The Gamification of Online Dating

Exploring the Intersection of Play, Choice, and Romance in Digital Spaces

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| abstract

The rise of online dating platforms has transformed the way individuals approach romantic relationships, with many users increasingly engaging in these platforms as a form of entertainment in addition to finding meaningful connections. Central to this shift is the growing phenomenon of gamification, the incorporation of game-like elements, into non-game contexts. This article proposes to explore the gamification of online dating, examining how these game mechanics shape user behaviours, influence romantic choices, and impact relationship outcomes. By analysing the ways in which dating platforms integrate game-inspired features, this study will also assess the implications of gamified experiences for the nature of dating in the digital age. Online dating platforms have revolutionised traditional dating practices, offering a more efficient and accessible way to meet potential partners. Over the past decade, however, a significant trend has emerged: the gamification of dating experiences. In the context of online dating, elements such as swiping, rankings, badges, and instant feedback have become common features that encourage user interaction. This article seeks to investigate the relationship between these gamified elements and the broader implications for identity construction, decision-making, and romantic engagement in online dating environments. Furthermore, this work aims to highlight potential implications of future gamified elements, such as the inclusion of immersive technology. The concept of gamification has gained significant academic attention across various fields, including education, marketing, and health. In the realm of online dating, previous research has explored the impact of swiping behaviour on attraction and decision-making, but there is a lack of comprehensive studies examining the gamified aspects of dating platforms. This article will draw on literature from social psychology, game studies, and digital culture to contextualise how gamification functions in online dating, and its implications on future romantic behaviour. This article will adopt a qualitative approach, utilising original research data to explore user experiences with gamification. These qualitative insights will help illuminate how users perceive gamified features, how these elements influence their dating behaviour, and whether they believe gamification enhances or detracts from the dating experience. The article will discuss the implications of gamification on the dating experience, exploring both the positive and negative consequences. On one hand, gamified features may enhance user engagement and create a sense of excitement. On the other hand, gamification may encourage superficial interactions, reduce the perceived authenticity of online connections, and foster a "game-like" mindset where users approach relationships with a transactional, competitive, or fleeting attitudes. The gamification of online dating is a complex and rapidly evolving phenomenon that has profound implications for how people approach relationships in the digital age. By examining how gamified elements impact user behaviour, romantic expectations, and identity construction, this article will contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between digital technology, romance, and play. The findings will be relevant to academics of digital culture, psychology, and social interaction, as well as to designers and marketers seeking to understand the effects of gamification on user engagement and experience.

1. Introduction

The emergence of online dating platforms has profoundly transformed the ways in which individuals engage with romantic relationships, introducing new dimensions to both the pursuit of meaningful connections and the pursuit of entertainment (David & Cambre, 2016). As users increasingly treat these platforms not merely as tools for dating, but as interactive environments offering elements of amusement, this shift aligns with the broader trend of gamification, the integration of game-like features into non-game contexts (Rodrigues et al., 2019). Gamification, which has received significant academic attention across various domains, has been extensively studied in fields such as education (Zeybek & Saygi, 2023), marketing (Hofacker et al., 2016; Lucassen & Jansen, 2014), and health (Edwards et al., 2016). Within the context of online dating, the bulk of existing research has centred on individual user behaviours, such as swiping, and the impact of these actions on attraction and decision-making processes (David & Cambre, 2016). Despite this, a notable gap persists in the literature regarding the broader implications of gamified features within dating platforms, particularly in terms of how these elements influence the construction of romantic relationships.

In parallel, the growing integration of advanced screen technologies into the dating experience raises critical questions about how these technologies reshape users' understanding of intimacy. As dating platforms continue to blur the boundaries between physical and digital realms, they offer new modes of interaction that have the potential to redefine traditional notions of connection and closeness (Atkinson, 2019; Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Chambers, 2021). One such development is the advent of "future screens", wherein users engage with a digital interface that adapts to their preferences and behaviours, creating a dynamic experience that anticipates their romantic desires. This evolving digital landscape introduces complexities that challenge conventional understandings of intimacy, suggesting the need for further research. Specifically, there is a pressing need to examine how gamified features within online dating platforms not only shape users' behaviours but also fundamentally transform the very nature of intimacy itself.

In addition to existing critiques, the dynamics described throughout this paper can be further illuminated through the combined application of Ultra-Realist criminology and Octalysis gamification theory. Ultra-Realism, rooted in transcendental materialism and late-capitalist subjectivity (Hall & Winlow, 2015; Winlow & Hall, 2013), emphasises how harm emerges from the interaction between structural economic conditions, commodified identities, and the internalisation of market logics. This framework argues that digital platforms actively shape desiring dispositions, creating subjects who increasingly pursue stimulation, recognition, and emotional intensity through mediated interactions. Octalysis (Chou, 2015), by contrast, provides a micro-level motivational map explaining how specific platform design features harness and intensify human drives such as competition, reward-seeking, unpredictability, scarcity, and social validation. When combined, these theories reveal that online dating platforms do not merely facilitate connection but function as behaviour-shaping environments that monetise desire and cultivate emotionally volatile digital subjects. This integrated lens provides a more comprehensive explanation of why gamified dating environments produce such acute experiences of alienation, addictive cycles, emotional harm, and relational instability.

2. How the Digital has Shaped Modern Relationships and Recreation

The development of dating practices and leisure activities are intricately linked, with both reflecting broader societal shifts, technological advancements, and changing cultural norms (Bandinelli, 2022). Over time, both dating and leisure have evolved from highly structured and controlled practices to more individualised and informal activities (Hill, 2024; Stoicescu, 2019). This transformation reveals much about societal values, the changing nature of personal relationships, and the increasing freedom individuals have to shape their own experiences (Finkel et al., 2012). Examining the development of dating and leisure together highlights how both have adapted to new social dynamics and how these shifts have affected the way people interact, form relationships, and spend their time. In earlier societies, dating and leisure were often heavily regulated by family expectations, religious norms, and social structures (Bergström, 2022). Leisure activities were frequently communal, with social events such as church gatherings, family picnics, and local fairs (Rojek, 1995; 1999; Stebbins, 2009) serving as opportunities for both entertainment and potential courtship (Lamont, 2013; Niehuis, 2008). Similarly, dating practices were formal and regulated by cultural norms, where courting was often done with the supervision of family members, and interactions between young men and women were highly prescribed (Bogle, 2008; Timmermans and Courtois, 2018). These structured forms of dating and leisure reflected a society that valued order, respectability, and clear social roles (Haywood and Ghaill, 2003; Lamont, 2013).

Over the course of the 20th century, profound societal changes including the rise of individualism, urbanisation, and the rapid expansion of new technologies began to reshape the practices surrounding both dating and leisure (Kennedy, 2017; Winlow and Hall, 2013). Central to this transformation was an increasing emphasis on personal autonomy, which led to more informal and individualised approaches to dating (Garcia et al., 2012; Timmermans and Courtois, 2018). People began to exercise greater freedom in choosing their partners, with minimal familial oversight or societal expectations dictating their choices (Bogle, 2008; Illouz, 2007; 2019). This shift paralleled the rise of digital technologies (High et al., 2024), especially the proliferation of mass media such as television and film, and later the Internet, which played a significant role in shaping individuals' understandings of love, relationships, and romantic expectations (Bergström, 2022; Crary, 2022). As these technologies spread, they not only influenced cultural norms but also contributed to a growing shift toward the pursuit of personal fulfilment, often at the expense of traditional notions of social conformity (Fullick, 2013; Homnack, 2015; Liew et al., 2023; Lutz and Ranzini, 2017). Leisure, too, underwent a radical transformation during this period, moving from structured, community-centred activities to more individualised, often digital, forms of entertainment. The advent of mass media, and later the Internet, introduced new ways for individuals to spend their free time, providing access to a broader range of leisure activities (López-Sintas et al., 2017). In the mid-20th century, the rise of consumer culture further accelerated this shift, as entertainment options grew more diverse and commercially accessible, marking the beginning of leisure's commercialisation (Raymen and Smith, 2015, 2019; Smith, 2014; Stebbins, 2009). Digital platforms, particularly those powered by the Internet, played a crucial role in reconfiguring leisure practices, enabling individuals to curate their experiences in ways that were previously unimaginable (Hamad and Jia, 2022; Zhou et al., 2024).

The onset of the digital age brought about significant changes in dating practices, which became especially evident with the development of online dating platforms

(Bergström, 2022 Crary, 2013; Illouz, 2007, 2019; LeFebvre, 2017). Websites such as Match.com and, more recently, Tinder revolutionised how individuals meet potential partners, creating new opportunities for connection that transcend geographic and social boundaries. These platforms, initially designed for dating, have laid the groundwork for the growing convergence of dating and leisure in the digital realm (Blackwell et al., 2014; Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2020; Finkel et al., 2012; Gottschalk, 2018; Timmermans and Courtois, 2018). Furthermore, the proliferation of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter further altered the dynamics of romantic engagement. These digital spaces allowed individuals to cultivate and curate their online identities, providing new forms of self-expression and interaction that extended into both social and romantic contexts (Beer and Burrows, 2007, 2010; Ellison, 2007). In addition to these shifts, dating and leisure practices became increasingly intertwined through platforms that promoted shared interests or activities (Finkel et al., 2012; Whitty and Buchanan, 2009). Dating apps, for instance, increasingly allowed users to meet based on common hobbies or experiences, blurring the lines between romantic pursuit and recreational activities. As a result, dating itself began to be framed as a form of leisure, with couples now meeting through apps or social media based on mutual interests, often in virtual or real-world spaces (Dobson and Ogolsky, 2021). In this context, relationships themselves became a form of digital entertainment, reshaped into a spectacle consumed by a broader audience (Heino et al., 2010; Illouz, 2007). This intersection of dating with digital leisure spaces therefore raises critical questions regarding the authenticity of modern relationships, particularly in light of the role that public personas and curated digital identities play in private romantic engagements.

Viewed through an Ultra-Realist lens, these transformations are not merely cultural but structurally generated. The rise of digital dating coincides with the intensification of neoliberal individualisation, the collapse of stable communal spaces, and the marketisation of identity (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2007). Ultra-Realism argues that individuals increasingly rely on commodified forms of leisure and app-based romantic encounters to generate fleeting moments of recognition and relief (Hall & Winlow, 2015). When analysed through Octalysis, this shift is strengthened by platform design that deliberately activates Core Drives such as Scarcity, Accomplishment, and Unpredictability, engineering environments where users are compelled to pursue constant emotional stimulation and reward feedback (Chou, 2015). Thus, digital dating becomes a site in which economic precarity, cultural consumerism, and behavioural design converge to produce a relationship marketplace characterised by disposability, intensity, and emotional volatility.

Despite the new freedoms and opportunities for self-expression these developments offer, there are significant concerns about the informalisation and commercialisation of dating and leisure (Baxter, 2013; Constable, 2009; David and Cambre, 2016; Fullick, 2013; Heino et al., 2010; Hess and Flores; 2016; LeFebvre, 2017; Timmerman and Courtois; 2018). For example, the rise of "hook-up" culture reflects a move away from traditional dating rituals, favouring casual, often fleeting encounters over long-term commitments. This shift has sparked debates about its potential impact on the values historically associated with enduring relationships (Bogle, 2008; Braboy Jackson et al., 2011; Lutz and Ranzini, 2017; Sales, 2015; Thompson, 2018; Vera Cruz et al., 2024). Similarly, the commodification of leisure through apps, streaming services, and social media platforms has led to a highly curated, at times superficial, understanding of enjoyment and fulfilment (Stebbins, 2001; 2015). This transformation can result in the normalisation of transient experiences,

with both leisure and dating being increasingly treated as disposable, rather than meaningful, pursuits that require long-term investment or personal growth (Homnack, 2015; Stebbins, 2015; Vera Cruz, 2024; Wong AnKee and Yazdanifard, 2015). The rise of casual encounters, combined with the pervasive influence of digital platforms, has the potential to foster social isolation or unhealthy relationship patterns. The relentless pursuit of constant stimulation whether through entertainment or romantic experiences can also contribute to feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction, emotions that are often exacerbated by the very technologies designed to facilitate these pursuits (Homnack, 2015; Illouz, 2019; Nowland et al., 2017; Smith and Alheneidi, 2023).

At its core, the intersection of digital technologies with dating and leisure practices highlights a society increasingly oriented toward immediate gratification and personal pleasure (Birnholtz et al., 2014; Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012; Sutko and De Souza e Silva, 2011). However, this trend also points to the potential neglect of deeper, more enduring forms of connection and fulfilment (Fetters and Tiffany, 2020; Klein, 2022; Wade, 2017). Simultaneously, these evolving practices underscore a growing emphasis on autonomy, choice, and self-determined enjoyment (Fisher, 2009; Hall, 2012; McCreanor et al., 2013), offering the possibility of creating more inclusive, diverse spaces where people can challenge traditional norms, explore new identities, and express themselves in ways that were once unimaginable (Wong AnKee and Yazdanifard, 2015).

While these developments offer new avenues for freedom and self-expression, they also raise pressing questions about the nature of human connection, the role of authenticity in relationships, and the pursuit of lasting fulfilment (Strubel and Petrie, 2017). The integration of immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) into dating practices, while offering novel modes of engagement, also challenges traditional notions of intimacy and emotional connection. As these technologies evolve, so too will the ways in which individuals navigate both romantic and recreational interactions, influenced by ongoing technological innovation and shifting societal norms (Glover, 2024). Therefore, implications for authentic relational experiences in such environments warrant ongoing scrutiny and critical examination.

3. Methodology

Previous criminological research on online dating has predominantly focused on the direct harms experienced by its users. These harms often include, but are not limited to, unwanted sexual advances and aggression (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2015; Hakala, 2015; Hess and Flores, 2016; Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012); misogyny and sexual harassment (Anderson et al., 2020; Barton and Mabry, 2018; Jane, 2016; Lundquist & Curlington, 2019; Thompson, 2018; Timmermans and Courtois, 2018), romance fraud (Cross et al., 2018), and sexual assault (Ahillon, 2019). While such research has provided valuable insights, it has often overlooked the broader factors influencing users' experiences, particularly the role of technological advancements in shaping online dating dynamics. By shifting the focus to these structural and technological influences, this research aims to highlight how digital innovation may not only exacerbate existing harms but also generate new, socially corrosive issues. It further explores how online dating, leisure, gamification, and relationship construction are deeply intertwined due to the enmeshment of the digital with everyday life (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Cochoy, 2017; Gottschalk, 2018; Koch and Miles, 2020).

To capture the nuanced, subjective experiences that shape user interactions with dating apps, a qualitative approach was employed (Johnson et al., 2023). Participants were selected based on the criteria of being over 18, actively using online dating platforms, and residing in Plymouth. The final sample included 19 individuals: 14 females and 5 males, including one bisexual participant, one gay male, and three lesbians. Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews lasting between 1–3 hours. These extended interviews allowed for rapport-building and the collection of rich, in-depth data about participants' experiences, while supplemental netnographic engagement with social media groups provided insight into digital interactions and content. This combination of methods offered a holistic perspective, bridging the real and virtual worlds and highlighting the reciprocal influence of each on user experiences.

The interview data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022), enabling themes to emerge directly from the participants' accounts rather than being imposed a priori. This approach, informed by critical realism (Bhaskar, 2020) and ultra-realist criminology (Hall & Winlow, 2015), allowed the study to capture the interplay between individual experiences and the broader structural forces shaping them. The analysis revealed patterns of harm, emotional labour, and behavioural adaptation that would have been difficult to identify through quantitative methods alone, demonstrating the value of in-depth qualitative research in understanding online dating dynamics.

Building on these findings, this study introduces the Ultra-Realist Octalysis Framework for Digital Dating Harm (URODDH), which synthesises structural criminological analysis with behavioural design theory. At the macro level, Ultra-Realism explains how the political economy of late capitalism shapes cultural expectations around intimacy, fostering subjects oriented toward stimulation, recognition, and rapid emotional consumption (Hall & Winlow, 2015). At the micro level, Octalysis accounts for how platform architectures operationalise these tendencies by activating motivational drives embedded in gamified systems (Chou, 2015). Together, URODDH conceptualises dating platforms as behavioural-economic environments in which user subjectivity, emotional labour, and interpersonal relations are patterned to maximise engagement.

The framework identifies three interrelated layers of harm:

- Structural Harm – the socio-economic and political conditions underpinning digital dating, including commodification of intimacy, competitive individualism, and precarity (Illouz, 2007; Raymen & Smith, 2019).
- Design-Induced Motivational Harm – the activation of Octalysis Core Drives such as Scarcity, Accomplishment, and Unpredictability, creating compulsive usage loops and intensifying emotional volatility.
- Subjective Harm – the experiential consequences for users, encompassing alienation, identity fragmentation, emotional turbulence, and manipulated desire.

By integrating these layers, URODDH frames online dating platforms not as neutral intermediaries but as systems that actively shape, discipline, and monetise emotional life. This conceptual lens situates the harms observed in the study as emergent outcomes of both structural socio-economic forces and platform-level behavioural design mechanisms, illustrating the intertwined realities of digital and offline experiences in contemporary dating.

4. The Influence of Gamified Elements on User Behaviour and Engagement

The integration of gamified elements in online dating platforms has significantly transformed the landscape of digital romance. Gamification, the application of game-design principles such as rewards, progression, and competition, aims to enhance user engagement and interaction (Mackinnon, 2022; Nader, 2024). In the context of online dating, these elements are strategically incorporated to shape user behaviour, foster consistent platform engagement, and optimize match-making outcomes (Cicchirillo et al., 2025). However, while gamification has proven effective in maintaining user interest, it raises questions about its long-term impact on user experiences, relationships, and perceptions of intimacy.

Beyond psychological and behavioural effects, gamified design must also be understood in relation to the broader attention and distraction economy that structures digital platform capitalism. Dating apps, like social media platforms, monetise user engagement rather than relational success. Their profitability depends on sustaining cycles of swiping, matching and messaging, not on facilitating long-term connection (Bandinelli and Bandinelli, 2021; Rochat et al., 2023). As such, gamified mechanics, scarcity, unpredictability, intermittent rewards, competitive ranking, function as tools for capturing and retaining attention, generating data, and extending users' presence within the app.

From an Ultra-Realist perspective, this reflects the wider dynamics of libidinal capitalism, wherein platforms capitalise on subjects' desire for stimulation, novelty and recognition (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Winlow and Hall, 2013). Octalysis helps clarify how these profit motives become operationalised at the micro level: features that maximise retention (Drive 7 Unpredictability, Drive 2 Accomplishment, and Drive 6 Scarcity) are precisely those that intensify emotional volatility and compulsive interaction (Chou, 2015). In this sense, gamification is not simply a design choice, but a commercial strategy embedded in the political economy of the attention market.

Online dating platforms have long struggled with the challenge of sustaining user engagement. With an increasing number of competitors in the market, platforms must consistently innovate to retain their users (Huang et al., 2024). Gamified elements have been introduced to address this issue, tapping into the fundamental human desire for achievement, recognition, and competition (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Wakeman, 2017), gamification uses structures such as rewards, progression, swipes, and competition to encourages sustained interaction (Mackinnon, 2022; Nader, 2024; Cicchirillo et al., 2025) through positive reinforcement (Hand, 2017; Gardiner, 2012; Timmermans and De Caluwe, 2017; Vera Cruz et al., 2024). By providing users with a sense of accomplishment and progression, dating apps make the experience more interactive and rewarding (David and Cambre, 2016; Timmermans and De Caluwé, 2017; Wu and Trottier, 2022). However, while these features maintain interest, participant accounts reveal how gamification can foster compulsive engagement, superficial connection, and misrepresentation.

Through setting up systems where users receive instant gratification through positive reinforcement, dating platforms engage users in repetitive behaviours, often leading to prolonged app usage. One participant, a 34yr old, bisexual female acknowledged this ease and prolonged use:

Participant 3: *Well, I've been using them [dating apps] for a few years now, not like constantly, but on and off. I just find them easier to use, like, I can look at and talk to people anytime,*

anywhere and I don't have to guess who is interested in me. It's clear [through likes]. I can sit and swipe for hours, and I prefer that. It's so hard trying to meet people now, and I've always been bad at knowing when someone likes me, especially women, and I don't exactly find it easy to flirt in person either. So, yeah, this way I guess, I guess I get to also see how many likes and messages and how much interest there is too.

This illustrates how swiping, likes, and feedback activate Octalysis Core Drives, Accomplishment (Drive 2), Social Influence (Drive 5), Scarcity (Drive 6), and Unpredictability (Drive 7) thus creating repetitive engagement cycles (Chou, 2015). These loops resemble gambling systems, generating both gratification and compulsion (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). This was also noted within a social media thread on a page called "To Catch a Catfish", which is designed for users to interact with one another about potentially fraudulent profiles, as well as any concerning behaviour from other online dating app users. Within this thread one user posted an image of a male asking if anyone else was speaking to him as she felt their connection could be progressing toward a serious relationship. One group member commented:

He's on all of the dating sites, I see him all of the time! Has been for years! Probably just likes all the attention he gets 🙄.

This evidences not only the competitive and superficial dynamics, amplified by gamified design but also the addictive nature of online dating platforms, and the impact of their instantaneity with individuals focusing on the thrill of the interaction rather than the depth of connection (Varsava, 2017; Wiederhold, 2015). Additionally, this comment highlights another critical gamified element within many online dating platforms, competition. Features like ranking systems, badges, or the ability to see how many people have liked a profile introduce an element of social comparison (García-Jurado et al., 2021). Users are not only interacting with potential matches but also competing for attention and validation. This gamified competition is particularly evident in apps like Tinder, where the "swipe" feature places users in a competitive environment, constantly comparing their desirability and social status with others (Gottschalk, 2018; Hakala, 2015; Thompson, 2018). While competition can encourage users to present their best selves, updating profiles, uploading more attractive photos, and engaging in more frequent interactions (Egan, 2003; Fullick, 2013; Singh, 2004; Toma and Hancock, 2010; Whitty and Carr, 2006), this can also lead to negative outcomes. The pressure to win in the dating "game" can result in users curating idealised versions of themselves, leading to a misrepresentation of identity and, consequently, the potential for disappointment and dissatisfaction when real-world interactions fail to meet the expectations set by the gamified interface (Bandinelli and Gandini, 2022; Chen et al., 2023; Ellison et al., 2006; Fullick, 2013; Hobbs et al., 2017; Homnack, 2015; Wong AnKee and Yazdanifard, 2015). Users' focus on competition and attention mirrors structural pressures identified in Ultra-Realism. Dating apps operate within libidinal capitalism, cultivating subjects oriented toward stimulation and recognition to offset boredom, alienation, and precarity (Hall and Winlow, 2018; Raymen and Smith, 2019). For many of the participant the experience of misrepresentation and dissatisfaction had occurred numerable times as evidenced by participant 18, a 24year old male, heterosexual student.

Participant 8: *I think one of the most difficult things with judging connection online is that you don't really know who you're connecting with, not really, not until you meet. I wouldn't*

say I've had any really bad encounters where the person that I met was nothing like their profile, but there have been times where they've used old photos, edited or filtered pictures you know. I do remember I met this one girl who blatantly lied about her interests too. She said she adventurous and loved going on dog walks and that, when we met, I asked where her favourite places to walk were and she just started laughing. I know they may not seem like big things, but if you're willing to lie or even twist the truth a little, what does that say if you get into a relationship?

This phenomenon is often referred to as the "paradox of choice", where users are faced with an overwhelming number of options but are unable to find lasting or meaningful connections due to the shallow nature of interactions spurred by competition (Pronk and Denissen, 2019). While gamified elements in online dating platforms are designed to enhance user engagement, they also have complex psychological effects. The constant pursuit of validation through likes, matches, and competition can lead to an unhealthy fixation on external approval, which in turn can affect an individual's self-esteem and emotional well-being (Berdychevsky and Carr, 2020; Berdychevsky et al., 2013; Tepper, 2000). The "dopamine loop" generated by gamification may also contribute to addictive patterns of behaviour, where users engage with the platform excessively, hoping for the next reward or validation. This cycle can distort users' perceptions of dating, turning it into a game rather than a genuine social activity (Abolfahti and Santamaria, 2020 and Albury, 2017; David and Cambre, 2016). Another participant, a 19yr old male student elaborated on their use of the platform Tinder:

Participant 6: *I use it all the time, it's sounds bad probably. I'll go on it when I wake up, on my way to uni, in lectures, it's definitely addictive. Me and my housemate's even use it at pre's [predrinks] checking each other's profiles, swiping for each other, betting on who can get the most matches. So yeah, I dunno it's definitely a habit now, almost like a game. I often use all of my 100 swipes in a day so quickly as well, just because like I don't even really realise, I've swiped that much. It's like oops all my lives have gone; do you know what I mean?*

It is this emphasis on instant gratification and short-term rewards that can hinder the development of meaningful, long-term relationships (Illouz, 2007). Users may become more focused on the immediate excitement of new matches rather than the deeper emotional investment that sustained relationships require, where users are viewed as "points" or "achievements" rather than individuals thus contributing to feelings of emotional disconnection and dissatisfaction (Aron, 2012; Diener and Seligman, 2002; Finkel et al., 2012). The "paradox of choice" further amplifies superficiality: endless options paired with gamified reward structures encourage rapid cycling through potential matches, hindering meaningful connections (Pronk and Denissen, 2019). The combination of gamification and Ultra-Realist socio-economic pressures explains why users remain engaged despite dissatisfaction and fleeting connection. From an Ultra-Realist perspective, these gamified dynamics reflect broader socio-economic logics in which individuals are conditioned to internalise competitive behaviours, instrumental rationality, and the perpetual search for stimulating experiences (Raymen and Smith, 2019).

The user testimonies in this study reveal subjectivities shaped by what Hall and Winlow (2018) describe as libidinal capitalism, wherein individuals seek emotional intensity to offset feelings of boredom, alienation, and existential drift. When analysed via the Octalysis framework, key features of dating apps such as limitless swiping, real-time

feedback, match counts, and reward loops, activate Drives 2 (Accomplishment), 5 (Social Influence), 6 (Scarcity), and 7 (Unpredictability). The result is a self-perpetuating behavioural cycle that mirrors the reward structures of gambling and fast-paced mobile gaming (Chou, 2015; Nieborg and Poell, 2018), fostering compulsive engagement even when users report dissatisfaction. This aligns with Ultra-Realism's argument that harmful behaviours persist not because individuals are unaware of the harm (see Žižek's cultural injunction to enjoy), but because the platform architecture provides momentary relief and identity-affirming stimuli. It is apparent that these features have transformed the dating experience into an interactive, reward-based activity that sustains user interest in the short term. However, the long-term effects of these gamified elements raise concerns regarding their impact on the authenticity of connections, emotional well-being, and perceptions of intimacy. As online dating platforms continue to innovate, it is crucial to balance the mechanics of gamification with an understanding of its psychological consequences, ensuring that users can engage in meaningful and fulfilling relationships in a way that transcends the gamified elements of the platform.

Ultra-Realism suggests that immersive dating technologies represent an intensification of the market's ability to shape desire by producing hyper-stimulating digital environments that compete with, and potentially overshadow, offline relational life (Atkinson, 2019). VR and AR spaces extend the logics of consumer capitalism into affective interaction, enabling platforms to manipulate desire through sensory immersion and personalised digital architectures. Octalysis helps identify why these environments are particularly potent: VR dating leverages Core Drive 3 (Empowerment of Creativity) through avatar design, 1 (Epic Meaning) via immersive shared experiences, and 7 (Unpredictability) through dynamic virtual environments. These systems create deeply engaging experiences that may surpass the emotional resonance of physical dating. Ultra-Realism warns, however, that such technological intensification risks deepening subjective fragmentation, as individuals oscillate between curated virtual identities and less gratifying offline realities (Chou, 2015; González-Padilla et al., 2025).

Ultra-Realism offers a critical framework for understanding why the emotional and behavioural patterns observed in this study emerge so consistently across digital dating contexts. Rather than viewing problematic engagement as the product of individual deficits, Ultra-Realism locates these harms within the wider structural and cultural conditions of late capitalism, including precarity, fragmented social bonds, commodified identities, and the persistent search for excitement and meaning (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Winlow and Hall, 2013). The dating app environment aligns closely with what Ultra-Realist scholars describe as a libidinal economy, wherein individuals pursue short bursts of stimulation, validation, or emotional relief to counteract boredom, alienation, and ontological insecurity (Raymen and Smith, 2019). The compulsive swiping, constant comparison, and rapid transitions between potential partners identified by participants therefore reflect deeper socio-economic pressures that shape desire and self-worth.

Gamification theory, particularly Chou's (2015) Octalysis framework provides a complementary micro-level account of how digital platforms operationalise these conditions through design. Core Drives such as Unpredictability, Accomplishment, Scarcity, and Social Influence are activated through swipe mechanics, limited-time boosts, algorithmic visibility, and match notifications. These gamified structures generate reinforcement loops that resemble gambling systems (Nieborg and Poell, 2018), producing a cycle of reward anticipation and emotional instability. What Ultra-Realism adds is an understand-

ing of why these mechanisms are so effective: users are already primed, through wider social and economic conditions, to seek intense but fleeting affective experiences that offer temporary relief from everyday pressures.

Combined, Ultra-Realism and Octalysis reveal that dating apps function not just as tools for connection but as behaviour-shaping environments that monetise attention, desire, and emotional insecurity. They demonstrate that dating platforms amplify pre-existing vulnerabilities by providing rapid, gamified routes to recognition and stimulation. This integrated theoretical lens is essential for interpreting the findings of this study and for understanding why the harms associated with digital dating persist despite widespread user dissatisfaction.

5. Technological Developments in Online Dating: The Use of Technology

I t is evident that recent technological advancements have significantly transformed the landscape of online dating, and that the inclusion of gamified structures have impacted the way in which individuals interact with both the applications and each other. Whilst traditionally, dating platforms have primarily utilised basic digital tools such as text-based communication and photos to facilitate connections between users (David and Cambre, 2016; Finkle et al., 2012), there is now an advent of immersive technologies specifically Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Mixed Reality (MR), which are beginning to redefine how individuals interact in the digital dating space (Bailey, 2017).

VR, AR, and MR each offer unique possibilities for enhancing online dating experiences. VR technology, for example, allows users to immerse themselves in fully virtual environments, offering the opportunity to simulate face-to-face interactions without the need for physical presence (Wiederhold, 2016). Through VR headsets, users can create avatars and engage in lifelike simulations, participating in dates, social gatherings, or even entire virtual worlds designed for interaction (Bailey, 2017; Sharabl, 2022). The sense of presence facilitated by VR can enhance feelings of connection and intimacy, which are often challenging to establish in text-based or video-chat settings (Sharma and Muise, 2025). Similarly, AR overlays digital elements onto the physical world, providing users with the ability to interact with virtual components in their real-world environment (Appel et al., 2023). In online dating, this could translate into features like virtual avatars interacting with users in their homes or AR-enabled apps that enhance profiles with interactive elements (Wang et al., 2023). MR, which blends elements of both VR and AR, takes this concept a step further by allowing users to interact with both the real and virtual world simultaneously, offering a richer and more dynamic experience. MR can enable users to see virtual profiles or avatars in real-time within physical spaces, further blurring the lines between the virtual and real worlds (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Chambers, 2021; Partner, 2020). It is this notion of connection and intimacy irrespective of distance, or time, which many participants found alluring in the context of online dating, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw a surge in the use of dating applications (De' et al., 2020).

Participant 9: *Well I had actually planned to meet someone just before the lockdown hit, and when they said we needed to isolate I was like "oh shit". I really liked them, and we'd been talking for a couple weeks, and I was excited to actually physically see them and connect. It*

was like a huge come down because I didn't know when we'd see each other. Luckily, we were able to do a sort of video date and ended up spending loads of time like that really.

Participant 4: I'm a busy person you know, I have a full-time job, kids, a whole life. I don't have time to get all dressed up, go to all these places and try to meet someone. I hate being single though, I do get lonely, and it's sad. I can't say the apps have worked their magic for me yet, but the option to do it [date] in my own time and from home, when I'm most lonely, it just works for me. I can chat to someone, build a connection, even some sexual intimacy, though it's not really physical it's on my terms.

Immersive technologies, when combined with gamification, intensify reward-driven engagement. Octalysis Core Drives of Empowerment of Creativity (Drive 3), Epic Meaning (Drive 1), and Unpredictability (Drive 7) are activated via avatars, shared experiences, and dynamic virtual environments. It is therefore evident that one of the key benefits of online dating, and the inclusion of immersive technologies is the potential to create deeper emotional connections between users (Appel et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023), something which traditional text and image-based communication can often lack, offering only a superficial sense of engagement (Varsava, 2017). With VR, for instance, users can have "real" experiences with potential partners, navigating virtual environments and engaging in shared activities that promote authentic interaction (Bailey, 2017). The ability to simulate face-to-face interactions in a virtual world could foster a greater sense of presence and closeness compared to the traditional online dating experience, where users rely on pictures and brief descriptions (Wiederhold, 2016). This could provide a potential solution for social barriers, such as the lack of physicality in the dating process, which often induces feelings of apprehension, sweaty palms, and tied tongues (Frazzetto, 2009). Additionally, for individuals who experience anxiety in face-to-face interactions or feel self-conscious about their physical appearance, VR or AR can offer a way to engage without the same level of vulnerability (Spytska, 2024). Furthermore, for those with disabilities, these technologies could offer a more accessible and inclusive platform for connection, eliminating the physical limitations of real-world dating (Stendal et al., 2010).

Despite these potential benefits, the integration of immersive technology in online dating raises several ethical and psychological concerns. The ability to create and interact with avatars that are not bound by physical reality could lead to a disconnection between virtual and real-world identities. Users may become overly attached to their avatars, blurring the lines between their digital selves and physical reality. This dissonance could lead to issues of identity confusion and distorted self-perception, particularly if the avatars present an idealised version of the user that is unattainable in real life (González-Padilla et al., 2025). Furthermore, the emotional effects of immersive dating experiences are not fully understood. While they can create engaging and lifelike experiences (Bailey, 2017; Wiederhold, 2016), the emotional depth of these connections may not translate to the physical world (Varsava, 2017). Users may experience a form of "disembodiment" or emotional detachment, where the virtual relationships lack the tangible and sensory elements that come with real-world intimacy (Moura et al., 2021), a concern already established in research surrounding traditional dating platforms (Finkel et al., 2012; Varsava, 2017; Wong AnKee and Yazdanifard, 2015). Additionally, the anonymity afforded by avatars and virtual personas, much like the freedom to curate an idealistic dating profile (Hakala, 2015; Hess and Flores, 2016; Homnack, 2015; Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012; Toma and Hancock, 2010) may encourage deception or

misrepresentation, leading to distrust or disappointment when users meet in person (Schultze and Leahy, 2009). This sense of disappointment was highlighted throughout this study, with participants acknowledging the opportunity for curation throughout the dating process.

> Participant 2: *I guess because you have time, so anyone can say anything. Like I could message someone in the morning, they read it and then they have as much time to think about how they want to respond. Its not like a normal conversation, they could literally make anything up, tell you what you want to hear, then once you meet, they already know all of your likes and dislikes so can try and go around them if they really want to.*

> Participant 18: *Sometimes it's like scrolling through a sea of the same pictures, the same style, the same haircut, the same bio's because everyone has this image of what perfect is, and what's going to get them the most attention. The sad thing is that they're not going to get anyone, not long term anyway. Who's gonna want to be with someone who's not being themselves, its shit for them and the person talking to them, like just be honest.*

It is evident that the integration of gamified structures, and immersive technology into online dating platforms has the potential to revolutionise the way people connect and interact in the digital world. These technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for engagement, offering users a chance to build more immersive and meaningful relationships. However, as with any technological advancement, the rise of immersive dating experiences is not without its challenges. Issues surrounding identity, privacy, and emotional well-being must be carefully considered to ensure that these innovations contribute positively to the evolving landscape of online relationships. These reflections illustrate the tension between engagement and authenticity, whereby immersive gamified environments enhance perceived connection, yet can encourage curated self-presentation, superficial interaction, and transactional relationality.

6. The Long-Term Implications of Immersive Technology on Online Dating

As immersive technologies continue to develop apace, and become increasingly integrated into the online dating industry, they also introduce significant ethical and safety concerns. For developers and marketers involved in immersive technology, understanding the long-term implications of these innovations is crucial in ensuring that products and platforms are not only engaging but also safe and responsible. Immersive online dating platforms promise to replicate the sensory and emotional experiences of in-person interactions. As users engage with virtual avatars and environments, the line between the digital and physical worlds becomes increasingly blurred (Bailey, 2017). For developers, this raises critical questions about how to establish clear boundaries and enforce ethical behaviour in virtual spaces. In traditional online dating, communication is often mediated through well-established norms of what constitutes acceptable interaction (Hakala, 2015; Hess and Flores, 2015; Thompson, 2018). However, in immersive environments, where physical proximity and movement are simulated, users may feel emboldened to push boundaries in ways that might not be socially acceptable in the physical world (Karapatakis, 2025; Porta et al., 2023).

One of the most pressing concerns surrounding immersive technology in online dating is the potential for virtual sexual assault (Henry and Powell, 2015; Karapatakis, 2025) In these spaces, unwanted interactions such as an avatar engaging in inappropriate touch or sexual gestures could cause significant emotional harm to victims, even if physical harm is not possible (Trotter, 2024; Vallance, 2024). For tech developers, addressing the issue of consent and harassment in virtual environments must be a priority. Creating systems for explicit consent, where users can clearly communicate their boundaries and indicate whether they are comfortable with specific interactions, is essential for preventing virtual sexual assault. Furthermore, developers need to consider the psychological impact of these interactions (Henry and Powell, 2015). Even though virtual sexual assault may not involve physical touch, the emotional and psychological effects on victims can be profound (Vallance, 2024). This can be likened to the receival of unsolicited images, or sexual messages on traditional dating platforms which are arguably comparable to real life street harassment (Hakala, 2015; Thompson, 2018). For several of the female participants the impact of these experiences were apparent:

> Participant 4: *I don't know what it is with them [men] sending dick pics, its gross! They'd never just flash you in public, would they? Oh, and don't get me started with some of the ridiculous messages I've had asking for a shag, or for me to send naked pictures, it really gets to me. Sometimes I just think, why am I bothering? Surely, I'm worth more than just sex.*

> Participant 15: *People literally just use it [online dating] for sex now. I think I get more messages asking for sex or making some sort of rude, and ludicrous comment about me. It's depressing, and I guess kind of ironic, like I use these [dating apps] to find someone to be with, connect with, and actually I just get treated like some sort of sex toy, like I don't matter.*

Within the realm of traditional dating platforms, an emphasis on image, and connotations of sex and instant gratification are regularly normalised (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012; Vera Cruz et al., 2024). As virtual interactions become increasingly realistic, the potential for objectification and commodification of individuals, particularly women grows (Kteily and Landry, 2022). In immersive spaces, users may feel empowered to treat others as mere objects for gratification, dehumanising them in the process, exacerbating pre-existing issues of sexual harassment and inequality that are already prevalent in online and offline dating environments (Derk, 2016; Finkel et al., 2012; Hess and Flores, 2015).

As immersive technologies continue to evolve, developers and marketers in the online dating industry must prioritize ethical development practices and responsible marketing strategies to help mitigate these harms, and the development for new future harms. Tech developers have a responsibility to build platforms that prioritize user safety, privacy, and consent. This involves not only creating technological safeguards to prevent harassment and exploitation but also considering the broader social and cultural implications of these technologies. For developers, addressing this challenge requires a deep understanding of the social dynamics at play in immersive environments, including broader influences of commodification, addiction and societal ideologies. Features that promote mutual respect, inclusivity, and diversity should be integral to the design of virtual dating platforms, as should working closely with psychologists, sociologists, and other experts to ensure that their platforms do not inadvertently encourage the normalization of exploitation or harmful behaviours. Marketers, too, have a critical role to play

in shaping how immersive dating platforms are perceived. By emphasizing positive aspects of the technology and encouraging healthy relationship dynamics, marketers can help counteract any potential negative effects of immersive technology within dating platforms. Campaigns which promote discussions about consent, mutual respect, and online safety can help to raise awareness of the potential risks associated with immersive dating technology.

These concerns become more acute when immersive technologies are contextualised within the commercial imperatives of platform capitalism. VR/AR/MR dating environments introduce novel, monetisable forms of user engagement, including premium virtual spaces, avatar customisation, exclusive events, and AI-mediated relational experiences (Bailey, 2017; Hamad and Jia, 2022). As platforms increasingly adopt microtransaction-based and subscription-based revenue models, the economic incentive shifts toward deepening emotional entanglement with the platform rather than facilitating successful relational off-ramps (Liew et al., 2023). Immersive architectures therefore risk reinforcing the core dynamics of the attention and distraction economy: extending time-on-platform, amplifying emotional dependency, and foregrounding technologically mediated intimacy that is profitable precisely insofar as it remains unresolved or incomplete (Varsava, 2017; Bandinelli, 2022). This raises significant questions regarding whether digital dating companies operating within such economic structures can meaningfully prioritise user wellbeing or long-term relational success while relying on engagement-driven design for financial viability.

Ultra-Realism situates these harms within structural conditions, dating platforms operate as libidinal economies where users' desires for recognition, stimulation, and emotional relief are monetised and exploited (Raymen and Smith, 2019). Octalysis reveals the design logic of gamified features provide immediate feedback, competition, and reward, reinforcing compulsive engagement while amplifying emotional vulnerability and identity fragmentation. Together, these frameworks indicate that online dating platforms are behaviour-shaping environments, offering engagement and perceived connection while reproducing harm. Ethical and structural interventions are therefore essential in design, marketing, and regulation to mitigate these harms while preserving opportunities for meaningful engagement.

7. Conclusion

The integration of gamification and immersive technologies within online dating platforms marks a profound evolution in how individuals experience connection, intimacy and relational possibility. These systems introduce dynamic and highly stimulating environments that enable users to interact, experiment and curate their identities in novel ways. Immersive technologies such as virtual, augmented and mixed reality promise more embodied and emotionally resonant encounters that extend beyond the limits of traditional digital communication. Yet, as this article has demonstrated, these technological innovations also raise significant ethical and sociological concerns. The commodification of personal relationships, the potential for manipulation through addictive design features and the amplification of harmful social stereotypes present substantive challenges for developers seeking to serve users responsibly. Platform designers therefore hold a responsibility to implement ethical principles that prioritise well-being, transparency and authenticity. This includes ensuring clarity in al-

gorithmic decision-making, protecting user privacy and fostering environments that promote healthy relational dynamics rather than rewarding superficial markers of desirability or popularity. Although immersive technologies offer opportunities for deeper emotional resonance, developers must remain aware of their potential to exacerbate social isolation, distort expectations of intimacy or construct unrealistic relational templates that undermine offline relationships.

When interpreted through the combined lens of Ultra-Realism and Octalysis, the long-term risks of these developments become more sharply defined. Ultra-Realism highlights how contemporary capitalist structures shape individuals around speed, intensity, competition and self-curation, creating subjects for whom digital dating platforms serve as spaces of stimulation and temporary emotional relief (Hall, 2012; Hall and Winlow, 2015). Octalysis complements this analysis by demonstrating how immersive, gamified environments operationalise these tendencies through design features that amplify key Core Drives such as Ownership and Social Influence, embedding users in ecosystems where desirability, status and relational capital are continually quantified and publicly displayed (Chou, 2015). This convergence risks normalising new forms of affective inequality in which idealised digital selves overshadow embodied identities, deepening dissatisfaction, insecurity and emotional volatility. Such harms extend beyond individual experience and into the zemiological domain, revealing how immersive dating platforms subtly restructure cultural understandings of intimacy, authenticity and relational labour.

Gamification intensifies existing market logics by activating psychological drives that sustain engagement while potentially diminishing relational authenticity and emotional well-being. Immersive technologies, meanwhile, offer even more potent forms of behavioural shaping, raising urgent questions about the future of digital intimacy and the cultural meanings of connection. These concerns become more acute when immersive architectures are situated within the commercial imperatives of platform capitalism. VR/AR/MR dating environments introduce new monetisable forms of engagement including premium virtual spaces, avatar customisation, exclusive events and AI-mediated relational experiences (Bailey, 2017; Hamad and Jia, 2022). As platforms increasingly rely on microtransaction-based and subscription-based revenue models, their economic incentives shift towards deepening emotional entanglement with the platform rather than facilitating successful relational off-ramps (Liew et al., 2023). In doing so, immersive architectures risk reinforcing the core dynamics of the attention and distraction economy, extending time-on-platforms, amplifying emotional dependency and foregrounding technologically mediated intimacy that is most profitable when it remains unresolved or incomplete (Varsava, 2017; Bandinelli, 2022).

At the centre of these developments lies a significant structural contradiction. While users typically seek stable, long-term relationships, the commercial viability of dating platforms depends on maintaining prolonged engagement, repeat usage and continuous circulation within the marketplace of potential partners (Illouz, 2019; Heino et al., 2010). Successful relationships remove users from the platform, directly undermining revenue derived from attention, data generation and microtransactions. Platform architectures are therefore designed to support ongoing romantic possibility rather than romantic fulfilment. Gamified elements such as intermittent rewards, algorithmic scarcity and competitive visibility are thus not peripheral embellishments but central components of commercial strategy (Abolfahti and Santamaria, 2020; Mackinnon, 2022). This produces a fundamental tension between the business imperative of retention being structurally misaligned with the relational aims of users, raising concerns about whether

dating platforms, under their current economic logics can realistically facilitate the conditions for authentic intimacy, emotional security and enduring connection (Illouz, 2007; Raymen and Smith, 2019).

Despite this tension, the goals of platform sustainability and user well-being are not necessarily irreconcilable. Emerging research suggests that slower, more reflective forms of digital dating such as "slow dating" or "intentional matching" models may support deeper relational development while fostering long-term trust and brand loyalty (Dobson and Ogolsky, 2021; Portolan and McAlister, 2021). Ethical design strategies that prioritise transparency, consent and reduced cognitive overload through limited daily matches, reflective prompts or relationship-oriented onboarding can generate revenue through subscription models that emphasise quality rather than compulsive engagement (Huang et al., 2024). Platforms may also profit from value-added relational services such as coaching, wellbeing tools, community events and premium features designed to support healthy offline outcomes. These approaches align with growing consumer demand for authenticity and digital safety (Anderson et al., 2020), suggesting that designing for relational health can itself become a viable commercial strategy. Integrating ethical gamification, user-centred design and socio-technical responsibility may therefore represent not only an ethical imperative but a sustainable commercial opportunity for the future of digital intimacy.

Ultimately, the harms associated with online dating cannot be understood solely through individual behaviour but must be situated within the broader political-economic and motivational structures that shape these platforms. Addressing these challenges requires both safer and more ethical design practices and a deeper interrogation of the socio-economic conditions that make gamified, immersive romance simultaneously appealing and harmful. Only through this dual approach can online dating evolve in ways that genuinely support the quality, integrity and authenticity of human relationships in an increasingly digital age.

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Special section

Artistic dialogues