Between Stigma and Swipe: An Examination of Dating Apps for Disabled Users Through the Lens of the Access–Choice–Pleasure Model

Zeynep Yildiz*
Human-Computer Interaction and Accessibility
Karlsruhe Institute of Technology
Karlsruhe, Germany
zeynep.yildiz@kit.edu

Nadja Scherer*
Karlsruhe Institute of Technology
Karlsruhe, Germany
nadja.scherer@web.de

Kathrin Gerling
Human-Computer Interaction and Accessibility
Karlsruhe Institute of Technology
Karlsruhe, Germany
kathrin.gerling@kit.edu

Abstract

Over the past decade, dating apps have become an increasingly popular way of seeking intimacy, yet they frequently exclude disabled individuals. In this work, we focus on dating apps as a significant and expanding platform for pursuing intimacy for disabled people. Through a fully anonymous qualitative online survey that covers diverse aspects of online dating, we examine the motivations and experiences of 44 disabled people who have previously used and/or are currently using any dating app. Through our findings, we reveal both the social barriers and stigma surrounding dating experiences of disabled people, and how app design reproduces these, collectively shaping users' experiences. In our discussion, we situate our findings within Pikkel's recent Access–Choice–Pleasure Model [43] from Disability Studies, showing how disabled users' experiences with dating apps can be understood through this lens. We then provide design examples that illustrate how dating apps could foster accessible, autonomous and pleasurable experiences for disabled users, thereby informing researchers and designers in this space.

CCS Concepts

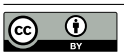
• **Computer systems organization** → **Embedded systems**; *Redundancy*; Robotics; • **Networks** → Network reliability.

Keywords

Dating apps, accessibility, disabled people, Access–Choice–Pleasure Model

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*Authors equally contributed to this work.



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1 Introduction

Dating apps are digital platforms that allow users to form romantic or sexual connections by creating profiles and interacting with others, often using features like swiping and location-based matching to identify suitable partners [11]. Over the past decades, online dating has experienced remarkable growth, becoming one of the popular ways of people to form romantic connections [47]. This widespread adoption of dating apps can be attributed to their convenience, efficiency, and increasing social acceptance [18]. In this context, many disabled users[1] report that dating apps can broaden their pool of potential partners, bypassing inaccessible physical venues, and offering more flexible spaces for self-disclosure [10, 37, 38, 45]. However, while dating apps can offer more accessible pathways to dating, they may also intensify an already demanding process for individuals who are frequently stigmatized and marginalized across both digital and physical spaces [45]. Prior research shows that disabled users often encounter structural barriers in online dating platforms, including technical accessibility issues arising from inaccessible design [3, 13, 39, 65], as well as social challenges such as stigma, safety concerns in online interactions, and the ongoing burden of managing biases and perceptions of others [39].

Despite the growing efforts in Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) to understand how technology mediates romantic and/or sexual engagements for marginalized communities [9, 13, 15, 20, 63], including disabled people [3, 10, 12, 45, 65], a recent literature review on sexuality and disability in HCI by Patel et al. [42] illustrates that it remains unclear whether there has been substantial effort within HCI to de-medicalize sexuality and disability. This aligns with longstanding discussions in Disability Studies (e.g., [50]), which argue that disabled sexuality is often framed as a medical issue or overlooked altogether. At the same time, while existing HCI work examines experiences across different disabilities and contexts (e.g., [10, 13, 45, 65]), it does not yet consider how multiple, intersecting identities shape disabled users' engagement with dating apps. Moreover, current research largely focuses on technical accessibility, self-representation or disclosure, leaving other aspects of the dating experience, (e.g., motivations for using dating apps and choosing the right dating app or safety and transparency concerns with dating apps) underexplored. In response, building on

[1]Throughout the paper, we use identity-first language, believing that distancing disability from one's identity constructs a collective representation of disability in an ableist culture [60]. While 49% of disabled people prefer identity-first language [52] along with the authors, we acknowledge that preferences vary and do not intend to dismiss person-first usage.

current research efforts on de-medicalizing research on sexuality and disability in HCI [42], our work focuses on dating apps as a key and expanding platform for intimacy-seeking among disabled people. By adopting the perspective of Access–Choice–Pleasure Model [43], **we bring contemporary perspectives from Disability Studies to challenge medicalized framings of disabled sexuality** and highlight **the importance of pleasure** in shaping accessible and autonomous online intimacy-seeking experiences. Access–Choice–Pleasure Model [43] conceptualizes disabled people's intimate lives through three interconnected dimensions: access, choice and pleasure. It frames access as the foundation for intimate participation, emphasizes autonomy and self-determination, and centers pleasure as a core dimension of disabled people's intimate experiences. Finally, following calls to center perspectives beyond dominant groups in HCI research on dating and disability [45], and drawing on the intersectionality principle of Disability Justice that emphasizes that individuals are not defined by disability alone [4], we examine how **multiple, intersecting identities** shape disabled users' engagement with dating apps, showing how their experiences are co-constituted by both **social stigma** and **platform design**. Therefore, we aim to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the motivations and experiences of disabled users in using dating apps, and how do their other identities shape these experiences?

RQ2: How can app design be re-imagined to support accessible, autonomous and pleasurable interactions for disabled users?

With this aim, we designed **a fully anonymous, qualitative online survey** that covers diverse aspects of online dating, focusing on motivations and experiences, and collected responses from **44 disabled people who have previously used and/or are currently using any dating app.** Applying Reflexive Thematic Analysis [7], we crafted two main themes: (1) Dating Norms and Disability Stigma Shape User Strategies and the Dating Experiences and (2) App Design and Development Models Reproduce Structural Barriers. Through our findings, we show that disabled people's experiences on dating apps are shaped by a continuous interplay between dating norms, disability stigma, multiple identities users have and platform design. Rather than functioning as separate or exceptional spaces, dating apps extend and reproduce existing dynamics of stigma and access, while also offering opportunities for representation and connection. We situate these findings within Pikkel's recent Access–Choice–Pleasure Model [43] from Disability Studies as a way of foregrounding disabled people's right to pleasurable experiences, and show how these three aspects are interacting in the online dating context.

Overall, our work makes the following **three key contributions:** (1) We provide an empirical analysis of disabled dating app users' motivations, experiences and the effect of having multiple identities on dating, (2) we present the first study in HCI that draws on Access–Choice–Pleasure Model [43] from Disability Studies, highlighting how disabled users' dating app experiences are shaped by the non-hierarchical, yet interdependent interplay of these components. This lens allows us to show how access, choice and pleasure are co-constituted through platform design, business and algorithmic models, as well as social norms around disability and dating. (3) Finally, we provide design implications and examples that is developed by the research team to illustrate how dating apps could foster accessible, autonomous and pleasurable dating app experiences for disabled users, thereby addressing other researchers and designers in this space.

2 Positionality

We built our positionality in this research based on Gurr et al.'s description of positionality: "*Positionality refers to both the researcher's view of the world and their position during all aspects of the research process.*" ([27], page 52). We are also aware of ongoing debates in HCI (e.g., [55]) and the Social Sciences (e.g., [49]) about the potential benefits and harms of positionality statements and what they should include. Following the recommendations of Sigh et al. [55] that underscore the shared experiences of the research team, as well as applying specific lenses to share the relevant aspects of backgrounds with the community of research, we would like to share that we are a mixed-ability research team with different experiences of disability (one member identifies as neurodivergent, one member identifies as physically disabled, and one member identifies as non-disabled). Saying so, we also acknowledge that being an insider or outsider to a community is not necessarily positive or negative [44], and we support refusing the insider-outsider dichotomy [44]. Instead, we acknowledge the intersectional and complex aspects of our identities, which are also very much in relation to the research questions: Besides having diverse experiences with disability, we have diverse intersectional identities (e.g., in terms of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds) which may affect how we experience being "insider or outsider" to our research community. Finally, all the members are familiar with the dating apps, with some of them having used (and/or still using) them. Overall, we approach our positionality statement as a way to embrace uncertainty, complexity, and fluidity of our identities [62] and how these may shape our study.

3 Background

Below, we start with providing an overview of the dating app ecosystem, including apps addressing disabled people, presenting information about the working mechanisms of dating apps to prepare readers who might be unfamiliar with them. Then, we continue with related work: We present literature on dating apps and marginalized communities in HCI, and focus on the online dating experiences of disabled users in HCI and Disability Studies.

3.1 The Dating App Ecosystem: Mainstream and Disability-Specific Platforms

Dating apps allow their users to create profiles and interact with others based on mutual interest, often using features like swiping and geolocation to match users [11]. Most mainstream dating apps share common features, such as customizable profiles, algorithm-driven match recommendations, swipe-based browsing, and a built-in chat that activates after two users have mutually "liked" or "swiped right". For profile creation, many platforms require at least one profile photo, while also offering a list of optional prompts to streamline the process, the others allow entirely blank profiles. Popular dating apps like Tinder [59], Bumble [8], or Badoo [1] feature "interest

pills" for hobbies and interests—allowing tags like "LGBTQ+" and "trans rights" with some dating apps (e.g., Tinder [59] and Bumble [8]) includes "disability rights" and "inclusivity" in the predefined tags. Many mainstream apps support basic preference filters (e.g., distance, gender, age, smoking status, languages spoken, verification needed), but only a few of them (e.g., Bumble [8]) makes all of these preference filters freely available, while others charge for their use. After matching, the apps support text, GIFs, voice memos, photos, and video chat -though Tinder [59] omits audio and photo messaging, and Hinge [31] omits photo and video chat. Mainstream dating apps cater to a broad audience, but there is also a diverse range of apps designed for specific demographics, including disabled people. These apps often include unique features, such as the option to disclose disabilities and more accessible interfaces and interaction modes [14, 30, 61]. However, regional restrictions, platform exclusivity, small user bases, and uneven technical stability continue to limit their reach and adoption [16, 46, 56].

3.2 HCI Perspectives on Dating and Marginalized Communities

There is a growing body of literature in HCI that focuses on experiences of different user groups with dating apps such as women [9, 13, 15, 20], LGBTQ+ communities [9, 13, 20, 63] or disabled people [3, 10, 12, 45, 65] focusing on different aspects of dating app experiences such as safety and harassment [15, 35, 40] including the issue of consent [9], disclosure experiences [2, 3, 13, 13, 45, 65] or self presentation [2, 12, 13, 63, 65], as well as different kinds of modalities and interactions such as voice interfaces for dating [53] or VR mediated dating environments [9]. Recent research also focuses heavily on Artificial Intelligence (AI) use on dating apps, introducing topics such as AI-supported risk assessment [15], AI-mediated conversations [20] or AI-influenced profile creation and moderation [2].

Here, HCI research acknowledges that while online dating has many positive aspects such as expanding dating opportunities [35] with reduced social demands [12], providing a safe space for more flexible disclosure [13, 45, 65] or seeking emotional support [13], develop connections and building communities [35, 41, 63], they also have a potential to expose users to various harms [13, 15, 20, 35, 40, 63, 65]. One specific harm extending beyond exclusion is related to safety, which is an important focus of current HCI research that on computer-mediated dating experiences [20, 35, 40], especially concerning marginalized groups [9, 9, 15, 20, 20]. For example, O'Brien et al. [40] found that platforms use moderation and educational tools to promote safety, but often place the responsibility on users. Lee [35] et al. presented that two popular dating apps Tinder and Bumble lack interventions to protect users' privacy and control possible abuse, especially for marginalized groups [35]. Focusing on LGBTQ+ individuals, Cui et al. [13] also argued that dating apps are used for building social relationships and seeking emotional support from people who may experience similar social stigma [13]. In a similar direction, Park et al. [41] presented queer women's dating app experiences and argue that users expect to access wider communities, but also experienced challenges in online dating technologies that did not adequately support core aspects of queerness in interactions, instead enforcing normalization on users [41]. Here, through examining ten popular dating apps, Katy et al. [63] found that in these platforms, gender and sexuality were often divided into descriptive labels and functional categories, which systematically marginalize or exclude queer identities. Overall, existing literature highlights that mainstream online dating platforms often fail to meet the needs of diverse users, resulting in marginalization and exclusion of minority groups [13].

3.3 Online Dating Experiences of Disabled People in HCI and Beyond

In Disability Studies literature, the entanglement of asexuality and disability is well-discussed, arguing that disabled people are viewed as lacking sexual potential or potency [51]. Recent empirical work on sexuality and disability also showed non-disabled people's tendency to desexualize disabled people, and that they have concerns regarding the sexuality of disabled people [32]. As Shakespeare [50] highlights, even within the disabled community and among disabled scholars, the issue of sexuality is often overlooked or even ignored. In this context, HCI research argued how online dating platforms can help decouple this inaccurate association between disability and asexuality [3]. Here, research underscores the importance of "access to dating apps" as the first step [3, 13, 65], and argues that dating apps might provide an alternative way for the disabled community to practice sexual autonomy [36], while also potentially exposing them to stigma and victimization [23]. Here, a scoping review of online dating for disabled people [39] from disability and sexuality studies outlined the factors that influence disabled people's choice for online dating, and illustrated disabled people's desire for "to be seen as more than their disability" as one of the main motivations in the existing research (e.g., [48]). Second, similar to research on other marginalized communities, studies focusing on disabled people's dating experiences also highlight disclosure, identity management, and self-presentation as key issues [12, 13, 45, 65]. Here, research on sexuality and disability showed that disclosure practices of disabled people are mostly affected by their previous dating experiences [57]. Regarding disclosure, HCI research underscores the emotional labor that disabled people experience during the process [45, 65], also when they are exposed to fetishization and objectification [38, 64]. Focusing on the experiences of deaf or hard-of-hearing people in China, Cui et al. [13] shared how disabled users employ practices of strategic identity disclosure, adapting their timing according to the situation and the traits of their dating partners. Further, framing participants' disclosure practices as responses to specific design limitations of current platforms [12, 13, 45], HCI research also provides some design recommendations. For instance, Porter et al. [45] argued for supporting active filtering to help disabled users understand perspectives on disability. Or, specifically for autistic online daters, Choi et al. [12] recommended aligning the matchmaking system with autistic users' perspectives, by recognizing their unique values and considering them as important criteria for algorithmic recommendations.

Finally, research highlights the importance of intersectional identities and calls for future work to focus on "perspectives of those who do not identify as white, female, heterosexual, Western, and

who are members of broader disability communities" ([45], p. 9). For example, Disability Studies research on intersectional identities in online dating highlighted that disability stigma remains prevalent among disabled LGBTQ+ individuals, demonstrating intersecting marginalized identities do not necessarily protect against ableist discrimination [38]. In HCI, while existing studies cover experiences across different disabilities (e.g., autistic users [12], deaf or hard-of-hearing users [13, 65]) and contexts (e.g., disabled people in China [10]), there remains a lack of research that examines diverse disabilities alongside the multiple, intersecting identities that shape how disabled people use and experience dating apps. Moreover, current work primarily focuses on self-representation and disclosure practices [45, 65], leaving other aspects of the dating experience underexplored. Therefore, building on existing research that critically examines dating apps in the context of disability, we extend the literature by showing how disabled users' engagement with dating apps emerges from a dynamic interplay between disability stigma, dominant dating norms, and platform infrastructures. Rather than treating online dating as a neutral technological solution, our analysis reveals how disability stigma as well as platform infrastructure actively structure experiences of disabled dating app users by redistributing different forms of labor onto users, particularly along intersectional lines.

4 Methodology

Below, we outline our methodology. We first present the development, deployment and distribution of the qualitative survey used to explore how disabled users experience dating apps, covering (1) survey design, including participant recruitment and procedures, and (2) data analysis.

4.1 Survey Design

We opted for a qualitative survey approach as dating and intimacy are highly sensitive, complex, and deeply personal topics. A qualitative approach enabled us to generate rich and nuanced accounts of participants' experiences around dating app use [6]. **A fully anonymous survey** was expected to enable more comfortable participation than one-to-one interviews, while allowing participants to respond at their own pace and according to their needs. The survey elements were developed through a two-stage process. First, we reviewed prior literature on disabled users' online dating experiences to identify central themes such as disclosure practices, positive and negative social interactions, and the opportunities afforded by dating apps, as well as underexplored areas in existing research, including safety and trust-related concerns and the effects of multiple identities. Second, we conducted iterative brainstorming and refinement sessions within the research team to develop the survey questions, with particular attention to inclusive language, accessibility, and conceptual clarity. Section-specific questions cover demographics, motivations for dating app usage, accessibility barriers, self-representation, social experiences, safety-related experiences, and multiple identity representation. While the survey included some closed-ended items (e.g., Likert scales and yes/no questions) to ease participants into each of the topics and to allow them to briefly contextualize their experiences, the work presented here primarily draws on the rich qualitative data generated by open-ended responses. For example, we asked "What accessibility challenges do you face while using dating apps?" to elicit descriptions of concrete accessibility barriers; "When and how do you prefer to disclose your disability?" to explore disclosure strategies; and "If you could design an ideal dating app experience for disabled users, what key features would it have?" to gather design-oriented reflections. A complete list of survey questions is provided in Supplementary Materials.

The questionnaire was hosted on an SoSciSurvey survey platform via Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) institutional access, using a browser-based system that required no installation, supported anonymous participation, and offered built-in accessibility features. These included a screen reader–friendly mode and high-contrast option. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics board of KIT. Anonymity was ensured by collecting only categorical demographic information through multiple-choice items, without free-text fields. Informed consent was obtained via an introductory screen stating that participation was voluntary, anonymous and could be discontinued at any time. Participants were explicitly instructed not to share personally identifiable information, and a contact email was provided for privacy-related concerns in line with institutional ethics guidelines. Except for demographic questions, no items were mandatory; as a result, the number of responses varies across questions. After the initial pilot testing of the survey that focused on understandability of the questions, the **data collection** ran from March 11 to May 6, 2025 and extended beyond the initially planned four weeks to accommodate late responses and ensure the target sample is diverse and representative. Throughout this period, the monitoring included responding to participant inquiries and tracking response metrics such as sample size, language, disability category and age to ensure balanced representation. On average, participants spent approximately 12 minutes (M = 727 s, range = 53–1,663 s) completing the survey, and 71% of those who started the survey completed it.

4.2 Respondents

The target population for the survey was **self-identified disabled people,** including people who have mobility disability, people with sensory disabilities (vision and hearing differences), neurodivergent people, and/or people with mental health differences, **who have used at least one dating app, currently or in the past.** Convenience sampling [26] was employed by distributing the survey across a range of online disabled communities, university services for disabled students, social media platforms (e.g., LinkedIn), and the communication channels of disability rights organizations and disabled activists. **Three language options,** English, German, and Turkish were included, according to the linguistic capabilities of the research team. With this, we also aimed to diversify the ethnic and cultural background of our sampling. Finally, the sample of our survey **comprised 44 valid responses**: 30 in German, 11 in English, and 3 in Turkish. Although we distributed the survey independent of location and provided different language options, we were more effective in reaching out to local communities, since the research team is located in Western Europe. This might be the reason for the over-representation of German-speaking respondents.

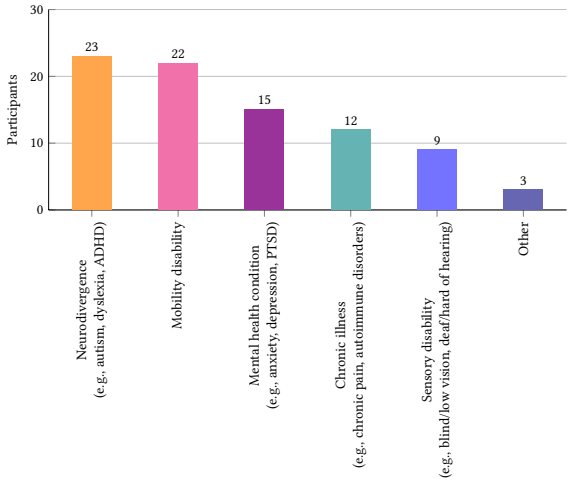


Figure 1: Disability Categories of Participants

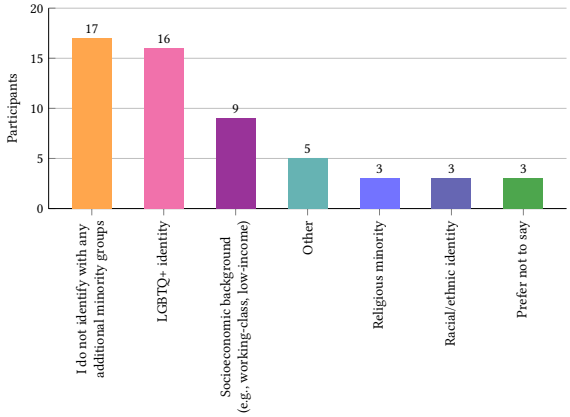


Figure 2: Minority Identities of Participants

The age distribution of respondents shows a concentration in early and mid-adulthood. Most respondents were between 26–35 years (n=16), followed by 36–45 (n=13) and 18–25 (n=11). Representation decreased in older age ranges, with 46–55 including three respondents and 56+ only one participant. **Gender identity** was distributed between 17 women, 19 men, seven non-binary individuals, and one who preferred not to disclose. **Disabilities were broadly represented:** 26 respondents reported multiple disabilities, and the largest disability categories were people with and neurodivergence and mobility disabilities, as shown in Figure 1. Please also see Table 1 in Appendix for full list of self-identified disabilities of the respondents. Respondents reported using a **variety of assistive technologies and tools**, most commonly noise-canceling headphones (n = 17), reminder and scheduling apps (n = 14), and navigation apps (n = 13), followed by text-to-speech software (n = 9). **Multiple identities of respondents** are summarized in Figure 2; 17 respondents did not identify with any further groups, while LGBTQ+ identity (n = 16) and disadvantaged socioeconomic background, such as working class and low income (n = 9), were the most frequent. **In terms of the experiences with the dating apps,** although every respondent reported having tried a dating app at some point, only 9 respondents were actively using one at the time of the survey. Among the inactive users, 6 were in monogamous relationships at the time and 15 cited frustration, primarily unsuccessful connections and accessibility barriers as their reason for disengagement. Use-duration varied: 16 of 41 had been using apps for over two years, 7 for one to two years, 11 for a few months and the rest selected other durations. Twenty-six persons had used more than one app, with Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid being the most common ones used by the respondents.

4.3 Data analysis

Data were organized, coded and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke [7]. The analysis began with an extended familiarization phase, during which the first authors repeatedly read all responses to gain an overall understanding of respondents' experiences. During coding, codes captured both descriptive elements (e.g., references to platform features, interaction practices, or disclosure moments) and more interpretive aspects (e.g., perceptions of inclusion, safety, or community norms). These codes were then iteratively compared and grouped into higher-level themes through a process of constant refinement. For example, the codes "Community Culture and Inclusion Norms", "Matching Pool and Quality Concerns", "Interaction Clarity and Cues", and "Disability-Centered Community Platforms" were examined in relation to one another and subsequently grouped under the broader subtheme of *"Motivations for Using Dating Apps and Navigating the App Ecosystem with a Disability."* Finally, we crafted two main themes: (1) Dating Norms and Disability Stigma Shape User Strategies and the Dating Experiences, and (2) App Design and Development Models Reproduce Structural Barriers (See section 5). During the analysis process, regular meetings were held with the other co-authors to collaboratively discuss emerging codes and themes, critically reflect on their interpretation, refine the evolving code structure and agree on the naming and scope of the primary themes. Finally, German and Turkish quotations were translated into English by the research team to enhance readability, while preserving the original meanings as closely as possible.

5 FINDINGS

In this section, we present the two main themes that we crafted from our data: (1) Dating Norms and Disability Stigma Shape User Strategies and the Dating Experiences, and (2) App Design and Development Models Reproduce Structural Barriers.

5.1 Theme 1: Dating Norms and Disability Stigma Shape User Strategies and the Dating Experiences

This theme first examines disabled users' motivations for using dating apps and how they strategically navigate the app ecosystem in relation to their identities. It then focuses on representation and disclosure, illustrating the complex and nuanced ways disabled users construct and negotiate their identities on dating apps. Finally,

it explores how dating apps are experienced as extensions of offline romantic interactions, including both opportunities for connection and challenges related to stigma. Together, these findings highlight recurring patterns in how participants experience, interpret and respond to these dynamics.

5.1.1 Motivations for Using Dating Apps and Navigating the App Ecosystem with a Disability. As our data showed, the most valued features of dating apps were **expanded opportunities** to meet people beyond one's usual geographical or social circles, convenient anytime/anywhere access, greater control over self-presentation, and the ease of text-based communication, with advanced filtering and matching tools. For some, particularly neurodivergent users, online environments offered a relatively safer and less overwhelming alternative to in-person approaches. As P14, a neurodivergent respondent, shared: "[...] interacting with people over the internet is much easier than approaching people in the real world [...]." Similarly, people who are physically disabled highlighted the physical inaccessibility of public spaces as the main barrier to in-person interactions. For these users, dating apps were not only convenient but essential tools for accessing social participation and potential intimacy: "I'm not mobile, and even if I were, I wouldn't dare to approach people. But my life mainly takes place online anyway. The app provides structure if it offers selection options." (P17, mobility disability, sensory disability, neurodivergence, mental health conditions, chronic illness). Here, our data shows how gendered norms and societal power structures also shape people's preferences: "I suffer under patriarchy and am completely unable to act in dating without the apps [...]. I don't know how to find the right words to openly and honestly express my intention [...]. The only thing that has helped break the ice so far was slowly getting to know each other through shared hobbies [...]." (P18, mobility disability, mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness). This illustrates that dating apps do more than mitigate accessibility barriers, they also offer possibilities for challenging dominant norms that intersects with gendered expectations and broader societal power structures.

Guided by their motivations, respondents approached **dating app selection as a strategic process,** also shaped by prior experiences, access needs and perceptions of community culture. Many respondents prioritized platforms that fostered respectful interaction, welcomed diverse identities, and aligned with their social and political values. Some dating apps were specifically appreciated for fostering "[...] respectful interactions [...]" and a "[...] pleasant political atmosphere [...]" (P15, neurodivergence). Here, queer participants reported greater acceptance on platforms that acknowledged multiple marginalizations. As one respondent puts it, "Queer people tend to be more accepting of intersectional identities [...] straight people do not typically like me" (P34, mobility disability). This suggests that users consider multiple aspects of their identity when choosing which dating app to use. Our findings demonstrate that most people were unaware that **specific dating platforms for disabled people** exist, and the majority had never used one, with only a few respondents indicating they had tried such a platform. While these apps are supposed to offer safer and more accessible environments, many respondents rejected them outright, criticizing their segregating logic. For example, P13 (neurodivergence) complained that such platforms give off "pre-sorting vibes", implying that "[...] disabled people are only allowed to date other disabled people, or else they wouldn't find anyone." P17 (mobility disability, sensory disability, neurodivergence, mental health conditions, chronic illness) explained further, likening them to "[...] kind of protected space in a negative sense, like sheltered workshops [...]" and declaring, "[...] I don't want anything to do with that." Here, respondents also made a distinction between disability-specific dating apps that are developed by non-disabled people vs. community-driven, disability-specific platforms "[...] from and for disabled people [...]" (P17), arguing that these spaces could foster empathy, shared understanding, and emotional safety. Overall, these findings show that disabled dating app users approached dating apps as strategic environments to extend their opportunities for intimacy-seeking, selecting and navigating platforms in relation to their multiple identities, and perceived platform cultures.

5.1.2 Representation and the Disclosure Dilemma: When, How, and to Whom? **While profile building,** respondents make intentional and context-sensitive decisions about whether, when, and how to disclose their disability to other users -carefully weighing authenticity, safety, and social risk. These decisions manifested in a spectrum of disclosure strategies, which can be clustered into two broad categories: Early profile disclosure and delayed disclosure. Here, almost half of the people preferred to wait until some initial conversation before mentioning their disability. In contrast, some people disclosed immediately after matching, and others described their disability briefly in their profile description (e.g., a few described it in detail there, others uploaded photos in which their disability was visible). However, our findings showed nuanced, complex and individualized strategies of disclosure as we outline below. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents reported that dating apps did not provide any feature for profile-based disability disclosure, and shared challenges with disclosing their disability on dating apps.

Our findings show that **early and explicit disclosure** was used to promote transparency, express self-acceptance and directly filter out ableist or incompatible matches. This approach served as both a boundary-setting and protective strategy, assessing disability as a non-negotiable aspect of identity and setting the tone for honest interaction. As P20 (mobility disability) put it, they try "[...] to be open about it and keep ableists at bay from the very start." In addition, short tags such as "disabled"/"neurodivergent" (P34, mobility disability) or "trans-inclusive" (P17, mobility disability, sensory disability, neurodivergence, mental health conditions, chronic illness) were sometimes included in profiles as a quick generalized disclosure of the disability or other identity statuses. Some respondents further layered this strategy by beginning with a brief reference in the bio and elaborating once trust was established. As P34 (mobility disability) explained, "[...] I use brief descriptions in my bio [...] and then after matching and talking [...] I might elaborate [...] if I believe the person is trustworthy." Some disabled users viewed non-disclosure as a form of dishonesty, describing their disability as inseparable from their identity. As P23 (sensory disability) stated, "I mention it on my profile as it affects every part of my life, so I would be obviously avoiding it otherwise." A subgroup of respondents here relied on indirect or implicit strategies: Deploying subtle

cues such as adding photographs featuring assistive devices. These signals enabled recognition by those with shared experiences while preserving ambiguity for others. As P12 (sensory disability, neurodivergence, mental health condition, chronic illness) explained, "I describe it indirectly in my profile. People who know will understand [...]." This approach worked as a filter to appeal to people who are familiar with the topic, and reflected a desire to avoid reduction to a diagnostic labels.

A second category that appeared from our data was centered on a **delayed disclosure approach,** in which information was often revealed only when it became directly relevant or arose naturally during the interaction. For instance, P7 (mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness) preferred to disclose "[...] only when it has direct relevance in the context," while P37 (mobility disability) only brings up the topic once they "know the person well". These strategies are aimed at foregrounding personality and shared interests before disability. As P9 (neurodivergence) explained: "[...] to show [my] general personality first and avoid (even unconscious) biases [...]." Some respondents found that this allowed potential partners to focus on personality first, while others described the need for explicit disclosure as "not natural" or "complicated" (P8, neurodivergence, chronic illness). Here, our data showed that the **visibility of the disabilities** influenced the timing of the disclosure: Some respondents with multiple disabilities reported disclosing a visible disability upfront in their profile, but mentioned their invisible disabilities later in the chat (e.g., P5, mobility disability, sensory disability, chronic illness and P7, mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness). Some disabled dating app users also emphasized that online disclosure led to conversations that is overly focused on their disability. P5 (mobility disability, sensory disability, chronic illness) put it "In chat is awkward—it all just revolves around [the disability] then [...]." Or, as P3 (mental health condition, neurodivergence) explained, they don't "[...] feel like the stereotypes around it apply to me, and I absolutely do not feel like it's a duty to tell it to other people." For these participants, in-person disclosure gave them greater control over the impressions they conveyed and allowed them to test how the other person approached their disability. Finally, some participants found sharing disability-related information to conflict with their privacy and safety concerns (see subsection 5.2.2); however, they ensured that they disclosed their disability before face-to-face meetings (P32, mobility disability). Taken together, our data shows that disclosure was rarely a simple act, it required careful deliberation and imposed a significant mental and emotional load, shaped by the perceptions of people toward their disabled identity as well as other identities, context, platform characteristics and the anticipated social response.

5.1.3 Dating App Experiences as Extensions of Offline Interactions. Our data suggest that respondents perceive their positive and negative experiences on dating apps as **closely mirroring their face-to-face romantic interactions.** As P31 (neurodivergence, mental health conditions, chronic illness) explained, "I had people who wanted nothing to do with me after I disclosed [my disability], and others who didn't care at all. It pretty much reflected the variety of responses I get from the general public toward my (now very visible) disability." In this sense, dating apps were not treated as isolated or exceptional spaces but as extension or part of participants' broader dating life. Here, dating apps also emerged as **transitional practice spaces** through which participants developed skills that extended into their offline social and romantic interactions. As P18 (mobility disability, mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness) reflected, "I gained a lot of self-confidence. Because I repeatedly pushed myself to message new people, it became easier and easier for me to communicate my needs [...]. Eventually, I became so comfortable with this in real life, too [...]." Here, on the one hand, people further shared **positive experiences** such as being able to find like-minded people, and even people who share same or similar disabilities which allow them to exchange experiences: "Sometimes I get matches with people who have the same disability, and they bring it up in conversation." (P30, mobility disability) or "Very interesting exchanges with different people about communication and neurodivergence." (P7, mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness). Many respondents also talked about several encounters that they find meaningful and enjoyable, such as getting to know people from "different backgrounds and diverse perspectives" (P37, mobility disability), meeting with many people who are "exceptionally polite, friendly, and considerate" (P7, mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness), making friends (P22, mobility disability, neurodivergence, mental health condition) or finding the partners that they were looking for (e.g., P9, neurodivergence and P34, mobility disability). Taken together, these experiences indicate that dating apps can support **diverse forms of connection** for disabled users and function as crucial venues for intimacy-seeking.

On the other hand, our respondents shared several **negative experiences,** with some people expressing that they have "nothing to share positive" (e.g., P35, P44, P23) because they "always swiped away" (P35, mobility disability, mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness), or they "didn't get many messages from people who seemed genuinely interesting" to them (P23, sensory disability). Here, many people described receiving messages based on assumptions that they were insecure or in need of encouragement because of their disability. Although often framed as supportive, these remarks were experienced as patronizing and objectifying, **reproducing ableist expectations about disabled users' emotional states.** For example, P7 (mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness) described how someone tried to "[...] build [me] up [...]," while P23 (sensory disability) was told they were "[...] being [too] negative [...]" after their disability was compared to a different condition. Respondents also reported more explicit violations, including emotional coercion, manipulative behavior or blackmail. As P11 (neurodivergence, mental health condition) noted, "[...] I was often placed under emotional pressure or blackmailed, and I didn't notice it until it was too late." Here, **identifying as a disabled woman emerged as a particular site of vulnerability,** with many female respondents describing being treated less as individuals and more as objects of desire. Here, in response to unwanted interactions, disabled people frequently adopted non-engagement strategies to protect their emotional well-being. As P32 (mobility disability) explained, "I just moved on [...]. [...] Their prejudice wasn't a reflection of me and didn't require my participation." Alongside these encounters, respondents described experiences of passive neglect -such as ghosting or lack of replies

that contributed to feelings of invisibility. As P23 (sensory disability) shared, "I didn't get any messages or replies on one app [...]." The emotional impact of ghosting was especially pronounced when it followed disability disclosure, as P22 (mobility disability, mental health condition, neurodivergence) recalled being unmatched shortly after revealing their disability, despite having already arranged a meeting. Normative expectations around initiation further shaped these dynamics. **Dating app users who identify as male** in particular, described the burden of being expected to send the first message despite low response rates, unless they masked or downplayed their disability. As P26 (sensory disability, mental health condition) observed, "The general expectation that, as a man, I have to write first [...], combined with a low reply rate [...], unless I mask myself heavily." Overall, these findings suggest that such experiences are not isolated incidents but **reflect broader societal norms and expectations around disability, gender and dating,** shaping how disabled users are perceived and treated on dating platforms.

5.2 Theme 2: App Design and Development Models Reproduce Structural Barriers

Focusing on structural barriers, this theme first examines technical accessibility issues in the design of dating apps as sources of access labor for disabled users. It then explores how the development and sustainability models of dating apps create additional layers of challenge around safety and transparency.

5.2.1 Technical Accessibility Barriers Lead to Access Labor. Our findings show that while some respondents found dating apps accessible, many reported diverse accessibility challenges. Here, **inaccessible design practices** compelled some disabled users to rely on access labor, including adopting workaround strategies such as switching to browser-based access or alternative platforms (P11, neurodivergence, mental health condition), disengaging from dating apps altogether when participation became too burdensome (P8, neurodivergence, chronic illness), or using apps while "depending on caregiver assistance" (P42, sensory disability, mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness), an arrangement that possibly complicates intimacy and autonomy.

First, blind users encounter pervasive problems with unlabeled controls, inaccessible text and unreliable navigation structures. One respondent observed: "All apps have issues with unlabeled buttons, as well as inaccessible text and non-accessible user navigation," (P25, sensory disability). As another participant noted, "I can't see the visuals, and most profiles say little or nothing. Without the descriptions, nearly every profile is interchangeable," (P5, mobility disability, sensory disability, chronic illness). To address this, participants advocated for multimodal expression such as textual bios, audio clips, video snippets, and guided prompts that convey personality beyond appearance. As an alternative, P39 (mobility disability) imagined "a feature to describe any pictures". Second, **limited interface customization** in dating apps prevented the accommodation of diverse needs. Many respondents here called for adjustable settings such as text size, contrast and layout to enhance readability and reduce fatigue, as well as accessible alternatives to verification processes. As P17 (mobility disability, sensory disability, neurodivergence, mental health condition, chronic illness) noted, "[...] more options [...] and [...] less pressure for certain verifications that are not barrier-free [...] would improve accessibility." For more customization options, P18 (mobility disability, mental health conditions, neurodivergence, chronic illness) proposed open-source plugin support to "[...] allow as many people as possible to develop plugins for their specific disability," while P35 (mobility disability, mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness) recommended a web-based version offering full keyboard and mouse control. Third, inconsistent layouts and gesture-only interactions created confusion and frustration. Disabled dating app users needed the adoption of standard controls, for example, a very common feature of many dating apps, swipes, were mostly inaccessible for screen reader users. Here, respondents called for buttons instead of swipes, with a clear differentiation between navigation gestures and action triggers: "It must be clearly distinguishable whether swiping turns the page to reveal more information or triggers an action, such as indicating interest or disinterest," (P25, mobility disability, sensory disability, neurodivergence). Consistent layout structures, standardized interface elements and improved error recovery mechanisms (e.g., undo swipes and visible back controls) were identified as critical to minimizing errors and frustration. In addition, **infinite-scroll mechanics, persistent notifications, and dynamic visuals** can provoke anxiety and overwhelm users, especially neurodivergent people. One participant pointed out, "I was able to use them [dating apps], but I'm not good at presenting myself in a digital, artificial way and found it very stressful to use them whether for matching, messaging, or organizing meetings," (P8, neurodivergence, chronic illness). Others described "intense stimulation, addictive mechanisms [...]" (P15, neurodivergence) or "message pop-ups" (P7, mental health conditions, neurodivergence, chronic illness) as sources of stress. In addition, the absence of seizure-safe visuals, specifically the lack of controls to disable flashing or rapidly changing animations, also poses health risks, as noted by P34 (mobility disability), who warned of "flashing for epilepsy." These patterns show that **sensory-overloading design** not only drains users cognitively but also pushes disabled users away from positive and sustainable dating experiences. Finally, cognitive burden also emerged in relation to the lack of in-app guidance during profile creation. As P8 (neurodivergence, chronic illness) noted, "Without reliable, timely feedback, it's hard for me to improve [my profile]." This absence of guidance reinforces uncertainty in already demanding dating process, further contributing to access labor. Together, these barriers illustrate how technical shortcomings in app design and infrastructure extend beyond usability issues, imposing additional cognitive burdens and at times, excluding disabled users from mainstream dating platforms.

5.2.2 Platform Infrastructure Leads to Trust Deficits and Additional Safety Labor. Another central concern for disabled users of dating apps is the **negotiation of personal safety and information control** in dating apps that often lack adequate platform support. As our data showed, users routinely adopt self-devised safety measures—such as screening matches via social media, sharing profile details with friends or insisting on longer off-platform texting and video calls to reduce risk before in-person meetings. Here, unclear abuse-reporting processes of dating apps reduce trust for users. Reports are often met with a generic automated acknowledgment

and no subsequent feedback or resolution: "[...] only an automated confirmation was shown." (P22, mobility disability, mental health condition, neurodivergence) leaving the user uncertain whether any action was taken. In some cases, respondents attempted to bypass these processes by seeking direct human contact, for example by writing "to the developer of the app" (P25, mobility disability, sensory disability, neurodivergence). **Concerns about data control, anonymity, potential misuse of personal information and lack of algorithmic transparency** further restrict trust and feelings of safety. Some users appreciate the ability to "[...] stay anonymous to the extent [I] want [...]" on dating apps (P18, mobility disability, mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness). Because disability is perceived as highly sensitive personal information, the expectation to disclose multiple layers of personal data alongside disability-related details amplified respondents' privacy and safety concerns. "It's kind of weird to reveal so much about yourself. I have no idea how many advertising companies ended up with my data," (P18). The spread of fake profiles and unclear data-handling policies intensifies these concerns, leading some users to withhold identifying details until a high level of trust is established. Here, being disabled introduced **an additional layer of safety-related challenges,** requiring respondents to engage in forms of **safety labor** alongside access labor, through which users compensate for insufficient platform protections by managing risk themselves. Disabled users described carefully calibrating what personal information to share, when, and with whom, as a strategy to minimize potential harm (see subsection 5.1.2). Some people delayed or avoided sharing disability-related information to protect themselves from harassment. As P12 (sensory disability, mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness) noted, being too upfront could attract people "[...] who fetishize disabilities and see disabled people merely as objects of desire [...]." Safety concerns were further shaped by **gendered experiences of risk.** Several disabled women explicitly linked information management to self-protection. As P7 (mental health condition, neurodivergence, chronic illness) reflected, "[...] as a woman, I have safety concerns [...]," explaining that early disclosure of autism might "[...] potentially attract people who might be dangerous [...]." This illustrates how general concerns around safety and privacy become amplified for disabled users, as the stigma around disability and ableist assumptions of people introduce **additional layers of risk management and self-protection.**

Beyond interpersonal safety concerns, respondents' accounts suggest that **broader platform infrastructures** also shape perceptions of safety and trust. Respondents characterized current matching engines and monetization tactics as strategically manipulative, prioritizing revenue over genuine connection. They argued for the need for "[...] a business model that doesn't collect data or use upselling." (P26, sensory disability, mental health condition) Further, respondents described existing filtering options -limited to age, gender, or location- as too blunt to identify genuinely compatible matches. Some participants preferred having opt-in onboarding questions to identify users who are open to dating disabled individuals: "Apps should ask everyone at the start something like will they date a disabled person? If yes, then recommend them disabled [people]" (P33, mobility disability, chronic illness), also highlighting that such features should be free (P30, mobility disability). This shows that, for some disabled users, the capacity to preclude incompatible profiles is critical, as it **reduces emotional labor, limits exposure to stigma, and supports well-being during the matching process.** Additionally, subscription tiers and paywalls introduce financial barriers that **disproportionately impact users with limited resources,** and there were many participants who raised this issue. P3 (mental health condition, neurodivergence) noted, "[...] I'm coming from the countryside, no prestigious background, and again, I will not accept disdain for social classes," illustrating how both social and economic background intersect to shape experience on dating apps. Several users envisioned donation-funded, open-source platforms offering full feature access without paywalls: "My utopia would be a really great open-source dating app—free or donation-funded, without any profit motive, with extensible features and full accessibility" (P17, mobility disability, sensory disability, neurodivergence, mental health condition, chronic illness). Overall, these findings suggest that safety emerges not as an inherent platform feature but as an **ongoing form of user labor, produced through infrastructural design choices, monetization logics and unequal distributions of trust and responsibility.**

6 Discussion

Our findings show that disabled users' engagement with dating apps is characterized by a **tension between opportunity and diverse forms of labor: Access labor, safety labor and emotional labor.** Below, we discuss our findings through the lens of the Access–Choice–Pleasure Model [43] to answer **RQ1**, *What are the motivations and experiences of disabled users when engaging with dating apps, and how do their other identities shape these experiences?* Building on that, and with the aim of answering **RQ2**, *How can app design be re-imagined to support accessible, autonomous and pleasurable interactions for disabled users*, we provide design implications and illustrative design examples to show what a dating app that provides accessible, autonomous and pleasurable interactions for disabled users might look like.

6.1 Rethinking Disabled Experiences With Dating Apps Through the Access–Choice–Pleasure Model

The Access–Choice–Pleasure Model [43] conceptualizes disabled people's intimate and sexual lives via three dimensions: Access, choice and pleasure. The model draws on Disability Studies [19, 54] to frame **access** as a core principle and necessary foundation for disabled people's sexual rights and participation in intimate life. Rooted in the principle of "Nothing about us without us," **choice** emphasizes autonomy and self-determination, foregrounding disabled people's capacity to define their desires, boundaries and relational preferences. Specifically drawing from Tepper's [58] foundational work on **pleasure** and disability, the model approaches "access to pleasure" as "the real accessibility issue." Here, the focus on pleasure centers disabled people's right to desire, enjoyment and fulfillment, challenging deficit-oriented framings that reduce sexuality to risk, care or functionality [43]. Although the model was originally developed in the context of disability sexual rights, we argue that online dating platforms have become an important context through which these rights are negotiated, as they increasingly shape how

people seek and experience intimacy. By adopting the perspective of this model to the context of disabled dating app users, **we reveal the interconnected nature of these dimensions, showing how experiences of access and choice shape the extent to which dating can be pleasurable.** In line with HCI work on accessibility that emphasizes experiential accessibility (e.g., [22]), we further foreground the pleasurability of dating experiences for disabled users, an aspect that remains largely overlooked in existing work (see background 3.2 and 3.3).

6.1.1 Access. In line with the Access–Choice–Pleasure model's [43] emphasis on access, our findings underscore that **access to dating is a foundational concern** highly relevant to the experiences of disabled people with dating apps. Our data reveal that access in this context is not a singular or static condition and that motivations to use dating apps are rooted in their function as critical gateways for disabled users by providing alternatives to physically inaccessible venues and dominant in-person dating and communication norms, while enabling a personal pace, offer room to practice flexible and autonomous disclosure (e.g., [10, 45]), as well as diverse modes of communication (see subsection 5.1.1). However, basic access to dating apps only is a first step, as the level of accessibility of a dating app plays a central role in shaping disabled users' experiences, and **many apps introduce new accessibility challenges while reproducing existing ones.** Prior research has highlighted accessibility issues in dating apps particularly in relation to deaf and hard-of-hearing people [10, 65], as well as to autistic dating app users [12], also outlining the incompatibility of dating apps with assistive technologies [39]. Our findings confirm these patterns and extend existing work by also foregrounding the needs and experiences of **users with diverse (and multiple) disabilities and identities,** since accessibility barriers did not affect users uniformly. **Intersectional identities influenced how technical barriers translated into lived experiences:** Visual dominance disproportionately excluded blind users, sensory overload intensified barriers for neurodivergent participants, visibility of disability complicates disclosure experience and safety-related concerns shaped how disabled women navigated visibility and interaction. Taken together, we argue that access to intimacy for disabled people is not simply enabled or restricted by the presence of a dating platform. Rather, platform design actively structures the terms of participation, redistributing access labor [5] to disabled users who must continuously adapt, compensate or withdraw in order to remain engaged in online intimacy seeking.

6.1.2 Choice. Within the Access–Choice–Pleasure framework, choice is often framed as autonomy and self-determination [43]. Our findings suggest that **choice in dating app use is not purely individual but emerges from ongoing negotiations between personal preferences and needs, dating norms and stigma, as well as platform infrastructures.** First, rather than approaching dating platforms as neutral tools, disabled users engage in what can be understood as constrained or **negotiated choice-making.** The preference for mainstream platforms over disability-specific alternatives reflects broader accessibility discourses in HCI and beyond that prioritize integration over segregation [28, 34]. Yet, this choice simultaneously exposes structural limitations: While mainstream apps offer larger user bases and greater relational possibilities, they rarely provide mechanisms that support disabled users' specific needs for accessibility, filtering, disclosure, or safety. From this perspective, choice becomes less about selecting among equal options and more about engaging in ongoing forms of access, emotional, and safety labor simply to sustain participation (see subsections 5.1.1, 5.2.1 and 5.2.2).

Second, **intersectional identities further structure choice.** Participants described how gender, sexuality and disability intersect to reshape perceived risks and opportunities, often requiring additional strategic labor (see subsections 5.1.1 and 5.2.2). For example, disabled women reported heightened safety considerations, while LGBTQ+ participants evaluated platforms through expectations of inclusivity and community culture. In case of disclosure, existing literature conceptualizes "active filtering" as a means for users to proactively shape compatibility [29, 45]. Our analysis suggests that when such tools are limited, monetized or poorly aligned with disability-related needs, users are pushed toward reactive strategies such as passive filtering [45], incremental disclosure, or strategic self-presentation (see subsection 5.1.2). Here, we argue that **platforms do not merely enable choice, they actively configure the conditions under which choices becomes possible to whom.** As a result, limitations in filtering infrastructures and disclosure support do not only restrict user autonomy but also reshape the emotional experience of dating, narrowing the space in which disabled users can pursue intimacy as a pleasurable rather than strategic activity.

6.1.3 Pleasure. Considering the promise of dating apps as a potential means to decouple the inaccurate association between disability and asexuality [3], our findings suggested a more complex picture. While dating apps may expand access and enable forms of strategic self-presentation (see subsections 5.1.2 and 5.2.1), **they do not automatically transform the dominant narratives that structure disabled sexuality.** Instead, these narratives continue to circulate within digital environments (see subsection 5.1.3). In this sense, dating apps do not constitute a radically new intimate sphere, but rather recreate existing narratives within algorithmic infrastructures. This resonates with prior work on queer women's experiences in online dating, which demonstrates how sociocultural norms persist within digital spaces and are often reproduced through design logics [41]. From a pleasure-oriented perspective, this continuity is significant. As Tepper [58] argues, discourses around disability and sexuality have historically centered on risk, deviance, or deficiency, sidelining pleasure as a legitimate concern. Similarly, recent HCI scholarship critiques how technology research addressing disability and intimacy often adopts medicalized or safety-driven framings, neglecting desire, fantasy and enjoyment [42]. Our findings suggest that pleasure on dating apps is not simply absent, but structurally conditional. It emerges only when stigma is temporarily suspended, when safety feels manageable, and when platform logics do not intensify existing exclusions through different forms of labor (see above 6.1.1 and 6.1.2).

Taken together, through the lens of the Access–Choice–Pleasure framework [43], we argue that **reframing pleasure as a central accessibility concern in online dating for disabled people requires fully accessible and inclusive platforms** that address the socio-technical conditions shaping who is represented and who can experience accessible, safe and autonomous dating interactions.

6.2 Design Implications

In this subsection, we translate our findings into design implications that consider technical compliance (access) a baseline, while moving toward enabling meaningful autonomy (choice) and sustaining enriching and meaningful participation (pleasure). We illustrate the implications with design examples that provide starting points for re-imagining dating apps through the Access–Choice–Pleasure framework [43].

6.2.1 Implication 1: Ensure Full Application Accessibility as Baseline. Our findings suggest that accessibility failures reflect deeper platform logistics that privilege certain bodies, interaction styles and forms of desirability rather than merely technical shortcomings (see 5.2.1 and 6.1.1). Therefore, while legal frameworks such as the European Accessibility Act [17] establish a baseline, accessibility should be treated as an infrastructural condition that minimizes access labor [5] and enables participation without continuous adaptation or external support. Rather than focusing solely on visual interface design, platforms should ensure that core interaction flows remain operable across diverse sensory, cognitive and motor conditions. This includes predictable navigation structures, customizable pacing of interaction, reduced cognitive load through interface stability and compatibility with assistive technologies such as screen readers and alternative input devices. While some mainstream dating apps have introduced basic compatibility with screen readers and accessibility features (e.g., [8, 59]), our findings suggest that accessibility remains inconsistent in practice. Participants continued to report barriers such as unlabeled controls, inaccessible navigation and the absence of meaningful image descriptions, indicating that basic level compatibility with assistive technologies alone does not ensure an accessible dating experience. Figure 3 illustrates the accessibility settings interface of a dating app that provides various and detailed options to customize the use of the app for users with diverse needs. Here, we distinguish between accessibility features that should be fully compatible with users' operating system accessibility settings (e.g., optimization for screen readers) and additional app-level customization options that enable users to tailor the experience to their specific preferences on dating apps.

6.2.2 Implication 2: Carefully Integrate Multimodal Profile Construction. To move from basic accessibility to equitable and pleasurable participation, dating apps should support rich, multimodal forms of profile construction to increase opportunities for disabled users, (see 6.1.2). This may include optional voice recordings, short videos, structured prompts or alternative narrative formats that allow users to present themselves through diverse sensory and communicative modes. Although some mainstream dating apps already support voice recordings and videos (e.g., [8]) in profile creation, our findings suggest that multimodality should go beyond simply offering additional media formats. Rather, users should be able to flexibly choose and combine communication modalities according to their access needs. Supporting multimodal communication also requires considering the access needs of both communication partners. Rather than assuming a single modality will be universally accessible, dating apps could support flexible transitions between modalities and allow users to communicate their preferred formats

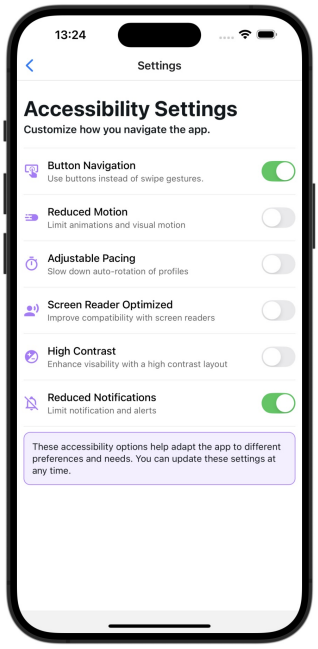


Figure 3: "Ensure Full Application Accessibility as Baseline" illustrating a settings page with diverse accessibility options for users.

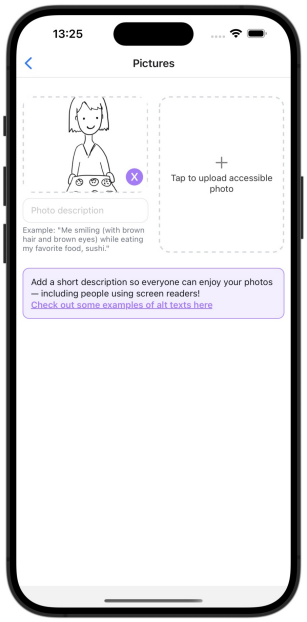


Figure 4: "Carefully Integrate Multimodal Profile Construction A." illustrating a screen of the profile creation page where users are encouraged to upload accessible photos.

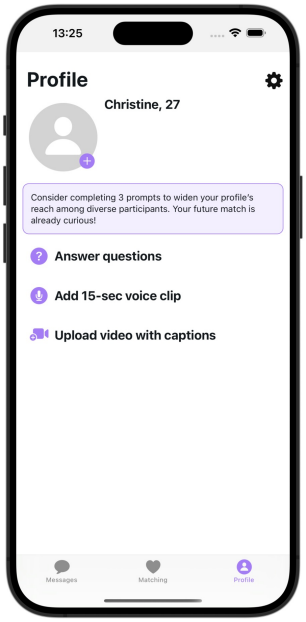


Figure 5: "Carefully Integrate Multimodal Profile Construction B." showing the screen of the profile creation page with different possibilities to fill out.

(also see 6.2.3). At the same time, it is important to note that existing research warns that further accessibility issues may arise from diverse multimodal forms of profile construction [10] as a result of conflicting access needs. Therefore, such features need to be integrated with care, avoiding new pressures to perform beyond one's comfort level. Instead, platforms should frame multimodality as an expansion of expressive possibilities (see 6.1.1). Further, prior HCI work shows that accessibility practices do not emerge automatically, but require active design interventions that shape user behavior and platform norms (e.g., [24, 25]). In dating apps, where images function as a core mechanism of self-presentation and desirability, profile accessibility choices also act as signals of users' preferences and relational values (see 5.1.2). Here, platforms could prompt users during photo upload to add short descriptive alt text. See Figure 4 for an example page of a dating app where the users are encouraged to upload accessible photos.

Further, building on our findings (especially see 5.2.1), we imagine a "profile creation support/guide" that gives feedback to users on how to build their profiles based on their needs and preferences, and how individual choices may impact accessibility for other users. Existing research has proposed AI-based "dating coaches" to foster a sense of partnership and support users throughout the dating process [33]. However, such systems risk reinforcing normative expectations if they implicitly guide users toward standardized profiles [33]. Instead, design should support users in exploring their own preferences, authenticity and unique expressive styles, for example through optional suggestions, contextual insights, or reflective prompts that preserve autonomy and encourage diverse self-expression. Figure 5 depicts a profile creation workflow that offers diverse input options for expressing oneself beyond visual content.

6.2.3 Implication 3: Support Flexible Disclosure and Filtering. Supporting disability disclosure presents a key design challenge: Platforms must support disclosure while preserving users' autonomy over timing, framing and visibility (see 6.1.2). As our data showed, disclosure is not only about what is shared, but also about with whom it becomes visible. In this sense, disclosure and filtering are intertwined practices through which users manage both self-representation and audience selection (see 5.1.2 and 5.2.1). Here, we draw on previous work calls for platforms that support disclosure "with care" [45]. Therefore, filtering tools should not be understood as mechanisms for sorting or excluding individuals, but as ways of supporting users in shaping the conditions under which they engage with others. This includes enabling users to manage how and when their information becomes visible, and to navigate interactions in ways that reduce exposure to stigma, misinterpretation, or fetishization. While stronger audience filtering mechanisms may raise concerns about segregation, our findings suggest that some disabled users wanted to have these mechanisms to avoid repeatedly encountering people who were openly unwilling to date disabled people. For these users, such mechanisms represented a way to reduce repeated experiences of ableism and the emotional labor associated with disclosure, highlighting an important design tension between expanding dating opportunities and reducing exposure to ableism. Figure 6 showcases an app interface that outlines

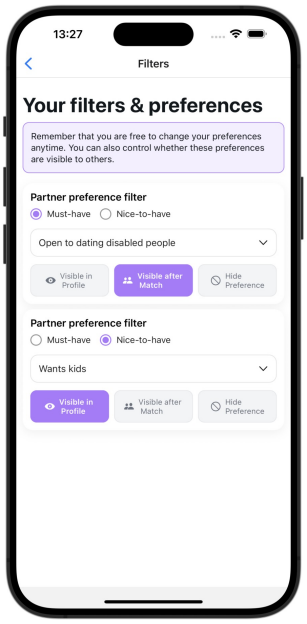


Figure 6: "Support Flexible Disclosure and Filtering A" showing a page of a dating app with users' filters and preferences, supporting user-controlled visibility and boundary setting.

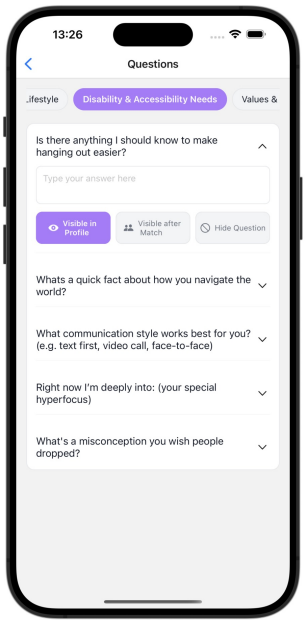


Figure 7: "Support Flexible Disclosure and Filtering B" showing a disclosure interface with thematic question categories and visibility controls.

how such filtering mechanisms can support user autonomy and boundary setting.

Additionally, rather than implementing rigid disclosure fields that risk reducing identity to diagnostic categories or treating disclosure as a completed action, platforms could support layered and progressive disclosure mechanisms that allow users to signal aspects of identity through partial cues or evolving narratives that can be expanded as interactions deepen and trust is established (see 5.1.2 and 5.2.2). Designing for disclosure as a staged, context-sensitive, as well as "flexible and nuanced" [10] process aligns with disabled users' evolving strategies, preserving their autonomy over identity negotiation (see6.1.2) while reducing emotional labor that can otherwise undermine pleasurable participation (see 6.1.3). Figure 7 illustrates how flexible, autonomous disclosure tools can be embedded in dating apps through targeted, disability-aware questions that invite users to share aspects of their identity on their own terms and pace.

6.2.4 Implication 4: Design Safety Mechanisms Responsive to Intersectionality. Current safety infrastructures in dating apps operate on universalized assumptions of risk, rarely accounting for how vulnerability emerges at the intersection of disability, gender, sexuality and other social positions (e.g., socio-economic disadvantages). Rather than treating safety as a universal or neutral concern, our findings suggest that safety needs are shaped by intersecting identities (see 5.1.1 and 5.2.2), aligning with Disability Justice principle

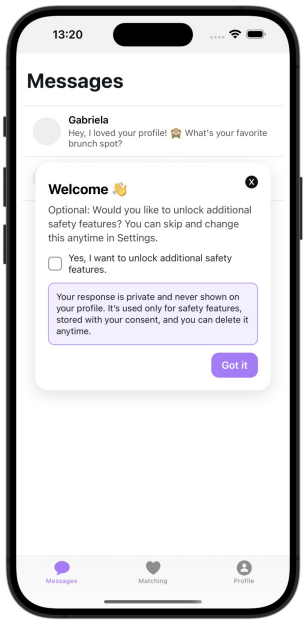


Figure 8: "Design Safety Mechanisms Responsive to Intersectionality" showing a pop-up screen with an onboarding prompt about safety features.

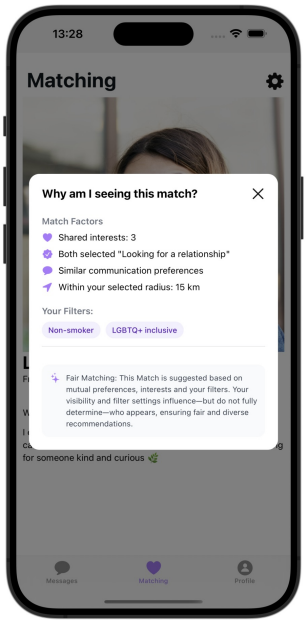


Figure 9: "Enable Transparent and Equitable Matching" illustrating transparency interface explaining why a match is suggested.

Intersectionality that emphasizes individuals are not defined by their disability alone [4]. Here, as existing literature argues, dating platforms frequently shift responsibility for safety onto users, who are expected to assess risk and respond to harmful interactions in the absence of robust platform safeguards [40]. We argue that designing proactive safety infrastructures requires moving beyond generic tools toward intersectionality-aware systems that acknowledge diverse risk experiences. This could include adaptive safety settings, identity-sensitive filtering options, and contextual prompts that support users in managing visibility and interaction boundaries according to their lived realities. This could allow disabled users to engage in intimacy as exploration rather than risk management (see 6.1.3). At the same time, such interventions should not override user autonomy or position users as passive recipients of protection. Rather, safety mechanisms should be designed to support users in exercising agency over their own boundaries and decisions, recognizing that safety is co-created between users and platforms. As an example, Figure 8 depicts an onboarding screen of a dating app offering additional safety checks tailored for disabled users with multiple identities. These could include safety tip sheets, a prioritized incident-reporting workflow, or a help center with hotline access.

6.2.5 Implication 5: Enable Transparent and Equitable Matching. Equitable and inclusive matching requires greater algorithmic transparency that acknowledges how disabled users may be differently affected by platform logics and ranking systems. Our findings suggest that disabled users often interpret low match rates through stigma, generating emotional labor and "algorithmic anxiety", a common experience among non-disabled users as well [33]. Given that disability is frequently shaped by discrimination across online and offline contexts (see 5.1.3), algorithmic outcomes may amplify stigma-related interpretations, increasing emotional labor and limiting pleasurable engagement (see 6.1.3). Here, our data presented a desire for transparency around how users' data is collected, interpreted and used within matchmaking systems, reflecting broader concerns about trust, agency, and platform accountability (see 5.2.2). Therefore, carefully designed transparency mechanisms could help users understand how factors such as profile completeness, interaction patterns and/or applied filters influence visibility. Rather than presenting algorithms as neutral systems, platforms could frame matchmaking as a collaborative process, enabling users to make informed adjustments while preserving autonomy (see 6.1.2). This perspective also opens space for alternative governance models for dating apps, including community-driven or participatory approaches (see 5.1.1) that challenge dominant commercial platform models. As an example, Figure 9 illustrates a pop-up screen that transparently informs users about how the matching algorithm works, and how personal preferences, interests and filters shape which profiles they are shown in the app. Here, we would like to note that without critically examining the commercial models that shape dating platforms, many of the design implications proposed above may remain difficult to realize in practice, as platform goals centered on monetization can conflict with working towards providing equitable, accessible and pleasurable dating experiences for everyone.

7 Limitations and Future Work

We acknowledge several limitations of our work that also open avenues for future research on dating and disability in HCI. First, respondents were primarily limited to German-speaking disabled dating app users, constraining the transferability of our findings across cultural and linguistic contexts. Here, future studies could expand recruitment through multilingual strategies. Second, reliance on convenience sampling via online communities and institutional networks may have excluded individuals without such connections. Also, we wanted to recruit persons who self-identified as disabled because we were interested in perspectives of participants who consider their disability part of their identity. However, we acknowledge that self-identification as disabled is a complex process, and our recruitment approach may have excluded individuals who experience disability related barriers but do not identify as disabled, e.g., due to stigma. Related to that, our final sample did not equally represent different disability groups. While some groups were represented more extensively, others (e.g., people with intellectual disabilities) were not represented. This suggests that even accessible recruitment procedures may unintentionally exclude some communities. Future work should therefore explore more diverse recruitment strategies, including alternative recruitment channels and recruitment materials in multiple formats (e.g., plain language) to better support participation across diverse disability communities. Third, data collection was based on a single cross-sectional survey without follow-up or iterative engagement, use of mixed-methods approaches combining surveys with interviews

or focus groups in future work could deepen qualitative insights. Further, our design examples were developed as proof-of-concept prototypes without real-world deployment or usability testing. In future work, we plan to design iterative co-design and formal evaluations with disabled users to further validate and refine these concepts. Finally, future work should also explore aspects surrounding the representation of disability, which has been demonstrated to be relevant in other settings (e.g., see [21]), and how to reflect this in dating apps. Likewise, systematically comparing findings on disability and dating apps to the experiences of other groups would offer the opportunity to further address intersecting issues.

8 Conclusion

In this work, we explored the dating app experiences of 44 disabled users with diverse disabilities and other identities through an anonymous qualitative online survey. Our analysis revealed two overarching themes: (1) Dating norms and disability stigma shape user strategies and experiences, and (2) app design and development models reproduce structural barriers. Together, these findings demonstrate that disabled users' experiences on dating platforms emerge from an ongoing interplay between societal dating norms, disability stigma, intersectional identities, and platform infrastructures. We interpret these insights through Pikkel's Access–Choice–Pleasure Model [43], highlighting how access, choice, and pleasure are mutually constituted within disabled users' intimacy-seeking practices on dating apps. Building on this perspective, **we present five design implications and illustrative examples that reimagine dating apps as spaces that support accessible, autonomous, and pleasurable interactions:** (1) Ensure full application accessibility as baseline, (2) carefully integrate multimodal profile construction, (3) support flexible disclosure and filtering, (4) design safety mechanisms responsive to intersectionality, and (5) enable transparent and equitable matching.

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Table 1: Self-identified disability categories of participants. Participants could select multiple categories.

Participant	Disability Category(ies)
P1	Other
P2	Mental health condition, Neurodivergence
P3	Neurodivergence
P4	Mobility disability, Sensory disability, Chronic illness
P5	Mobility disability
P6	Mental health condition, Chronic illness, Neurodivergence
P7	Chronic illness, Neurodivergence
P8	Neurodivergence
P9	Sensory disability
P10	Neurodivergence, Mental health condition
P11	Sensory disability, Neurodivergence, Mental health condition, Chronic illness
P12	Neurodivergence
P13	Neurodivergence
P14	Neurodivergence
P15	Mental health condition, Neurodivergence
P16	Mobility disability, Sensory disability, Neurodivergence, Mental health condition, Chronic illness
P17	Mobility disability, Mental health condition, Neurodivergence, Chronic illness
P18	Neurodivergence, Mental health condition
P19	Mobility disability
P20	Mobility disability, Neurodivergence
P21	Mobility disability, Mental health condition, Neurodivergence
P22	Sensory disability
P23	Mobility disability, Chronic illness
P24	Sensory disability, Neurodivergence, Mobility disability
P25	Sensory disability, Mental health condition
P26	Mental health condition, Neurodivergence
P27	Chronic illness
P28	Sensory disability
P29	Mobility disability
P30	Neurodivergence, Mental health condition, Chronic illness
P31	Mobility disability
P32	Mobility disability, Chronic illness
P33	Mobility disability
P34	Mobility disability, Mental health condition, Neurodivergence, Chronic illness
P35	Mobility disability
P36	Mobility disability
P37	Mental health condition, Neurodivergence
P38	Mobility disability, Other
P39	Mobility disability
P40	Mobility disability, Neurodivergence, Other
P41	Sensory disability, Mental health condition, Chronic illness, Neurodivergence
P42	Mobility disability
P43	Mobility disability
P44	Mobility disability