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A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE AGENCY OF WOMEN
IN THEIR 30S AND 40S WHO USE DATING APPLICATIONS

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Family Sciences in the
College of Agriculture, Food and Environment
at the University of Kentucky

By

Tera Buerkle

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Ronald Werner-Wilson, Professor of Family Sciences

Lexington, Kentucky

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE AGENCY OF WOMEN IN THEIR 30S AND 40S WHO USE DATING APPLICATIONS

The use of dating applications (apps) to find romantic and sexual partners is widespread across age groups, however, there is a paucity of research on dating apps with those in middle adulthood. Sexual script theory suggests that women's agency (i.e. the ability to act in one's own best interest) may be impacted by expectations from an inherently sexualized context, such as dating apps. Feminist theory contends that women's agency is complicated by gender socialization due to the imbalance of power in society that greatly favors men. In this study seventeen women aged 30 to 49 completed in-depth semi-structured interviews, and their responses were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Data analysis resulted in identifying themes related to how dating apps pose challenges to women's agency, the casual nature of apps, positive aspects of dating apps in general and specific to women's agency, differences and similarities to meeting in-person, and how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting dating app experiences. These results highlight the complicated process of navigating dating app use for women aged 30 to 49 and call for cultural changes relating to gender socialization.

KEYWORDS: Sexual agency, Dating applications, Women, Sexual script theory,
Feminism, COVID-19

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05/07/2021

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Dating application usage is on the rise. According to the Pew Research Center, between 2013 to 2019, the number of adults who have ever used an online dating site has increased from 11% to 30%, and the number of adults who used an online dating site or app, as they are commonly called, from October 2018 to October 2019 increased from 3% to 11% (Anderson et al., 2020). Users aged 30 to 49, the second-largest population of users, make up 38% of those on dating apps or sites (Anderson et al., 2020), yet much of the research about dating apps has been focused on those in the emerging adult population, which ranges from about age 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000). Adult women, aged 30 to 49, may have special considerations for research regarding dating apps.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Agency

In writings on life course theory Pearlin (2010) describes agency as the ability to make choices, including choosing and navigating ones' trajectories and goals (p. 208). Agency is essentially an individual's ability to pursue their own desires and act in their best interests.

2.2 Gendered Power Imbalances Limit Women's Agency

Current research highlights concrete ways that gendered power imbalances negatively impacts women. For example, one in three US women have been the victim to some type of sexual violence in their lifetime, with men accounting for over 97% of the perpetrators (Smith et al., 2017). Women are also at a greater economic disadvantage; women experience greater rates of poverty following divorce (Hogendoorn et al., 2019), and educated women earn 74 cents on the dollar to equally educated men (Cheeseman Day, 2019). These and countless other statistical comparisons of men and women show a general pattern of imbalance in the aggregate, but listening to the stories of women is a means to gain insight into the more nuanced ways that women's lives can be shaped at the individual level by gender socialization.

2.2.1 Theoretical Frameworks Supporting the Existence of Gender Power Imbalances

2.2.1.1 Sexual Script Theory.

Sexual script theory outlines how gendered constructs play out during sexual interactions, with an emphasis on the heterosexual context as being viewed as the correct context (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Both genders are implicitly and explicitly taught to

behave and to think of themselves in specific ways. Men are taught to engage in proactive behaviors, initiating sexual activity, in an effort to obtain opportunities for engaging in sex, and women are taught to behave from reactive positions, responding to the advances of men (Emmers-Sommer, 2015; Gagnon & Simon, 1973). That women are culturally taught to respond to the advances of men negatively influences their ability to act from their own desires. This influence can result in having feelings of less agency during sexual interactions. Extant research supports sexual script theory's assertions by showing that the behaviors of women and men tend to align with cultural gender norms during sexual interactions (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Gillespie & Eisler, 1992; Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988; Quinn-Nilas & Kennett, 2018). Social norms create expectations for how one should behave according to their gender

Gender socialization, which sexual script theory outlines, is said to be learned and active within three distinct levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Cultural scenarios relate to guidelines that outline appropriate behavior for men and women depending on cultural factors such as their geographical place and time in history. Cultural scenarios are the foundation for the other two levels of scripting. Interpersonal scripts are those that individuals partially create when interacting with each other, with cultural scenarios underpinning their scripts. Intrapsychic scripts are internal scripts that are influenced both by one's personal history and also by their culture. These gendered scenarios and scripts interact, are internalized and can direct how sexual and sexualized interactions unfold.

2.2.1.2 Feminist Theory.

The cultural history of modern women shows some ways their power has been quelled. The family system is a key area where gender is constructed, a power imbalance that favors men exists, and the exploitation of women is maintained (Hare-Mustin, 1978). Behaviors appropriate to roles within the family system are constructed in the social context of the family (Blume & Blume, 2003; Doherty & Colangelo 1984). Historically, women moved from their parent's house to the house of their husband, which infantilized them and influenced them to create their identity in subjugated contexts, where it was necessary for them to rely on men (Ross, 1994). For example, American women needed approval and support from a man to cosign for credit until 1974, when the Equal Credit Opportunity Act was approved by the Senate (Ross, 1994). While there is currently more freedom and variability in women's life course, intergenerational patterns related to passivity and subjugation are still the foundation for modern women: While young women may have more leniency in what is expected of them, the women that raised them, who they grew up watching, did not have the same amount of agency in their trajectories.

Feminist theory highlights how women's power is lessened in society and interactions, and it asserts there is a need to ameliorate this imbalance (Smith & Hamon, 2018; Hare-Mustin, 1978; Leslie & Southard, 2009). This imbalance impacts the amount of agency women have to negotiate for themselves because women are socialized to defer to men (Hare-Mustin, 1978; Leslie & Southard, 2009).

2.2.2 Empirical Research Supporting How Gendered Expectations Can Limit Agency

Research shows that socialized and gendered expectations are so powerful that both men and women will engage in unwanted sexual interactions just to stay aligned with

socialized norms (Darden, et. al. 2018; Kennett, et al., 2013; Quinn-Nilas & Kennett, 2018). However, the current imbalance of power that feminist theory acknowledges and sexual script theory describes both highlight that greater power is offered to men (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Hare-Mustin, 1978). Recent studies have found that women often have discrepancies between internal desires and consent behaviors (Bouchard & Humphreys, 2018; Darden, et. al. 2018; Willis, et al., 2019). Women consenting to sexual behaviors that they do not desire is evidence of lowered agency. Bouchard & Humphrey's (2018) study notably found that a woman having general assertiveness does not necessarily relate to being assertive in a sexual context. This shows a distinction in a context that is specifically sexual. Communicating disinterest in sexual contexts may pose special challenges for women that may limit women's agency.

2.2.3 How Dating Applications May Limit Women's Agency

The gendered power imbalance may be greater in the context of dating apps because the context sets the tone for a relationship to be sexual or romantic in nature. Whereas, when people first meet in-person, as opposed to meeting through an app, the nature of the relationship is less clear and is informed by the context that they are in. For example, meeting someone in the context of work would likely create different expectations than meeting someone in a bar. Each context of meeting a new person requires communication and negotiation in order to navigate the relationship. Dating apps are generally understood to immediately signify an individual's interest in either romantic and/or sexual elements of a relationship before the people interacting have experienced each other face-to-face.

Dating apps also have sexualized reputations which may inform some users as to what they can expect on dating apps and what is expected of them. One meta-analysis

notes a high number of research articles focusing on the risks of dating app use, showing that there is a negative perception of dating app use that aligns with them being a context related to risky sexual behaviors (Castro, 2020). The majority of women who use dating apps experience harassment by way of unsolicited sexual communications and imagery or are pressured for sex or to send explicit images (Brown, 2020; Castro, 2020). This harassment could create additional pressure regarding sexual expectations. Dating apps, where people show their availability and interest for romantic and sexual relationships are an inherently sexualized context. Contexts create socialized expectations. Expectations influence behaviors.

2.2.3.1 Special Implications For Women Aged 30 to 49.

Adult women who are 30 to 49 years old have different implications informing their romantic and sexual decision-making than those in other age groups. There are fewer single people in the 30 to 49 age group (23%) than those aged 18 to 29 (41%) and only a quarter of all adults who are single are interested in dating (Brown, 2020). There are fewer choices of dating prospects available for those who want to date in 30 to 49 year age group. While some women aged 30 to 49 may feel more confident regarding handling unwanted advances, they could also have more reasons to acquiesce, particularly if they have strong beliefs in sexual double standards, feel rushed to find someone to start a family with, or have awareness that their dating choices are limited. Having fewer reasons to refuse sexual interactions has been shown to relate to engaging in unwanted sexual behaviors (Kennett, et al., 2013). And even when women do say no, gender socialization has taught women to offer token resistance even when they do consent, which sometimes leads men to misunderstand denial of consent (Emmers-Somer, 2016). Gender socialization serves to

maintain and reinforce gender imbalance, which leaves women with less power to act in their best interests.

When one has fewer choices, as is the case with adult women who are dating, it is a symptom of having less agency to make choices. Sex with people met through dating apps may pose increased agentic challenges for women who are in the 30 to 49 age group because of the combination of cultural expectations, contextual expectations, and having fewer choices. Awareness of a problem is often the first step to make change. By asking women who are aged 30 to 49 about agency in the context of dating apps I hoped to find some common themes and insights to bring awareness to challenges posed by dating apps.

CHAPTER 3. THE PRESENT STUDY

This research project considers the experiences of women aged 30 to 49, who have not been the focus of extant dating app research. The intent of this study is to explore participants' perceived agency in physical and sexual situations with those that they have met through dating apps in the prior two years.

Dating apps are a relatively new context to meet romantic and sexual partners that have been given little qualitative study. While there is a plethora of extant dating app research on the emerging adult population, there is relatively little research on women that date who are older than age 25. Phenomenological approaches are employed to explore phenomena that a homogenous sample has experienced (Creswell, 2013). The goal of phenomenological studies is to highlight the essence of a phenomena through a researcher's analysis of data by identifying themes common to the research participants (Creswell, 2013). Thus the goal of this study is to identify common themes of dating app experiences and how participants viewed their ability to act in their own best interests when in physical or sexual situations with people they met via dating apps.

My intended audiences for this study are women in this demographic, academics, dating app makers, and the culture at large. By amplifying the experiences of these participants through the use of thick, rich description I hope to provide a complex view of the challenges of adult women who are dating. Because this is a group that is rarely heard from on such topics, I hope the existence of this research offers this demographic of women credence and support. By exploring challenges stemming from gender socialization, through the lens of sexual script theory, I hope to encourage a perspective that allows empathy to be at the forefront.

3.1 Researcher as Instrument

All researchers come with subjective perspectives that inform what they are studying (Ahern, 1999). My own preconceptions from using dating apps myself, and studying gender socialization and sexual script theory, help to both identify more nuanced themes, and naturally have influenced the themes that I found. To establish credibility a researcher should acknowledge their perspective and what they have previously studied because it will inherently influence how they conduct and present research (Ahern, 1999). In the hopes of developing credibility, I have followed guidelines that Ahern (1999) suggests, making bracketing for this project an iterative and reflexive process. I began journaling before I conducted the research interviews in order to explore my identities, values, perceptions, and emotions about the subjects I intended to research. Journaling through the end of analysis and having regular check ins with peers and my committee helped me to evaluate my perceptions and check on biases.

Working on data analysis on a dating app research project conducted through Dr. Kristen Mark's Sexual Health research lab at the University of Kentucky influenced me to think more critically about my own dating app experiences. For Dr. Mark's research study, I coded types of gaslighting communications that one woman has received through her dating app profiles. My personal experiences with dating apps have been mixed but I have noticed common themes that certainly influenced the interview questions I created as well as the interviews themselves.

I meet the inclusion criteria for this study. I am currently dating someone that I met on a dating app. I am cis-gendered, white, heterosexual, and have never been married but I have cohabitated with a long-term partner. I grew up in a diverse area in a middle-class neighborhood, but my family experienced near-constant financial struggles while I was

young. Working as a clinician whose practice is based in systems theory, I have found that highlighting foundational familial beliefs and cultural socialization can offer empathy and/or validation to clients. Because of my work experiences in the clinic, I am inclined to believe that people are not always able to operate with agency and free will, but are instead influenced by their family, identities, social circles, culture, and the expectations that are a part of those contexts. I believe people whose demographic qualities experience oppression, including women, have likely had to adjust their behaviors at times in ways that stray from being able to pursue what they wish. I have certainly had that experience myself.

All of that being said, I do have an understanding that the unique set of circumstances that make me who I am are not going to mirror the experiences of others. My curiosity to hear from women that are different from me and have had different experiences with dating apps is genuine. I did my best to remain open and curious when interviewing the participants. However, I realize that my personal lens no doubt colors some of the interpretation of participants' responses, particularly those who seemed to express that the expectations of others bear no weight on their decisions and behaviors. In my work as an intern therapist, I have sought and continue to seek awareness of my "self-of-the-therapist" in the hopes of knowing my pitfalls, and developing awareness of my emotional experience and its tendencies. In clinical practice this allows me to listen and reflect, even when I have had a very different life from the person speaking.

This personal information is shared to be transparent and delivers on the reflexive bracketing that Ahern (1999), Creswell (2013), and Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend

so that I could approach the data with the possibility of fresh awareness and an openness to what is unknown to me.

Because I have used dating apps off and on for about 3 years, I have insight into some nuances of how they are used. My experience allows me to ask detailed follow-up questions, and may have allowed me to interact with participants more personally than if I had no experience with dating apps. My use of dating apps may also allow me to pick up on nuances in the data that those without dating app use may have missed and could therefore be considered an asset.

CHAPTER 4. METHOD

4.1 Recruitment

Inclusion criteria for this project dictated that at the time of their interview the participants (a) be cis-gendered women; (b) be aged 30 to 49; (c) have used dating apps within the previous two years; (d) have met people that they have dated by means other than dating apps at some point in their lives; (e) have had sexual experiences with people they have met via dating apps in the previous two years; and (f) either be single or in a relationship of fewer than six months. Because my study incorporates ideas related to gender socialization of women, I made the decision to recruit participants that are cis-gendered, that is, they are biologically female and identify as women. I did not make this decision lightly and believe that conducting research with transwomen is vital (e.g. Katz-Wise et al., 2018). However, I was not put in the position to turn away any women because of their self-described biological sex or gender identity. Age 30 is understood to mark the beginning of adulthood (Arnett 2000; Lowe et al. 2013), and the Pew Research Center's large 2020 study on dating apps, groups ages 30 to 49 as the second largest population of dating app users (Anderson et al., 2020). Meeting romantic and sexual partners at some point in one's life, by means other than a dating app, may offer users a point of comparison that could highlight how the context of dating apps may differ. Participants were sought who had recently been single, and had physical or sexual experiences with people met through dating apps within the previous two years, to offer recollections that could more readily be recalled.

4.1.1 Communications with Participants

After obtaining approval from the IRB, I posted my research flyer (see Appendix A) to my Facebook and Instagram pages with the option for others to share the flyer. Participants who saw the flyer or were told about the research from people they knew contacted me via email, text message, and through Facebook's and Instagram's direct messaging service. When I received a text message or direct message, I asked the participant to email me at my University of Kentucky email address in order for me to relay the full study details. When I received an email from a potential participant I would reply with an initial email (see Appendix C) that included the full study details and the informed consent document (see Appendix B). My email requested that they reply with their availability for a one-hour interview. After an interview time and date were agreed upon, I sent a reminder email two days before the interview (see Appendix D). On the morning of the interview, I sent a final email (see Appendix E), with the informed consent document attached again, which contained the password-protected, HIPAA-compliant Zoom link.

4.1.2 Recruitment Response

I had a strong initial response and so chose not to recruit via Reddit pages which had previously agreed to allow a post of my research flyer. The first fifteen interviews were scheduled and completed within three weeks of my first posting of the research flyer, and the last two interviews were completed four weeks after my initial posts. Three people who were interested in participating were disqualified for not meeting the inclusion criteria. One person had been dating someone more than six months, and two had not had sex with anyone they met via a dating app within the previous two years. Overall, eight

people who contacted me with an interest in participating did not reply after I sent them an email containing the full study information.

4.2 Sample

Snowball sampling from my Facebook and Instagram social media pages created a sample that was mostly white-collar professionals, those working in or as a part of higher education communities, those in the arts, and people that know these people. The 17 participants for this study ranged in age from 30 to 46, with an average age of 36.6. Of the 16 who noted being single, two were seeing someone, and one was talking to someone. One participant noted being in a relationship of fewer than two months. Most participants self-described their race or ethnicity as being white or Caucasian. See Table 1 for full demographic information. The number of people who study participants met in person that they first connected with through a dating app varied wildly from meeting two people to meeting about 70 people. Most women had to think for several moments regarding the number of people they met. Some participants offered revisions to this amount during the interview, while others gave their answers quickly and assuredly. Creswell (2013) notes in-depth interviews for phenomenological studies have as many as 10 participants, and Dr. Kristen Mark noted that studies of this kind have around 20 participants or reach saturation (K. Mark, personal communication, 2019). Recruitment procedures continued until saturation was met.

4.2.1 Misconception: Everyone on Dating Apps is There For Sex

Fourteen of the seventeen women that I interviewed shared that they are ideally seeking long-term or serious relationships. Eight of those women noted being open to other

Table 1: Demographic Information, General

Participant	Sex	Gender	Current relationship status	Married previously	Times married	Currently have children?	# of children	Genders dated, in the previous 2 years	Race or ethnic identity, self-described
Theresa	F	F	Single	yes	once	yes	4	Males	White
Roseanna	F	F	Single	1 cohabitation	no	no	-	Males	Mexican, Hispanic
Emily	F	F	Single	no	-	no	-	Males	White
Katie	F	F	Single	no	-	no	-	Males	White
Molly	F	F	Single	no	-	no	-	Males	Caucasian
Misha	F	F	Single	yes	twice	yes	2	Males	Caucasian
Brie	F	F	Single	yes	once	yes	2	Males	African American
Sam	F	F	Single, seeing someone	no	-	no	-	Males	White, not Hispanic
Gabriella	F	F	Single, talking to someone	no	-	no	-	Males	Greek Orthodox-Caucasian
Dierdra	F	F	Single	no	-	yes	1	Males	White
Sophie	F	F	Single	no	-	no	-	Males	White
Minnie	F	F	Single, seeing someone	yes	once	no	-	Males	Jewish
Rosemary	F	F	Single	yes	twice	yes	2	Males	Caucasian
Cleo	F	F	Single	no	-	no	-	Males	Black
Zoey	F	F	Single	yes	once	yes	1	Males & Females	White, not Hispanic
Ruby	F	F	Single	no	-	no	-	Males	White
Audrey	F	F	Relationship, < 2 months	no	-	no	-	Males	Caucasian

relationships while they search for that serious partner. Most women said they were not interested in hooking up (i.e. casual sex). Only one woman used dating apps exclusively for hooking up.

4.2.2 Study Participants

All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms, however, all other aspects shared about their identities are self-reported and have not been changed.

Theresa is a single, White woman and mother of four children. She was married once. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met four people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Theresa noted identifying as a sapiosexual. She noted being confident in her intellect and perception and openly discussed how having a disability impacts dating.

Roseanna is a single, Mexican-Hispanic woman, who has cohabitated with one partner. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met 10 to 30 people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Roseanna's answers reflected that her perceptions about male and female socialization have changed sharply from how she was raised. She spoke very quickly and noted several times being in no rush to find a meaningful relationship.

Emily is a single, White woman, who had met around five people in person that she first connected with on a dating app in the two years prior to her interview. Emily noted feeling frustrated or disappointed in herself for not having more agency in dating situations. She relayed that she has a tendency to build up app dates in her mind only to feel let down when she meets them.

Katie is a single, White woman, who had met about 10 people in person that she first connected with on a dating app in the two years prior to her interview. Katie did not talk about sex directly but noted that dating apps allow her more freedom sexually. She was drugged while on a date with someone she had met via a dating app, but noted this as an anomaly, and throughout much of the interview that experience did not seem to be at the forefront of her mind.

Molly is a single, Caucasian woman, who had met less than five people in person that she first connect with on a dating app in the two years prior to her interview. Molly seemed to come to the interview with pre-planned ideas about what she wanted to talk about. In particular, she commented several times regarding one man that both she and a friend had matched with via an app. She noted being an attorney and spoke very quickly.

Misha is a single, Caucasian woman, and mother of two children. She has been married twice. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met about five people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Misha was giggly throughout much of the interview and noted being a teacher at a college. She spoke with an Eastern-European accent.

Brie is a single, African American woman, and mother of two children. She was married once. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met about five or six people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Brie appeared tired, yawning often, and did not engage deeply with the questions. She expressed annoyance with dating apps, noting the lack of seriousness in those that she had met through them.

Sam is a White, not Hispanic woman, who is single but is currently dating someone. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met six people in person that she first

connected with on a dating app. Sam noted using dating apps for years and found it difficult to generalize her dating app experiences because of her high usage. She played with her hair near-constantly and made little eye contact.

Gabriella is a Greek Orthodox and Caucasian woman, who is single but is currently talking to a romantic partner. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met about three or four people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Gabriella spoke quickly and came with specific dating app experiences that she wanted to share, regardless of my questions.

Dierdra is a single, White woman and mother of one. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met four people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. The subject of dating apps was distressing to Dierdra. She met the father of her child, who decided not to be a part of the child's life, through a dating app.

Sophie is a single, White woman. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met three people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Sophie noted aspects of her life that revealed that she was an accomplished professional and academic. However, she often noted conflict about her own perceptions and made statements that showed that she feels some shame due to her experiences with dating apps.

Minnie is a Jewish woman, who is seeing someone. She was married once. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met about 70 people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Minnie was the only woman who noted using dating apps for hooking up exclusively, however, at the time of the interview she was in a new relationship with a man that she met through a dating app for a hook-up. She talked about

her experiences very matter-of-factly and noted exploring various behaviors with those she met through dating apps.

Rosemary is a single, Caucasian woman and mother of two. She has been married twice. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met about 20 people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Rosemary noted marrying very young and not dating much until her early 40s. Protecting her children and herself was a central topic to many answers during her interview.

Cleo is a single, Black woman. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met 2 people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Cleo noted being a teacher, and answered questions succinctly. She had a lack of interest in dating apps, finding them to be an inadequate way to meet potential dates.

Zoey is a single, White, not Hispanic woman, and mother of one. She was married once. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met about 15 to 20 people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Zoey noted being a psychology student several times, shared wild dating stories not related to the study, and mentioned several personal philosophies about dating apps.

Ruby is a single, White woman. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met about three people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Ruby noted being a comedic performer but that her job had been greatly impacted due to COVID-19.

Audrey is a Caucasian woman, who has been in a relationship for less than two months. In the two years prior to our interview, she had met about 8 to 10 people in person that she first connected with on a dating app. Audrey noted having mostly very positive experiences with dating apps.

4.3 Procedure

4.3.1 Data Collection

During the IRB approval process, and before interviewing participants, I conducted two practice interviews with colleagues, one of whom met inclusion criteria and the other was two years too young to have been a participant. During and after each interview I requested feedback from these two colleagues. Their feedback allowed me to revise language and omit questions that were less focused on my research questions.

Participants were informed that the interview would last about one-hour and that they would be compensated for their participation with a \$25 Amazon gift card that would be sent about a month after the interview was conducted due to bureaucratic processes.

The HIPAA-compliant Zoom link for each interview was set to automatically record the interview upon my joining the meeting. Because Zoom does not allow for the recording of only the audio, both audio and video were recorded. However, after each interview was complete, to ensure the privacy of my participants and follow the protocol as submitted to the IRB, I deleted the video record after ensuring that the audio had recorded successfully. I did not review any of the video records before deleting them. An initial transcript was generated using Microsoft Word's dictation function on my laptop. I would then listen to the interview myself and review the initial transcript, adding basic punctuation, making corrections, color coding the participant's text blue, and changing names to pseudonyms. All transcripts and audio recordings were deleted from my computer and are saved to a secured Microsoft One Drive folder, on a University of Kentucky secured server, that I can only access by logging on to via the University of Kentucky's VPN.

4.3.1.1 Participant Interviews.

Participants were asked to select a location that ensured privacy so that they could share sensitive information if they wished. At the start of the recording, I informed each participant that their continued involvement in the interview was considered their agreement with the informed consent document, and they could revoke their consent at any time by leaving the Zoom meeting. Using a semi-structured interview guide, I asked participants questions focused on their experience of employing agency to act in their own best interest when using dating apps, including asking more specifically about agency during sexual situations with people they met through dating apps. (See Appendix F for the full interview guide). Before beginning the interview I reviewed overarching information about the study and interview as is recommended by Madill (2012), this included going over the inclusion criteria, and the informed consent document, which included how to get in touch with therapists in their area, and how to contact the Office of Research Integrity and the chair of my thesis committee. Then I would briefly describe the study, and sometimes I would offer my definition of agency at this point and other times I would offer it after the demographic questions. After defining agency, I would ask if they had any questions about that definition, the study, or anything else. Some people would ask for clarity but most had no questions.

4.3.1.2 Demographic Questions.

After answering any of their questions, I would then ask the study's demographic questions. Demographic information collected included age, biological sex assigned at birth, current gender identity, current relationship status, previous marriages, number, age, and biological sex of current children, gender(s) that the participant has been sexual with

in the previous two years, a self-description of their race or ethnic identity, names of the dating apps used in the previous two years, and the number of people met in-person that the participant first connected with through a dating app in the previous two years. See Table 1 for general demographic information and see Table 2 for dating app-specific demographic information.

4.3.1.3 In-Depth Interview Questions.

Before asking questions that were designed to provide in-depth answers, I often reiterated the definition of agency and asked participants whether they had any questions about that definition. At this point, I would tell them that I would try to use their language, wanted to hear about their perspective, would ask follow up questions for clarity, and I also asked them to correct me if I seemed not to understand what they were sharing with me. I let each participant know they could skip questions for any reason and end the interview at any time for any reason. The interview guide was usually followed in the same order as it is written, however, to keep the interview conversational, if a participant brought up an idea that related to a question in another part of my guide, I would often follow up with their line of thought at that time.

There were participants that I felt it was necessary to make the interview more structured. I made this choice with participants who seemed to have an agenda of what they would talk about before the interview began. These respondents normally had a personal theme throughout their responses, such as a bad or less than satisfying experience, or a propensity to relay “wild” dating stories. I realize that other researchers may have made a different choice, and followed the flow of these threads. I chose to redirect the participants back to the questions on my interview guide for several reasons. When

Table 2: Demographic Information, App Specific

Participant	People met in-person that first connected on a dating app in the previous 2 years	Dating apps used in the previous 2 years														
		Bumble	Clover	Coffee Meets Bagel	E-Harmony	Facebook Dating	Farmers Only	Hinge	Inner Circle	The League	Match	Meet Mindful	OkCupid	Our Time	Plenty of Fish	Tinder
Theresa	4	X									X	X	X	X		X
Roseanna	10 to 30	X														
Emily	5, I think	X														
Katie	10 or so	X					X			X						X
Molly	less than 5	X	X	X		X	X								X	X
Misha	I think about 5						X	X		X		X				
Brie	like 5 or 6	X				X	X								X	X
Sam	6	X					X		X			X				
Gabriella	like 3 or 4	X				X										X
Dierdra	4													X		
Sophie	3	X								X						X
Minnie	about 70	X										X				X
Rosemary	at least 20	X					X									X
Cleo	2	X			X					X						
Zoey	maybe 15 to 20	X				X	X	X				X				
Ruby	3 that I can think of	X					X									
Audrey	between 8 and 10															X
Total		14	1	1	1	3	2	8	1	1	5	1	5	1	3	9

participants seemed to want to enlist me in working out a particular experience, it felt as though they were trying to engage me as a therapist rather than a researcher. By redirecting the interview at these times, in order to be more structured, I felt I was following the ethical path for the given context. When one participant seemed to want me to broadcast a bad experience they had (i.e. they offered to send me emails that they had sent to officials so that I could include them in my research), I felt as though they were trying to subvert the direction of the interview for their purposes. Perhaps, in this case, I was not allowing them agency to explore what they wished. However, I was enacting my own agency, by sticking to the topic I set out to research.

The in-depth part of the interview began by my asking two questions in the hopes of helping the participant to feel relaxed and establishing rapport (Creswell, 2013; Madill, 2012):

1. Is there anything about being a woman that makes dating with apps more fun?
2. Is there anything about being a woman that makes dating with apps less fun?

Many participants laughed at these two questions and shared their answers with a sense of ease. But asking about “fun” was not only meant to establish rapport but also to highlight what could be a symptom of agency, that if one feels comfortable acting in their own best interests using dating apps that they might be able to have more fun using them.

The interview guide (see Appendix F) was designed to evoke information on several topics relating to the use of dating apps and the felt-agency of women aged 30 to 49 with those they meet through dating apps. Data was collected about (a) the type(s) of relationships ideally sought and whether dating apps helped or hindered this process; (b) whether using a dating app changes participants’ ability to act in their own best interest in

sexual or physical situations or in any other ways; (c) whether participants feel they are expected to act in particular ways during physical and sexual situations; (d) whether participants find differences in their agency in physical and sexual situation between those they have met on a dating app and those they have met in other ways; (e) how they show interest in being physical or sexual with someone they have met through a dating app; (f) whether and how they express wants, needs, and limits with those they have met through a dating app; (g) what their common experiences are from rejecting someone that they have met through a dating app; (h) whether they have noticed any common experiences relating to physical or sexual situations with those met via a dating app; (i) whether the pandemic has changed their experiences with dating apps; (j) and if there is anything else they would like to share about dating apps or agency.

After all questions were answered, I thanked each participant for sharing their experiences with me and highlighted how rare it is for this population to be studied. I reminded each participant that there are therapy referrals in the informed consent document if the interview brought up difficult emotions or experiences that they would like to explore. Lastly, I let participants know that I would turn off the recording, so that if they wanted, they were welcome to debrief or ask me any questions but that there was no pressure to do so. Three participants requested to ask me questions and 14 participants ended the interview at this point.

During the interview I used what felt like appropriate amounts of silence, and non-verbal responses to allow the participant greater time or space to explore their answer if they wished (Madill, 2012).

4.3.2 Data Analysis

The framework of reflexive thematic analysis provided by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019) offered guidelines for identifying patterned responses or themes that I noticed within the data collected.

After each interview, I took some initial notes in a spreadsheet. For each participant, I gave a brief immediate description that sometimes included the way they visually presented themselves (e.g., red hair, fidgety) and other times noted a general sense of my impression of them (e.g., academic, playful). I recorded notes about my perception of their comfort with talking about sex and also general notes about what stood out to me about the interview. These notes are kept in a password-protected Microsoft Excel spreadsheet on my password-protected laptop, creating two layers of security recommended by the institutional review board at the University of Kentucky. If a participant said their name or occupation, I marked the time where they had done so during the interview so that I could change their name to an alias in the secondary transcription process. The total record time (trt) was also recorded in this initial spreadsheet.

After all interviews were conducted I used Microsoft Word's dictation function to generate a rough transcript. Then I went through each transcript, listening to each corresponding interview, and edited the initial Microsoft Word transcriptions. After completing this secondary version of a transcript I would record the demographic answers in a second password-protected Excel spreadsheet. In another tab of this second spreadsheet, I summarized answers and identified patterns of each interview, sometimes including quotations from the interview transcript in my spreadsheet.

Summarizing how participants responded to interview questions allowed me to identify initial themes across the data set that seemed key to the experiences of the sample. I approached the data inductively but want to note my prior study of women's agency, as well as sexual script theory and systems theory, both of which acknowledge sociological influences on the behaviors of individuals.

After identifying key themes, I analyzed the data for prevalence of topics to develop a codebook, continuing to follow guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006; 2019). Identifying the prevalence of themes helped me to understand which were most key to the dating app experiences of this sample of women. In the results section I chose quotations that seemed to accurately reflect prevalent, key themes, but I also chose quotations for their ability to reflect underlying and/or nuanced themes and experiences. Because I am investigating an under-researched population, Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019) suggest using quotations from across the entire data set to provide thick-rich description which captures both the key themes and the diversity of experiences of women aged 30 to 49 who use dating apps.

Data was analyzed at the semantic level by looking at the textual transcripts, identifying themes, and providing quotations in the results section that reflect those themes. Data was also analyzed at the latent level when I interpreted underlying meanings and offered speculations about participants' behavior during the interview process and noted my impressions of the answers they gave. Epistemologically, looking at the data in both semantic and latent levels uses a contextualist paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006), whereby the data is understood both at face value and with an interpretation of the data in broader social contexts through the lens of sexual script theory. The results section offers

both the essence of the participants' dating app experiences and offers more general insights into the dating app experiences of women aged 30 to 49.

Four interviews were different than the rest and so I provide a more in-depth latent analysis of these interviews in the results section.

When I make mention of people meeting in a shared physical context, such as a bar or church, I will use the term "in-person" to describe this kind of meeting. Because those who first connect on a dating app also share experiences about meeting app dates in person or face-to-face, it seemed important to differentiate the two types of meeting. In this research, those who first connect on a dating app may eventually meet in person, but those who first connect in a shared physical space meet in-person. Also, I will refer to dating applications simply as apps. Because I do not speak about apps other than dating apps, it did not seem necessary to call out "dating" apps every time they were mentioned. All quotations from participants are verbatim, which includes the use of some repeated words and colloquialisms.

CHAPTER 5. RESULTS

5.1 Challenges to Agency

5.1.1 The Inherently Sexual Context of Dating Apps.

Many participants made mention of apps being an inherently sexual context. Sam relayed the sexual nature of apps directly to my question of whether apps change her ability to act in her own best interests in any way:

I think people used to meet each other through through a setting that wasn't sexualized all the time. So like they met in classes. They met at school. They met through friends. They met at a friend's party. At the gym. They were doing something some activity in the same vicinity that wasn't sexualized. Or at least like not all the time, right? And so they were they're able to get a sense of who that person is in the way that they interacted with classmates, or with their friends, or you know? It's just like this you're able to be kind of a fly on the wall with this person that you don't know. And you can get information about that person from classmates or friends etc. so you feel a little more comfortable going on a date with him....

There she is highlighting the importance of seeing someone in a nonsexualized context as a way to better understand who they are. She related her above response about sexualized contexts to going along with sexual activities out of fear:

[T]hat's the big problem with with someone that you don't really know very well, who's bigger than you, who's trying to make a move on you, is if you reject them I don't know how they're going to react. so I feel like sometimes in these situations it's like you're playing possum. Where it's like maybe you might let a physical or sexual thing happen to you and you just kind of let it happen and then you find a safe way to get out of it rather than being like "Oh no." because I don't know if they're going to get angry I don't know if they're going to get violent like I don't I don't know this person, you know?

She highlights how putting herself on a date with someone that she only knows through a sexualized context puts her at risk of allowing unwanted physical and sexual advances. She acquiesced to the expectations of another after meeting in the context of a dating app. Here she is following a sexual script in which the man is controlling the situation and she responds passively to his advances. Some people would describe this scenario as assault due to what sounds like a lack of clear consent. Together, the two previous quotes help to show that dating apps are a sexualized context and that the context may have affected this participant's ability to act in her best interest.

Sophie notices less pressure to feel chemistry when meeting someone in-person than when she has matched with someone through a dating app:

I have more of a chance to walk away when our meeting was on the streets. Then if it's online. Like I don't. That walking away is. It comes with less baggage. When it comes from an organic meeting versus. 'Cause it's almost like you've already agreed you like each other, like so if we swipe then we must have an interest. ...[B]ut you feel almost committed to giving it a chance whereas normally I wouldn't I wouldn't feel like that, you know?

To Sophie, matching on a dating app feels like an agreement of mutual romantic or sexual interest that she feels pressure to follow through with. For her, the context of a dating app comes with expectations that seem to make her doubt herself and influenced her to behave with less agency.

Many participants noticed that there is an expectation that sexual interactions will happen more quickly with those met via an app. Ruby relays that starting the relationship with texting can set the stage for things to become sexual sooner:

The apps are designed for you know just quickness, just efficiency, you know agility. And and also it's text based, so you know, you're- there is a lot of

communication that can happen there. And then when you meet someone in person, especially as a woman. I'm meeting men. I do feel like that there, you know, at times is already a dynamic there that, you know, could put me in a place where you know I don't have, I don't find, I have recourse maybe in a situation. And I do feel pressured, because I'm just like being inundated, maybe with like "well what did you think was going to happen?" "well we never said this." You know things like that or or even- I do find I do think I find more expectation for- To be sexual sooner with people I've met on dating apps. I have definitely found a correlation between that.

When texting becomes sexual on dating apps before meeting (and many women noted this is a norm) it sets up expectations that she feels pressure to meet. When she notes a date saying "what did you think was going to happen?" she is relaying a date suggesting the inherent sexual nature of dating apps, as if everyone is on dating apps for the purpose of finding sex.

According to sexual script theory, women have less power to direct the course of sexual interaction because they are taught to respond to the actions of men. With this in mind, being raised as a woman may come with lower agency in sexual situations. Ruby mentions this cultural frame:

...[B]ecause I am a woman dating men, there is already a societal pressure for me to you know even defer to what they want or or not advocate for my own wants and needs. And with an app I think that that expectation is definitely to their advantage.

Because the context of apps is sexual in nature, women may have less power to control interactions in this context.

5.1.2 Presentation Via a Dating App Versus Presentation in Person.

Some participants noted quick changes in how men presented themselves through the app versus when they met or continued dating, including changes in the type of relationship they initially said they were seeking. Sophie offered an example of how men have acted through the app versus when they meet in person:

The one that I didn't see again was because of that. Because it was very quickly obvious as cool as he was on the chat, I mean just as cool and easy going, and didn't say anything gross. And then met in a bar and he was disgusting. Like he was just like, "So what do you think, 2 drinks?" "And only two drinks before I catch an Uber?" Yeah.

Here she is saying that he was insinuating that they would only have two drinks before leaving to go have sex, which is unlike how he presented while they were texting through the app. The drastic change in his presentation came with a matching change in what he expected. Sophie noted often struggling with her self-worth in relation to her dating apps experiences throughout the interview. I quoted her earlier in this study regarding how matching with someone can feel like a mutual agreement, making her try harder to like someone even though her gut is telling her it is not a match. However, the sudden shift that this date tried seemed to allow her to act with a great deal of agency, instead of self-doubt. Perhaps his straying from a standard, socialized interpersonal script set off alarm bells that she did not consider second-guessing.

However, when a man presents drastically different in public than when alone, this can place women in scary situations in which choice may be completely taken away, and which women may not have been able to foresee. Sam notes experiences of men changing their presentation when not in public and after several dates.

Um so maybe they picked you up or you're in an Uber with them. Or maybe they invited you back to their house. And you thought at the beginning of the day that they were, you know, you've been on maybe two or three dates with them already and you're feeling like OK this guy seems really great, but then once you get back at their house they completely change. Um you know, it's it's that kind of thing. Where it just depends on the setting. and if you're able to get out of it easily.

Because the date changed their presentation, Sam had to contend with expectations shifting suddenly, making her safety the priority instead of the enjoyment of getting to know someone.

5.1.3 Women Needing to Keep Themselves Safe From Men Behaving Aggressively, Illegally, Abusively, and Unethically.

Fear of men showed up in a number of different ways. Participants noted having to employ various strategies to keep themselves safe including researching their dates, meeting in a public location, listening to their gut instincts, and reading nonverbal cues. Gabriella spoke about the importance of meeting men from dating apps:

...I don't give out phone numbers. I don't give out any other identifying information until we do have that first meeting. So I want to sit down with them in a public place, make sure they don't have murder in their eyes.... [A]nd at that date, if everything goes well I'll send them my phone number. I won't give it to him that like that night, but I'll send it to them through the app.

Several women mentioned that meeting a man in person is the point at which they consider to have begun dating that man. The communications until that point seem to hold less value for the women, perhaps because of the aforementioned changes in how some men present themselves on the app versus in person. Six women noted listening to their gut instinct as

a way to keep themselves safe. This gut reaction was something that several women mentioned they had to learn to trust over the course of their lives.

Six participants noted instances of men behaving aggressively, illegally, abusively, and/or unethically in person. Roseanna had two experiences with men who she met in person that were abusive to her. One was an ex-boyfriend who began harassing her and vandalized her car. She was able to obtain a restraining order but it took almost two years. Another abuser was a therapist who she noted to be trying to groom her into a sexual relationship but who ended up losing his license after she filed a complaint. Roseanna mentioned that she had learned growing up that men were entitled to women's bodies and that after experiencing these abuses she learned to question that lesson:

...[E]very time that I face a transgression of my boundaries by a man. A man who's trying to be physical, romantic or flirtatious with me, that I don't want. I am reminded of those things. I think about that and I like to think that I push back. I like to think- those two [experiences] have been definitely breaking points or the switching points of my my empowerment. If I have any. I like to think that I do, but at least a little bit more.

Her experiences of abuse increased her introspection, which influenced her to shift her perceptions and expectations of male-female interactions. Roseanna noted that she still tries to be gentle when rejecting men or telling them no but is concerned with coming across as "mean." Needing to be gentle in rejecting men's advances is a sign of fear. Most of the participants had fears of and/or stories of hurtful or abusive reactions when they rejected adult men.

Katie was drugged while on a first date with a guy she met via a dating app. She spoke of this experience as an anomaly and not something that she blames on apps, although she did note that the larger pool of men on dating apps likely includes some who

are rougher than she may ordinarily meet. She described getting sick soon after taking first sips of her drink and being able to fight the guy off due to the teachings of her tough, older sisters. That night, while she was still suffering from the effects of the drug she unmatched with the guy who had drugged her on the app. She noted it took her a couple of days to piece together exactly what happened and that she wished that dating apps allowed users to keep some record of who they were matched with, even after unmatching, so that she could have reported him when the full impact of what happened hit her.

Sam seemed to have many experiences with men from dating apps who put their desires ahead of her safety and wellbeing. She spoke of playing possum several times during the interview which seemed to allude to multiple experiences. Playing possum seemed to involve allowing the men to do what they wanted, in the hopes that the experience would be less awful if she did not fight them. Sam seemed to have a deep fear of men, a discomfort setting boundaries, and uncertainty about how to stop unwanted advances. There seemed to be a discrepancy between how she perceived herself (e.g. confidence from her career and knowing what she wants) and the helplessness she seemed to feel around men with sexual expectations.

Gabriella had a first video date with a guy met via a dating app who turned out to be actively masturbating during the call. She immediately unmatched with the guy after getting off the call. She used the information she had about him to contact the university where he had mentioned being enrolled in a Ph.D. program. She shared about this experience over social media, which alerted a friend that she was single: At the time of the interview, Gabriella and the friend were dating.

Rosemary dated a guy she met on a dating app for a year and a half, but when she broke things off with him he started showing up at her house at night, and following her on the street and in the grocery store. She ended up getting a protective order against him in the hopes that he would stay away from her and her two young daughters.

Audrey noted that once a guy she had been dating casually, who she met via an app, completely ignored her boundaries and proceeded to do things with her that she did not consent to. However, she does not blame the app for introducing them and noted very little differences meeting someone on an app versus in-person.

I would describe many of these women as empowered and people who act with intention, but they still had men harass, abuse, and assault them, taking away their control and power. Being the victim of abuse is not a reflection of who that person is, but rather the choices of the abuser.

5.1.4 Reasons Women Did Not Stop Unwanted Sexual Activities.

Several women made mentions of not stopping sexual interactions that they were not enjoying. The reasons they gave for not stopping interactions varied. Misha noted that by the time she becomes sexual with someone there is a level of comfort and that she wants the man to take charge, preferring to respond to what they do. As previously noted, Sam seemed to believe that by not saying anything she might avoid a worse experience. Minnie and Ruby noted not stopping a sexual interaction that they were not enjoying because saying something did not seem worth the effort. To Minnie it seemed as though saying something would take more effort than the encounter was worthy of:

Honestly if there was something that I like [didn't want to do]... I would just like wait for it to be over and then not see them again, you know? I'm just like alright I guess this is happening OK, alright, alright bye, you know?

And Ruby found that sometimes saying what she needs or wants does not mean that those things will be done, or done to satisfaction:

I also want to say like there have been times where I have you know said my needs and what I wanted from the experience and it just doesn't happen. You know like someone else just doesn't do it. Or they try and they don't do it well or whatever. And then at that point I would just be like OK fuck it.

Zoey mentions not being good at communicating her limits and preferences:

So I'm awful about not setting limits.... [T]ypically if that- if I don't like something, like I'll just kind of like physically like kinda be like shy shy off a little bit. But then if the person starts making me feel comfortable then I kind of just like go back into it and I'm like "oh hey."

She seems to express that she relies on the other person becoming aware that she may not like some activity, noting that their awareness of her responses allows her to feel comfortable. Each of these three women relayed experiences of needing a certain level of comfort, connection, or chemistry in order to be more active in sexual encounters. Six participants expressed discomfort with verbalizing sexual interest, wants, and limits, noting a preference for using body language or facial expressions instead. Each relied on sexual partners picking up on their nonverbal communications. These behaviors are in line with sexual script theory's assertion that men drive sexual activity and women are reactive: Women respond to the actions of men and do not assert their own wants, needs, or limits.

5.2 Challenges to Dating Apps: Lacking a Shared Physical Context

Several participants noted that not having a shared physical context with the person they are interacting with makes communications via dating apps different than meeting in-person. Ruby notes that everyone is texting in their own, comfortable context which influences them to act differently than if both people were in a shared physical context:

People are ... doing it everywhere so there is no like social barrier of acceptance. You know? It's like someone could- they just wake up or they're in bed, and then they get on a dating app. And so there are no social boundaries of like. You know well this person in a very comfortable situation, so of course they would feel more comfortable, and have less barriers, to be more like set- explicit I guess. Or just you know rude maybe.

Each person in their own comfortable space can create a dynamic that can be overly familiar. Ruby admits that she is also guilty of being too comfortable, or perhaps less intentional in her dating app interactions than she would be if she were meeting someone in-person.

...[I]t's like how deliberate can you be with apps? You know like, what am I doing like lighting a candle for myself and like going on, you know 50 like micro dates? No. I'm on my couch drinking wine and like I'm swiping too. But you know I would say even for myself, like that you know just that casualness of like "what are you doing?" "I'm just lying down and like watching television." You know it's like OK well then what does that mean? Like to other people?

Ruby highlights how not sharing physical space with another person can cause uncertainty in what each person is communicating.

5.3 Dating Apps: A Casual Context

5.3.1 Negative Aspects of a Casual Context.

The casual nature with which dating apps are used seems to create lower expectations of quality for those on dating apps. Six women noted matching with low quality men hurt their confidence, self-esteem and/or had them doubting themselves, leaving them wondering if their standards were too high. A couple of participants mentioned lowering their bar of who is acceptable after seeing the pool of men available to them on dating apps. These women expressed frustration over the limited choice of men available, which may relate to the smaller pool of single men in this age group.

Several participants mentioned being disappointed with the level of seriousness or the quality of men they were interacting with through dating apps. Misha, Brie, Cleo, and Ruby found men on dating apps tend to lack a level of seriousness, making both the men and dating apps less appealing. Zoey compared her dating app experiences to fast food:

I feel like it's the McDonald's of sex. Or the McDonald's of humans. Like you know you just get what you need and then if it works out, great. You hit that person up later. If not they end up ghosting you.

“Ghosting” is a term to describe someone suddenly cutting off communications, without explanation, and seemingly disappearing from one’s life (Safronova, 2015). The participant highlights the ease of which one can meet others through dating apps, but at the expense of quality and the coldness with which that they can leave.

Sophie also noted a tendency for people from dating apps to vanish on each other:

The one guy was great for a while. but you know we had a lot of fun. but as people are wont to do these days we both just sort of disappeared. There was no real exit. ...[I]t just petered out.

Perhaps the lack of shared social ties and not meeting in a physical context means that those met through dating apps may be more likely to be temporary fixtures in one's life.

The ease of meeting also seems to bring some skepticism about why people are on dating apps:

You know you can meet all these people with good connection. But it's almost like why are these people online? And you know it's an easy place for them to also meet someone and maybe they are also like very lazy about relationships and don't actually want it to work. ...[T]he people I meet online or like- they're gonna have issues, you know?

Sam, whose interview I pulled that quote from, has used dating apps for many years and expressed and explored concerns about herself during the interview regarding finding someone for a long-term relationship. She noted dating frequently, that apps offer her lots of opportunity and access, but that she has not been able to find someone that she shared chemistry, values, and desires with. At times Sam noted settling for someone that does not feel like a good match for a long-term partner. Emily noted that feeling lonely or anxious to find a partner lowers her ability to act with agency.

5.3.2 Positive Aspects of a Casual Context.

However, several participants noted that the lower stakes and casual-nature of dating apps had positive sides. Five of the women noted that dating apps are helpful to sexual exploration. Katie, who seeks both long term and casual partners, notes this freedom in exploring sex:

I would say in my experience I've maybe felt a little freer to express my sexuality I guess through it. Um you know I think, I don't think dating apps are necessarily where I would go to necessarily find a relationship, but if I'm looking to just have

a sexual experience it's a great place for that. And I feel a little freer in the apps there. And to me that, it can be fun. It's not always fun. But it can be sometimes.

She notes that the anonymity allows her to be more expressive of her true desires:

I think it's easier to just say I like this and I- please don't do that. That's not cool. I think it I think it's maybe the anonymity of it, allows me to feel like I can just say when I'm interested in, when I'm not interested in. So I think I can just be upfront about it.

Gabriella also felt grateful to have a space to explore sexually. She made several mentions of wishing to be set up by people that she knows because then she could have more help vetting the men and determining their quality. However, she noted that because dating apps have no social intermediaries she is able to be more sexually free on them: "I think with dating apps because you are the only person controlling how you interact it's different. If I was meeting somebody from church I would not be as quick to get intimate with them." The anonymity of dating apps may allow some women to step outside of gendered norms when no one is looking. That anonymity feels necessary for both of the above women to act as they wish underscores how cultural expectations may negate a woman's ability to act with agency. Cultural scenarios have immense power on interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts.

5.4 Positive Aspects of Dating Apps: An Increase in Agency For Some Women

Women offered a variety of ways that they feel they have greater agency when using dating apps. Many participants noted blocking men and unmatching with men were ways that apps allowed them greater agency. Theresa noted blocking someone after reading a qualification that they wrote in their profile.

I blocked someone this morning. I read his profile. His thing is my only qualification is you have to weigh less than me. You know he doesn't care how tall you are because he's a shorter man. So there is a lot of fatism on there. you know?

Reading his profile gave her information regarding what he values about who he dates. She was able to identify quickly that she was not interested and could block him before they even started chatting.

Emily mentioned unmatching with men when it becomes apparent that they are only interested in having sex with her. Molly, Brie, Gabriella, and Ruby noted unmatching with men who do not respect their boundaries. Gabriella notes a common experience:

I'm very curvy so the pictures that I post I that's just how I am. And so I do get a lot of comments about my body before I get comments about my personality. So there will be some inappropriate comments. And usually those guys get blocked pretty quick. I either don't respond to them or I ask if their mother knows they use their mouth like that.

Sam and Minnie mention the power an app can give a dating app user by comparing it to meeting someone in-person. Sam highlights how the ability to block someone or unmatch with them empowers agency versus meeting someone in a shared physical context.

...[Y]ou could just block the person on an app. Like you have all the agency in the world on an app. Because you just stop talking to them and they have no more access to you. But when you're meeting them in person. That is a whole different ball of wax.

Blocking and unmatching can be helpful strategies for dealing with men who made participants uncomfortable with their communications or bad behaviors. While being able

to easily cut contact with men can be empowering, each participant above did so because of the men treating women with a lack of respect or dignity.

Theresa, Katie, Gabriella, Minnie, and Ruby note that dating apps have offered them a place to say what they want and expect from sexual interactions. Ruby highlights how the low stakes of dating apps allow her to explore taking more control in sexual situations.

It's been an interesting playground I guess for me, as a woman to explore my agency. Because the stakes are low. And so, in the past you know like two years I have especially with, you know, age and maturity, been like no, like fuck it, let me, let me tell this person what I want. You know, let me just try this.

Low stakes allow her to feel more comfortable not acting in culturally expected ways, which gives her the ability to try nonstandard sexual scripts.

5.5 Positives Aspects of Dating Apps in General

Six participants were grateful to dating apps for expanding their social circle and introducing them to people they would not have met otherwise. A few women noted keeping in touch with men as friends or acquaintances after dating them did not work out. Four participants noted that it is easier for them to text about sexual desires, and limits than it is to talk about them in person with sexual partners. Emily notes that sexual interest has typically been relayed through text message:

I think historically it kind of came up via text message for the first time in some of the relationships yeah. I would love to say that it was you know in a moment passion but: *(laughs)* text messages.

Another positive note was being able to identify who is available to date, which is vague at best in-person. Audrey feels like apps allow her more of a choice of who she is meeting:

Maybe for a woman you know it can be really fun to, sort of feel like you're picking somebody, that you, in a way have almost curated, yourself. It's not quite like just going to a bar, and seeing who, talks to you, which could be anybody. And oftentimes you have no more control over that than just which bar you went to. But I feel like, with an app, um you can be a little bit more selective about who you meet. Um and I think that can be really fun. In theory. *(laughs)*

She likes being able to identify appealing traits about men before meeting them, which, of course, relies on honest self-disclosure. However, three participants of the study had experiences with men met via dating apps who turned out to be hiding that they were married or in a relationship.

5.6 Meeting In-Person Versus Through a Dating App

Six participants found minimal or no differences in meeting men through apps versus in-person. These women compared meeting men on a dating app to meeting strangers in public places such as the gym or a bar. Dierdra explains her perception of the similarity of meeting someone in person versus via an app:

I really don't make um the connections like you would in college, right? You meet different people and you can talk to them for a long time and get to know them. Versus if you're always working on computer usually you meet people like at the gym or the grocery store. And it's kind of like almost like online dating because it takes a long time before you can get to know them and you're only learning bits and pieces of them at short intervals of time.

She does not mention social intermediaries in her example, but there is, naturally, a shared physical space that each person has chosen in some way. Three women noted that when they meet a man in-person they feel more comfortable and that sharing a physical space allows them to get to know the other person as just a person, instead of a potential sexual

match. Brie finds that meeting in-person allows her to feel more confident in her perception compared to when she meets a man online:

I think the intentions are different. I think when you are able to meet somebody in person you have you know a secure sense of of being, you know? You're you're getting to know somebody you get to see them in a certain element. Online you just are talking to strangers pretty much. And it's really really a façade. I mean I mean it could be the same with face to face but you- I feel a little bit more assured when I can meet somebody in person versus online. Whether it works out or not you know. You have the opportunity to be in that space, share energy with that person. So you can get a good vibe of who they are you know, and what they do?

Brie and most of the participants noted that dating apps are more sexualized and that they come with greater expectations for sex than meeting in-person. Roseanna notes that expectations from men on dating apps leave her in the position of having to act as a gatekeeper:

If you meet someone on a dating app I guess there is more of an expectation from the- from at least the men that I have met that you're interested to go all the way in, not only physically but also emotionally in a committed relationship. That I do have- I have found that I have to be the one who's pushing the brakes hard and say whoa whoa whoa.

She finds a difference in what the men she meets via dating apps expect of her and this creates a need for her to firmly rebut their advances.

5.7 COVID-19 Pandemic: How it is Impacting Dating Apps Experiences

The social isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be influencing dating app experiences in several ways. Most participants continued using dating apps despite the pandemic but self-reported intentional decision-making about where to meet, choosing

places where social distancing was possible. Rosemary was the only one to say that relationships have become sexual more quickly due to dates coming to her house sooner than before the pandemic, when they would have met in public places first. Most women mentioned meeting fewer men or being more selective about who they met, and taking a longer time to become physical than they would have prior to the pandemic.

Audrey noted a higher degree of trust and honesty was necessary because of the pandemic:

Yeah I feel like we're having to sort of get to know each other in this way that demands trust, and it demands you know a feeling that someone is being honest. and this is all stuff that comes up when you get to know people in general but now I feel like it's happening a lot faster. It's almost like- it is almost akin to like, a like a sexual history conversation of just when was the last time you got tested? And you could even literally ask that question about COVID. You know so it's definitely changed- yeah it's definitely changed like what you're able to do with people. and sort of those first conversations too. and honestly I don't mind it because again I think it does sort of put you in this interesting place of- do I trust this person? You know like automatically: do I trust this person to be honest with me? Does this person seem like they're taking this global event seriously enough? And then also just in terms of the date themselves, they've gotten pretty simple too. So you know instead of going to a bar where you'll drink all night you go to a park and you talk. And in a way it's refreshing. Yeah it's it's- for such a strange sort of uncertain scary time I don't really mind the way it's impacted dating. I feel like it's sort of making good things about us and the bad things about us more visible. So- which helps when you're dating somebody. *(Laughs)*

Audrey highlights positive aspects of dating during the pandemic and how it requires trust more so than during non-pandemic times.

Video calls were tried as an alternate to a first date for some participants who are trying to maintain social distancing rules. Zoey notes video chatting during the pandemic before meeting someone in person:

I definitely do a lot more video chatting or try to do a lot more video messaging before I meet someone in person. Because like, technically with the pandemic probably shouldn't be meeting people in person right?

The pandemic seems to have made rejection, both physical and otherwise easier for many of the participants. Sam seemed to feel more confident and less anxious about offering a rejection to app dates:

[I]t's actually been a little bit better. Because I have a valid excuse to not be physical with someone. It's an easier way to be like no I'm not gonna kiss you.... [Y]ou know, like let's take this little slower. So you actually, like I've actually had a lot more boundary, without it being like: I'm rejecting you.

She is relaying an appreciation for the built-in soft rejection that the pandemic offers. It allows her to feel like she has a valid reason for saying no, when it seems that her confidence in what she would like to do feels more nebulous. While many found rejections easier, two participants found rejecting men for pandemic-related reasons created insults that were more extreme and also political.

5.8 Four Interview That Were Different Than the Rest

Four interviews stood out as different and warranted special exploration. The first interview that I explored in more depth was with Brie, who seemed especially guarded, answering “yes” or “no” to questions that were designed to allow participants to talk at length. These curt answers were unlike anyone else that I interviewed. Efforts to get further information were sometimes met briefly but other times seemed to evoke annoyance. Upon

review, when I noticed her short responses, I could hear myself checking in with her more, explaining the interview process more, and trying to sound more friendly. At times she would respond with greater depth but not for very long. Because the participant is African-American and I am white, I decided to more carefully review the interview, and journal my thoughts, to see whether I could determine if race was a factor that made this interview so different. While I cannot rule out whether race may have been a factor for why that interview was different than the others, I determined that the participant also relayed a guarded quality about her interactions on dating apps. She noted several times a lack of interest in explaining herself to others and mentioned that men had complained about her communication style. In the end, I determined that she may be a more guarded person and that that side of her also showed up in our interview. I did notice a similarity between Brie and Cleo who self-described as Black and Rosemary, who self-described as Caucasian. Rosemary and Cleo responded assuredly in their initial assessment of a date or choice and my questions did not seem to prompt further introspection during the interview. While I would not describe either of their answers as short or curt, I would say that, similar to Brie, they do not seem to ruminate on experiences, but accept them and then move on.

It is understandable that asking similar questions could come off as scrutinizing what participants offered. I did my best to address this before asking questions that could be seen as being marginally different, or if I was able to notice discomfort or hesitancy. Roseanna, Brie, and Zoey seemed to reflect that I was doubting or questioning previous answers they had given. However, they either noted this verbally or changed tact when I addressed this concern by letting them know that my questions were meant to evoke details, not doubt their perceptions.

The second interview that stood out from the rest was with Misha, who self-described as Caucasian, and spoke with an accent I describe as Eastern European. After the interview I made these notes in my spreadsheet:

I felt like she was trying to give me the answers that I wanted rather than share her experience. I had to remind her several times (or at least thought to) that this was about her perspective. It seems important to her to be seen as light-hearted and fun, giggling and making lots of jokes. It felt like a performance, almost like I was on a date with her.

Her verbal answers showed agency in some respects (e.g. being selective about who she meets) but not in other ways (e.g. only reacting to men's behaviors during sex instead of actively pursuing her desires, feeling the need to perform during sex). But Misha's overall behavior during the interview communicated a low level of agency. It seemed as though she were trying to determine who I wanted her to be and what answers she should offer me, once noting that she would try to give me the answers that I wanted and at other times offering friends' experiences as if they were her own. I did indeed have to remind her twice that I was hoping to get her perceptions and experiences, not what I wanted to hear or the experiences of her friends. At one point I had to clarify if the answers that she gave were her own: They were not. I considered whether I should include her answers in my study at all because of their seeming unknown origin.

Dierdra was one of the shortest interviews in length. We spent about six minutes of the 34-minute interview regulating her emotions. The subject matter of dating apps was one that brought up a good deal of emotional reaction for her. She had a child with a man met through the dating app, who decided to not be a part of the child's life, even though he wanted to continue the relationship with her. She decided to have the child without him

which seems to dramatically changed her life. We did not explore how she came to the decision to have the child without him.

Minnie's use of dating apps was an outlier in many respects. While two participants were accused of wanting to meet a date to get a free dinner, only Minnie noted free meals as a perk to meeting guys through dating apps (although she noted not using them for this purpose). She used dating apps for hook-ups exclusively and also had a significantly greater number of guys that she met in person after first connecting with them through a dating app (an estimate of about 70) compared to all other participants, who ranged from meeting two to around 30 guys in the previous two years. While her experience could be framed as one of sexual exploration, she did not seem to be phrasing it that way, and I did not get that impression either. I got the impression that she took the idea that dating apps are used for casual sex to an extreme. Minnie noted that prior to the past two years she had been less involved in sexual decision-making, allowing what her sex partner wanted to just happen. In the past couple of years, she began to try to take what she wanted from people that she met on apps, communicating to them what she wanted from the interaction and how exactly to bring her to orgasm. While this seemed like an effort to be more agentic, it seemed as though she was still playing a game designed by someone else. I got the impression that Minnie might feel that dating came with high expectations for sex, so if she were going to be viewed as a means for sex, she may as well try to get something for herself from such interactions. She noted toward the end of the interview that she has been going to therapy to get help for tying her self-worth to attention from dating apps. I feel reluctant to share my impressions, in case they are wrong, because we only spoke about

her experiences for one hour. I hope she is living her life exactly how she wishes. I would not want my impression to lessen her power.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

The inherently sexual context of dating apps is perceived to challenge the agency of women aged 30 to 49 in several ways. Expectations set through the app before meeting can make some women feel as though they must follow through on these expectations when they meet in person. The lack of a shared context may leave dating app users with less understanding about how to interact. The casual nature of using dating apps while sitting on one's couch alone may influence how people behave and how intentional they are about their interactions. While this casual context allows some women greater sexual freedom, it also can come with a lack of seriousness, making genuine, lasting connections rare. Being able to suddenly stop talking to a match by blocking them allowed many participants to have a sense of control, but blocking often came after inappropriate or offensive communications by men. Several women noted feeling like dating apps were no different than meeting someone in public. But other participants highlighted that meeting someone in a shared physical context allowed them to get to know the person with less focus on whether they would be a potential date. Not being immediately sexualized or sexualizing who they were talking with, as often seems to happen in the inherently sexual context of a dating app, may allow them to have a more complex perspective of the other. The reactive and/or passive role that sexual script theory acknowledges is culturally appropriate for women to assume was found in this group of women, sometimes in a way that impacted their ability to be agentic in their interactions.

One-third of the women interviewed mentioned some type of safety strategy, even though I asked no questions about safety and had no questions about it on my interview guide. It was not a surprise that safety came up while asking women about dating

experiences solely based on the statistic that one-third of women are sexually assaulted at some point in their lives and that 97% of the perpetrators are men (Smith et al., 2017). Women continue to bear the brunt of keeping dating and sexual activity safe because our culture does not hold men responsible.

Six participants noted specific experiences of men behaving aggressively, abusively, illegally, and/or unethically. That Sam seemed to have normalized a fear of men is likely not an anomaly: Fearing men logically makes sense, and yet avoiding interacting with them would severely limit one's ability to move through the world, particularly for heterosexual women because their sexuality compels them to be close to men. Katie, who was drugged on a first date, needed several days of sorting through the events of that night in order to grasp the reality of what happened to her. In her interview, she expressed awe at women who go through the process of reporting sexual assaults thinking of how the small amount of information she had to make such an accusation discouraged her from doing so. While such a strange event takes time to process, part of that process was working to believe in her perception. When she was able to put her story together she noted that it changed the way she interacted with men, making her take charge, set clear boundaries, and feel confident saying no.

Some women may not perceive themselves to have low levels of agency, particularly in romantic or sexual areas of their lives, a context which one study found to have special implications for navigating one's desires (Bouchard & Humphrey, 2018). Sam seems to reflect aspects of this finding. During the interview, I perceived her as confident. She had keen observations of others and seemed to know precisely what she wants for herself, but her answers also revealed struggles related to interpersonal scripts

(i.e. setting boundaries) and intrapersonal scripts (i.e. believing her perceptions as valid). By not addressing this fear, she may be making herself vulnerable to further experiences of abuse and disempowerment.

Self-doubt seemed to be a core factor related to lower feelings of agency. Roseanna, Katie, Sam, Gabriella, Sophie, and Rosemary all spent time doubting themselves regarding bad romantic or sexual interactions. Some of them moved out of that doubt and others continue to ruminate, uncertain of their perception. This doubt would sometimes lead them to accept behaviors from men that they seemed to know on some level were abusive or inappropriate.

Discussion of women's agency could easily focus on what women are doing wrong instead of understanding why they are making the choices that they are. A postfeminist lens, which supposes that women are sexually liberated, negates that women must protect themselves from men, and continually monitor themselves from making choices that are viewed culturally as wrong (Gill, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Even language about sexual assault centers on women (e.g. one-third of women are sexually assaulted) instead of focusing on male perpetrators. (I was unable to find a statistic relaying what percentage of men are perpetrators of sexual assault.) While I do not want to take the spotlight off of the vast number of women who are assaulted, I wonder if shifting language to focus on the perpetrators might help us to focus on the source of the problem. Culturally, women do not have equal power to men and postfeminist ideas continue a problematic pattern of blaming women and holding them responsible for the actions of men.

Sexual script theory highlights that women are expected to take on a more passive role in sexual interactions, reacting to the advances of men (Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

Some participants desired this sexual script wanting their male partners to lead them. But this cultural expectation seemed to hold other participants back from pursuing a sexual experience that they would prefer in instances when they noted not stopping unwanted sexual interactions. Several participants continued the interaction because they were unsure their communication would be received well and/or understood. Sam did not stop sexual interactions out of a fear of men, and Ruby and Zoey both noted instances of their communications being disregarded but sustaining the sexual experiences. Further empathic exploration of the foundations of their interpersonal and intrapersonal scripts would likely reveal personal experiences that offer sound reasons for their actions.

What could it mean that some participants have awareness that they would rather not continue a sexual interaction but do so anyway? Some could say that these women are making a choice and therefore acting with agency. However, that would likely not account for the influence of cultural scenarios that serve as a foundation of sexual script theory and which are supported empirically. Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras's (2008) study at an elite private college found women who took part in unwanted sexual interactions believed that they should take responsibility for their actions after the fact, which seemed to result in lessening negative self-perceptions. Similar to some participants, if they do not stop to acknowledge that the expectations and/or fear are guiding them then they do not have to acknowledge a lack of agency or control.

6.1 Limitations

Time was a major limitation for this project. I was only able to present a fraction of the findings from the very generous women who participated in this study. In the data, I found interesting information related to communications, safety, how some women try to

game an app's algorithms, trials related to dating in general, lessons the participants have learned through experience, and more details and quotes related to the findings that I offered in the results section.

Due to a searching error, and perhaps the isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic, I did not find important research about sexual agency (see: Bay-Cheng, 2019 and Bay-Cheng, 2015) until after presenting my thesis. I am disappointed I was not able to use some of this great research about sexual agency in my thesis.

After conducting my first two interviews I realized that I did not have questions to address privileges of sexuality and race. Questions such as, "how do you perceive your race (or sexuality) as affecting your experiences with dating apps?" would have allowed the participants to speak about subjects not regularly addressed in research. Not including such questions was an oversight and one that I regretted. After reading about critical race theory (e.g. Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and queer theory (e.g. Allen & Mendez, 2018) I believe all research should include such questions. Ignoring that certain identities have privilege dismisses that privilege exists. Privilege needs to be acknowledged in order to offer insight to those who have yet to examine it critically.

During the interviews with participants, asking questions that were too similar in nature might have given the impression that I was doubting participants. I did my best to address this by saying things like, "this question may sound similar, but I ask it in the hopes of getting more detail." However, in a future study, I will likely approach question creation differently.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

The use of online dating apps is now a common way that people meet and nearly 40% of dating app users are in their 30s and 40s (Anderson et al., 2020). Women's ability to employ agency may have special considerations to understand when using dating apps. Using the frameworks of sexual script theory and feminist theory has helped to illuminate some of these issues.

Historically, women's perspectives have been pathologized and doubted (Hare-Mustin, 1978), which may hinder their ability to trust themselves and enact agency. The power imbalance that can weaken women's ability to act in their own best interests may be influenced by the expectations that come with the inherently sexual context of dating apps. Women who are 30 to 49 years old have fewer choices in potential mates, which for some participants resulted in accepting abusive behaviors, and/or lowering their standards. This age group may have more practice listening to their instincts than those who are younger, but for many participants, learning came after having bad experiences with men.

7.1 Implications

More research needs to be done to understand both the challenges women have attaining their needs and desires, and the challenges that men have that create or add to bad sexual interactions. Gender socialization places limits and challenges on both women and men; however, women's lower status creates less power to enact agency than men. Future research needs to be completed with empathy and which considers the influences of culture and family. Research should explore the role of self-doubt in decision-making during sexual interactions. That so many women have been sexually assaulted underscores

the amount of vulnerability and fear women can understandably have about dating and sexual interactions.

Creating an instrument that could accurately assess agency may offer mental health practitioners better information regarding how to treat mental health clients. Such an instrument could call attention to clients who may benefit from more validation and less questioning of their perceptions. Until such an instrument is created, mental health professionals should consider empathic exploration of clients' sexual scripts at the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels. Using a feminist family therapy framework can help male and female clients explicitly investigate their implicit beliefs and identify ways in which gendered expectations are guiding their personal actions.

Dating application companies could make changes for better safety and overall use. Allowing users to report bad or illegal behavior after users have unmatched might help to keep unsafe users off of their dating app platforms. Apps could advise users to interact with matches more intentionally by offering tips or perhaps limiting app use to certain times of the day or even locations. A few women noted that apps just do not offer the same "magic" of an in-person meeting. Perhaps studying what creates such magic could help improve dating apps.

Ultimately, women will need to decide, based on what they are seeking, and their personal history, whether dating apps are appropriate to their desires. Those who are prone to self-doubt and/or rumination and who respond to the expectations of others may want to consider how they are using dating apps or whether using dating apps is a good choice for them. The expectations that come with showing one's availability to date or have sex may place women who struggle setting boundaries, or who doubt themselves when others

ignore their boundaries, in vulnerable positions. It may be wise for some to not begin sexualized conversations through the app or by text before meeting, even though this can be a component of flirting that is common on apps. Women who want to explore their sexuality may find dating apps to be a great context to meet people. However, women will likely need to continue to focus on their own safety, sometimes to the detriment of being able to act how they wish, until men are socialized to be more attuned to women.

Our culture needs to change so that those who are bad actors, not victims, are held responsible, and individual expression is less governed by gender norms so that both men and women can operate with more felt personal agency. The number of women who have been assaulted signals a huge cultural problem. If it seems unbelievable, consider how large of a cultural problem we have, instead of doubting whether women's stories are true. Until culture changes from placing the burden on women to keep themselves safe from the actions of men, it will be important for individuals to believe and support women and girls.

Volunteers needed for Research on Dating Apps



Participants must be:

- * female
- * 30 to 49 years old
- * have met partners via dating apps in the last 2 years
- * have not been in a relationship for more than 6 months
- * have met romantic and/or sexual partners both via apps & in-person

Interviews for this study will focus on questions related to women's ability to employ agency (i.e. act in their own best interests) when making choices in physical or sexual situations with partners met via dating apps. Interviews will last about 1 hour.

\$25 Amazon Gift Card for participation



Research

An Equal Opportunity University

*For more information on how to participate
Contact Tera Buerkle
tera.buerkle@uky.edu or text/call 404-635-6951*

You are welcome to share this post with individuals or groups that are interested in participating.

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

KEY INFORMATION For STUDY REGARDING

Agency in Physical or Sexual Situations for Women Ages 30-49 with Partners Met Via Dating Apps

We are asking you to choose whether or not to volunteer for a research study about women's experiences with using dating apps and the ability to employ agency when making choices in physical or sexual situations with partners met via dating apps. We are asking you because you expressed interest in participation, have used dating apps within the previous 2 years, have not been in a relationship for greater than 6 months at the time of your scheduled interview, have had physical or sexual experiences with those they have met through dating apps within the same 2-year window, are female, have had experiences meeting romantic and sexual partners both through apps and in-person, and are 30 to 49 years of age. This page is to give you key information to help you decide whether to participate. We have included detailed information after this page. Ask the research team questions. If you have questions later, the contact information for the research investigator in charge of the study is below.

WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The interview for this study will ask you about your experiences using dating apps and more specifically will ask about your ability to act in your best interests in physical or sexual situations with those you have met via a dating app. Physical situations” refers to intentional touching by any party on the date(s) (e.g., holding hands, touching someone’s arm or hair, wrestling, etc.)

By doing this study, we hope to answer these main research questions: What is the experience of women aged 30 to 49 who use dating apps? How does the use of dating apps affect the processes women aged 30 to 49 use to employ agency during dating and sexual situations? How do cultural expectations based on gender and age influence the choices of women who are aged 30 to 49 and using dating apps? (Please note the interview questions are different than these research questions.)

Your participation in this research will last about 1 hour.

WHAT ARE KEY REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

The voices of 30 to 49 year-old women need to be heard in order to understand the nuances of their experiences as they relate to dating via apps. Sharing your impressions may inform future research, provide helpful information for this demographic and for helping

professional, and inform future dating app design. Participating in this interview may also promote reflection on your experiences of dating via apps.

WHAT ARE KEY REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

The interview will include discussions of physical and sexual behaviors, a potentially sensitive topic depending on your comfort level. The proposed questions will require you to divulge personal information, but questions are not designed to elicit highly emotional responses. The questions asked are open-ended enough that you do not have to say anything that you do not wish to share. Additionally, you are welcome to stop participation at any time. The interviewer for this study has clinical training and is currently completing a clinical fellowship at the UK Family Center. She has training in de-escalation techniques if you feel distressed.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw from the study contact Tera Buerkle, the interviewer and principal investigator of the University of Kentucky, Department of Agriculture at tera.buerkle@uky.edu or by phone at 404-635-6951. Tera Buerkle's faculty advisor, Ron Werner-Wilson, PhD., can also be contacted at ronald.werner-wilson@uky.edu or 859-257-7750.

If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact staff in the University of Kentucky (UK) Office of Research Integrity (ORI) between the business hours of 8am and 5pm EST, Monday-Friday at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

DETAILED CONSENT:

ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU WOULD NOT QUALIFY FOR THIS STUDY?

To participate in this study you must be interested in participating, have used dating apps within the previous 2 years, have not been in a relationship for greater than 6 months at the time of your scheduled interview, have had physical or sexual experiences with those they have met through dating apps within the same 2-year window, have had experiences meeting romantic and sexual partners both through apps and in-person, are a female who is cis-gendered, and are 30 to 49 years of age. Anyone who does not meet these characteristics will be excluded from the study. The study is decided to explore the phenomenon of women who use dating apps and are 30 to 49 years of age. In order to describe the phenomenon it is important to limit participants to a homogeneous sample.

WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND WHAT IS THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF TIME INVOLVED?

Interviews will take place over a Zoom conference call, using Zoom's recording capabilities. Only audio recordings will be saved. Video recordings will be deleted after the interview is over. Zoom does not have the capability to only record audio. If you are not comfortable with the existence of the video file before it is deleted, you are welcome to turn your camera off before recording begins. The University of Kentucky's Healthcare Zoom package is HIPAA-compliant, and all meetings will be password-protected.

You are encouraged to secure a space and time for the interview that can best protect your privacy and confidentiality. You will be participating in a single interview, during which you can take breaks at any time, or end the interview at any time. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is about 1 hour on 1 day.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

First, after reading this document, if you decide you would like to participate you will need to work with the researcher to schedule an interview. After a time and date has been agreed on the researcher will send two more emails: a reminder email two days prior to the scheduled interview time and an email the morning of the scheduled interview providing the link to the Zoom meeting as well as copies of the informed consent information and the list of resources that the individual may make use of in the event that they experience any distress as a result of participation. The lead researcher will not be collecting any identifying information for research purposes, will delete all contact information and correspondences following the completion of the research project, and will not be sharing any of your contact information. You are welcome to keep the lead researcher's contact information in the event that you have any questions in the future.

At the beginning of the Zoom call, the interviewer will ask if she can begin the recording. After you agree, the interviewer will be remind that your responses during the interview process are completely by choice and that you do not have to answer any questions if you do not wish to answer. You will be asked whether you have any questions or require any clarification regarding the informed consent. You will then be asked to verbally affirm that you have read the consent form and agree to it.

If you agree to the informed consent, the interview will begin with a series of short-answer demographic-related questions. Then the interviewer will give a brief description of the word agency as it is used in the study, and begin the interview by asking you questions related to your use of dating apps within the previous 2 years. The interview will last about 1 hour. The interviewer will have a set of questions to ask you, but may ask additional questions, within the time frame, that are salient to the research. The questions asked will be open-ended enough that you do not have to say anything that you do not wish to say. Additionally, you are welcome to stop participation at any time. When the interview is over, the interviewer will let you know that there are no more questions and ask if you need any

time to debrief with her, with the Zoom recording turned off. There is no expectation of you to debrief after the interview is complete.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

If you experiences distress during the interview, the lead researcher is an intern therapist at the UK Family Center who is trained in de-escalation and crisis management and response. The researcher can help to calm you and will ask if you whether you would like to continue with the interview if you appear distressed or express that you are distressed. As noted previously, the subject matter may be personal but the questions are not designed to evoke strong emotions. Prior to the interview, in an email, along with the informed consent, you should have received resources in your area to help with any emotional or stress felt from the interview. Resources can also be found in the appendix at the end of this document. You can also ask the researcher to send resources to you again.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

We do not know if you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. The risks are minimal; any information disclosed will be kept confidential and replaced by a pseudonym in the transcripts of the interviews. The benefits of learning about how 30 to 49 year-old women navigate physical and sexual experiences with those they have met via dating apps is important, especially in our current sociocultural climate. There is very minimal research on this dating population, particularly in regards to using dating apps. This work will create increased understanding for helping professionals and the community at large. Also, the interview questions themselves may allow you to reflect more deeply about your dating experiences.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study. The version of Zoom that you will use is free to download. The burden for HIPAA-compliant Zoom rests on the interviewer, and we have already secured this software and use it with clients at the UK Family Center.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?

When we write about or share the results from the study, we will use pseudonyms or write about the combined information of several participants. We will keep your name and other identifying information private. All data from the interviews will be de-identified, including the use of aliases rather than real names. Identifiers will be redacted from the recordings prior to transcription, and recordings will be transcribed either by the lead researcher or by Rev transcription service. Your name will be replaced by a pseudonym in the transcripts of the interviews.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. All data and recordings will be

kept on a secure, encrypted drive at the University of Kentucky that can only be accessed after signing onto a VPN, which requires identity validation.

You should know that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people because it is a violation of the law not to. For example:

- The law may require us to share your information with authorities, if you report information about a child being abused, if you pose a danger to yourself or someone else; and/or
- To ensure the study is conducted properly, the University of Kentucky may look at pertinent portions of records that identify you.

We will make every effort to safeguard your data, but as with anything online, we cannot guarantee the security of data obtained via the Internet. Third-party applications used in this study may have Terms of Service and Privacy policies outside of the control of the University of Kentucky.

CAN YOU CHOOSE TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY EARLY?

You can choose to leave the study at any time. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

If you choose to leave the study early, data collected until that point will remain in the study database and may not be removed.

The investigators conducting the study may need to remove you from the study. This may occur for a number of reasons. You may be removed from the study if:

- you are not able to follow the directions,
- they find that your participation in the study is more risk than benefit to you.

ARE YOU PARTICIPATING, OR CAN YOU PARTICIPATE, IN ANOTHER RESEARCH STUDY AT THE SAME TIME AS PARTICIPATING IN THIS ONE?

You may take part in this study if you are currently involved in another research study. It is important to let the investigator know if you are in another research study. You should discuss this with the investigator before you agree to participate in another research study while you are in this study.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card for taking part in this study. It will be sent to you using your email address.

Study payments are not taxable income reportable to the Internal Review Service (IRS) if your total payments for research participation are \$600 or less in a calendar year.

WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about 40 women to do so.

The principal investigator is being guided in this research by Dr. Ron Werner-Wilson. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

The information that you are providing will no longer belong to you. The research may lead to new clinical or educational knowledge, tests, treatments, or products. These products could have some financial value. There are no plans to provide financial payment to you or your relatives if this occurs.

The Chellgren Endowment is providing financial support and/or material for this study.

WILL YOUR INFORMATION BE USED FOR FUTURE RESEARCH?

All identifiable information (e.g., your name, contact information) will be removed from the information or samples collected in this study. After we remove all identifiers, the information may be used for future research or shared with other researchers without your additional informed consent.

STORING AND SHARING YOUR INFORMATION FOR FUTURE USE

After 6 years, all data and records will be completely deleted.

By continuing with the interview you are consenting to participate in this study.

APPENDIX: LIST OF REFERENCES

Please note: all therapy references are beholden to their state licensure boards to practice only within the states that they are licensed. (Kentucky and Georgia references are provided because there is an anticipation that many participants will come from these two states due to the lead researchers contacts.)

NATIONAL REFERENCES:

AAMFT Therapist Locator: <https://www.therapistlocator.net//>

The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy created this site to help people find licensed Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) in their area. MFTs work with individuals, couples, and families, looking at individuals through a contextual and relational lens.

Psychology Today Therapist Locator: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists>

Psychology Today magazine provides a large database of various types of therapists, so that you can find someone appropriate to your needs within your area.

REGIONAL REFERENCES:

Kentucky:

Parker Relationship Center: <https://relationshipcenterky.com/> Phone: 859-705-8075 Email: info@relationshipcenterky.com

The Harris Center: Phone: <https://psychology.as.uky.edu/psychological-services-center>
Phone: 859-257-6853 Email: harriscenter@uky.edu

Georgia:

Emory Psychological Center: <http://psychology.emory.edu/home/about/psychological-center/index.html> Phone: (404) 727-7451

Maci Daye: www.macidaye.com Phone: 404-321-9955 Email: maci@macidaye.com

APPENDIX C: INITIAL EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

I am replying to you because you expressed interest in my thesis research study at the University of Kentucky about women's ability to employ agency (i.e. act in their own best interests) when making choices in physical or sexual situations with partners met via dating apps. In order to participate in this study you need to meet all of the following criteria:

- Female, cisgendered (*Cisgendered means your gender identity and birth sex are aligned as female. In other words, this means that you were born with female genitalia and identify yourself as female.*)
- 30 to 49 years old
- Have met romantic or sexual partners via a dating app within the previous 2 years
- Have not been in a relationships for more than 6 months
- Have had physical or sexual experiences with those you have met via a dating app within the previous 2 years
- Have had experiences meeting romantic and sexual partners both through apps and in-person

If you meet all criteria and are interested in being interviewed, please reply back to me with your availability in the next 2 to 4 weeks with times that you have about 1 hour to participate. Minimal research has been done on dating women in this age range and your participation will allow others to understand your experiences and add to the body of research!

Additional details:

- Interview: done via HIPAA-compliant Zoom, only the audio recording will be saved.
- Gratitude: \$25 Amazon gift card for participation
- Identifying information: will be redacted; the data and publication will use aliases
- Detailed information about the study: is in the attached informed consent document; You do not need to return the informed consent document to me.
- Contact me: If you have ANY questions about the study, its criteria, or the informed consent document please email, call or text me. My contact information is in my signature at the end of this email.
- Forward this email or share the study's flyer: I am looking for many participants. If you know someone who might be interested, please forward this email to them so that they can contact me if they wish to participate.

Thank you for your time!

--

Tera Buerkle

Graduate Assistant

Couple and Family Intern Therapist

University of Kentucky, Class of 2021

Voicemail number: 404-635-6951 (call or text)

Email address: tera.buerkle@uky.edu

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APPENDIX D: SECOND EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

This email is to remind you of your interview in 2 days on X-date at X-time as a participant in a thesis study for the University of Kentucky. The interview for this study will ask you about your experiences using dating apps and more specifically will ask about your ability to act in your best interests in physical or sexual situations with those you have met via a dating app. To show gratitude for your participation in this study, you will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

The interview will take place over Zoom. You can download the free software here: <https://zoom.us/download> If you have questions about which version to download, email me and I will gladly help. The link for the meeting will be sent to you on the day of your interview.

You are encouraged to secure a location for the interview that can best protect your privacy and confidentiality. You will be participating in a single interview that will last about 1 hour, during which you can take breaks at any time, or end the interview at any time.

I am looking forward to hearing from you and appreciate your participation!

--

Tera Buerkle
Graduate Assistant
Couple and Family Intern Therapist
University of Kentucky, Class of 2021
Voicemail number: 404-635-6951 (call or text)
Email address: tera.buerkle@uky.edu

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APPENDIX E: EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS ON THE DAY OF THEIR INTERVIEW

I am looking forward to talking with you today! This email is to remind you of your interview today at X-time on the subject of your experiences using dating apps. You will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card for your participation in this study.

At x-time click on this zoom link to be directed to our meeting:

<https://uky.zoom.us/j/92492420316?pwd=NHlXYjNua3JLN2JQeDgzV1JQKzN6dz09>

If you have any issues connecting, please call my number listed in my signature below. I will gladly help.

I appreciate your time.

--

Tera Buerkle

Graduate Assistant

Couple and Family Intern Therapist

University of Kentucky, Class of 2021

Voicemail number: 404-635-6951 (call or text)

Email address: tera.buerkle@uky.edu

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APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Let the participant know you are recording. Review the informed consent document. By continuing with the interview you are consenting to participate in this study.

Target Population and Sample: My target population is women who are dating and use or have used dating apps, and are 30 to 49 years of age. My sample will be women who are dating and have used dating apps within the previous 2 years, have had sexual experiences with those they have met through dating apps within the same 2-year window, have been in a relationship less than 6 months (if partnered), and are 30 to 49 years of age.

Interview Guide:

I am recording this interview but will delete the video when we are done. I have a few demographic and lifestyle questions to ask you before we begin the interview.

Demographic Questions

1. How old are you?
2. What biological sex were you assigned at birth? (*male female intersex*)
3. What is your current gender identity?
4. What is your current relationship status?
 - a. If in a relationship currently, how long have you been in your current relationship?
 - b. If in a relationship currently, what type of relationship are you currently involved? (*example: monogamous, polyamorous, open, master/slave, etc.*)
5. Were you married previously?
 - a. If yes, how many times?
6. Do you currently have children?
 - a. If yes, what are their ages and biological sexes.
7. Which gender(s) have you been sexually intimate with in the previous 2 years?
8. Please describe your race or ethnic identity.

9. Which dating apps have you used in the previous 2 years?
10. In the previous 2 years, how many people have you met in person that you first connected with via a dating app?

Interview Section

I want to make sure I am understanding your experience of dating app use. If I don't seem to be understanding something, please let me know. I will do my best to ask follow-up questions in order to get clarity regarding your experiences.

As mentioned previously, the interview should take about 1 hour. You are welcome to skip questions for any reason.

First, I would like you to think about the idea of “*being able to act in your own best interests*” **to pursue what you want** in physical or sexual situations with those that you have through dating apps. Do you have any questions about that idea?

Is there anything about being a woman that makes dating via apps more fun?

Is there anything about being a woman that makes dating via apps less fun?

In the previous 2 years, what type(s) of relationship are you ideally seeking from those you meet via dating apps?

- Do you actively pursue this type of relationship?
 - If yes, how do you pursue that type of relationship? *Ask for examples of behaviors (e.g., it's in my profile, or I tell a date at X point).*
 - If yes, does using a dating app help you to pursue this type of relationship? *Why or why not?*
 - If not, what stops you from pursuing that type of relationship while using a dating app?

Do you feel like using an app to find partners changes your ability to act in your own best interests in any way? (*negative effects and/ or positive effects*)

When things become physical or sexual with someone you have met via a dating app, do you feel you are expected to act in a certain way?

- If yes, what kind of expectations do you feel are present?
- If yes, do you usually act on the expectations that you feel?
- If yes, is there anything about meeting someone via a dating app that impacts the expectations you feel?

- If yes, do you have an idea of where your beliefs of these expectations might come from?
- If no, how do you decide how to behave?
- If no, has your perception changed with your age or have you always felt this way?

In comparison to other avenues of meeting, do you think your ability to act on your desires is different or the same in physical or sexual situations with those you have met via a dating app?

- If so, in what ways? *Ask for examples.*
- If you feel less able to act on your desires with those you have met via a dating app, what do you understand as standing in the way of you acting in your own best interests?

How do you communicate or show someone who you have met via an app that you are interested in being physical or sexual with them?

- Could you provide some examples of this from dates you have had with those you have met on dating apps?

Do you voice your wants or needs or set limits with dates regarding physical touch or sexual experiences?

- If yes, could you provide examples that you have used?
 - Is this something commonly do?
- If yes, how do dates usually respond?

Could you share some common experiences when you have said no or offered a rejection to someone that you have met via a dating app in regards to being touched or in sexual situations?

Have you noticed any common experiences in regards to physical or sexual situations that you have had with people you have met via dating apps?

If you have used dating apps during the pandemic, could you share some experiences of how your interactions were or were not affected by the pandemic?

- *Did you choose to meet up with fewer people or be or selective about who you met?*
- *Did you make social distancing or mask-wearing agreements before meeting?*
- Did you choose to act any differently in physical or sexual situations because of the pandemic?

Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experiences using dating apps?

Close-out the interview: Thank you so much for sharing your experiences of using dating apps. Your participation in this study will help to promote the voices and experiences of women who use dating apps. There is little research done on the demographic population that you are a part of in regards to dating apps so you offer a valuable, new perspective. If this study brought up any negative feelings for you, I will be glad to offer a couple of therapy referrals for you. Additionally, if you have questions about the study and would like to debrief about the interview, I can turn off the recording now so that you can talk about it.

I will be sending you an Amazon gift card in gratitude for your participation. I am going to turn off the recording now so that I may confirm the email address and maintain your privacy. After I send you the gift card I will be deleting all of our correspondences and will not have a way to contact you.

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