for individuals in rural areas. Bineau et al. (2021) discuss how “dating apps provide a sense of anonymity in areas that may be less welcoming to LGBT individuals” (p.2). Therefore, looking at how online dating affects identity exploration in LGBT+ people living in rural areas may be a valuable future research topic.

Conclusion

Overall, it was found that dating apps provide a unique environment for female-identified emerging adults to explore their identities. It was found that female-identified emerging adults make a variety of realizations about themselves which do not only relate to relationship identities but also focus on individual characteristics. Dating apps also provide increased feelings of agency over one’s self-presentation making individuals feel more comfortable and able to present themselves authentically and confidently. Conflicts on dating apps also led to identity exploring and led some participants to reflect on and define their personal relationship boundaries. However, it was also shown that dating apps had the potential to increase ruminative exploration through experiencing ambiguous break-ups such as by being ghosted. A variety of barriers to identity exploration were also found in the data which show that people who identify as female feel unsafe in the online dating environment. These results show that patriarchal structures and structural oppression against women are reinforced on dating apps making identity exploration more difficult for female-identifying dating app users. This highlights that while there are potentially many opportunities for

female-identifying dating app users to explore their identities, threats to safety are diminishing their options of using dating apps to their full potential.

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Appendix

Open Questions

1. People may use dating apps for various reasons, ranging from wanting to build long-term relationships, to find short-term sexual contact, to find friends, or simply for entertainment or passing the time. Please describe your own reasons for using dating apps.
2. People who use dating apps often make a variety of experiences which may be both negative and positive. Please describe your overall experience as someone who is [indicated gender identity] and whether you perceive this experience as more positive or negative.
3. In what ways are you a different person dating online (e.g. when texting people) than going on dates in person?
4. When using dating apps, people often find out new things about themselves, such as what they like, what they identify as, what is important to them, etc. Other people find that dating apps do not influence their understanding of themselves. What, if anything, have you learned about yourself while online dating?
5. How has online dating “helped” you learn more about who you are as a person?
6. Please describe a specific experience during online dating that had an influence on how you see yourself. You can make this as detailed as you like by describing what happened, where it happened, who was with you, as well as emotions that you felt during this experience.