

Date: 26 May 2026



Experiences of People with Visual Impairments in Online Dating Platforms

by

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submitted in accordance with the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the subject

PSYCHOLOGY

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: PROF L M UBISI

MAY 2026

DECLARATION

I declare that this research is my own, unaided work. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at this or any other institution.

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PAPER NAME

Final Dissertation after corrections.docx

AUTHOR

ILZE VAN DEN BERG

WORD COUNT

24731 Words

CHARACTER COUNT

156984 Characters

PAGE COUNT

102 Pages

FILE SIZE

230.3KB

SUBMISSION DATE

May 13, 2026 5:14 PM GMT+2

REPORT DATE

May 14, 2026 4:06 AM GMT+2

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Summary

ABSTRACT

Online dating platforms have become a popular way of engaging in romantic relationships. However, they are primarily designed for visual interaction, creating barriers for those who engage with the world through non-visual modes of perception. This raises important concerns about digital inclusion and how platform design may reproduce ableist assumptions about desirability, visibility, and participation. Despite the growing prevalence of online dating, experiences of people with visual impairments within these environments remain underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of visually impaired individuals navigating online dating platforms. Grounded in crip theory and located within an interpretivist paradigm, the research adopts a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological approach. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with visually impaired participants and analysed using thematic analysis to explore patterns of meaning across their experiences.

The findings indicate that participants encounter significant structural barriers, including inaccessible interfaces, reliance on image-based interaction, and limited compatibility with assistive technologies. These challenges contribute to exclusion and reduced participation. Simultaneously, participants demonstrate agency by adapting their practices, prioritising non-visual forms of communication such as voice, tone, and narrative to foster connection and intimacy. These strategies both respond to and challenge dominant visual norms embedded within digital dating environments.

The study contributes to disability studies and digital sociology by highlighting the intersection of technology, embodiment, and social norms in shaping online dating experiences. It argues that enhancing inclusion requires technical accessibility and a broader reconsideration of cultural assumptions underpinning digital intimacy. The findings offer insights for the development of more inclusive and equitable online platforms that accommodate various ways of engaging and connecting.

Keywords: Visual impairment; online dating; accessibility; digital ableism; crip theory; qualitative research; embodiment; inclusion

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Online dating is a widely used method of forming relationships, yet, its visually driven design presents significant barriers for visually impaired users (Miron *et al.*, 2022; Moore *et al.*, 2019; Panchanathan *et al.*, 2018). Numerous studies have explored online dating and visual disability (Mert Kastner, 2019; Miron *et al.*, 2022; Moore *et al.*, 2019). However, studies specifically addressing the intersection of visual impairment and digital dating remain limited. Quantitative research has identified key accessibility features (Barpanda *et al.*, 2021; Kim, 2022; Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024), while qualitative work has focused on social and cultural barriers to sexuality (Csernák & Gombás, 2022; Kuefler, 2022; Martino & Moumos, 2022). Additionally, related studies have examined identity formation (Muthukrishna *et al.*, 2009) and sexual health (Donkor *et al.*, 2010; Rohleder, 2008), with only a few exploring how visually impaired individuals navigate digital dating platforms.

Despite the growing popularity of online dating platforms such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge, they remain inaccessible to users with visual impairments (Jensen, 2024; Moore *et al.*, 2019). Their features include swiping mechanisms, image-based profiles, and minimal alternative text descriptions, thereby creating structural barriers for non-sighted users (Ba Matraf *et al.*, 2023; Shinohara & Tenenberg, 2009). Resultantly, visually impaired individuals often rely on screen readers, voice-over technologies, or assistance from others to navigate digital platforms, which can compromise autonomy, privacy, and self-representation (Lazar *et al.*, 2015; Wang, 2017). These limitations extend beyond usability concerns, promoting social exclusion and perpetuating ableist norms that privilege visual modes of interaction and aesthetics as central to attraction and connection (Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024).

Moreover, for people living with disabilities, dating and relationships are often situated within broader societal discourses of desexualisation, stigma, and marginalisation

(Milligan & Neufeldt, 2001; Rohleder & Swartz, 2009). For individuals with visual impairments, these narratives are compounded by a lack of representation in media and dating culture, leading to internalised stigma and reduced self-worth in romantic contexts (Erevelles, 2011; Goggin & Newell, 2005). Studies have demonstrated that visually impaired individuals often feel compelled to disclose their disability early in online interactions, to minimise the risk of rejection or discomfort from potential matches (Santinele et al., 2025). Although necessary, this disclosure can simultaneously lead to increased vulnerability and fear of rejection. These psychosocial dynamics highlight the urgent need for more inclusive dating technologies that support the dignity and agency of visually impaired users.

1.1.Researcher reflexivity

In this study, reflexivity was a central methodological consideration, as the researcher is also visually impaired. This shared identity also shaped the researcher's encounter in important epistemic and methodological ways. In qualitative research, reflexivity requires the researcher to critically examine how their social position, lived experience, assumptions, and emotional investments influence the generation and interpretation of knowledge (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2011). In this study, the researcher's visual impairment may have facilitated trust, openness, and rapport, as participants might have felt more understood and less compelled to explain or justify aspects of their experiences. This shared understanding may have influenced disclosure, enabling participants to speak more freely about sensitive issues such as exclusion, shame, intimacy, and the emotional complexities of navigating online dating as visually impaired individuals (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Simultaneously, this position also required careful reflection, as shared experience does not guarantee same meaning. Although the researcher's lived experience enabled empathy and contextual sensitivity, it also potentially led to over-identification, assumption, or premature

interpretation (Berger, 2015). Participants' accounts could not be assumed to mirror the researcher's own experiences, thus, reflexivity involved remaining attentive to differences within perceived similarities. Meaning was understood as co-constructed during the interview process, shaped by the interaction between the researcher and participants, rather than as something simply extracted from participants' narratives (Finlay, 2011). Therefore, the researcher needed to remain critically aware of how her own assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive frameworks may have influenced the questions asked, the aspects of participants' accounts that were foregrounded, and the meanings ultimately derived from the data. According to the study's phenomenological orientation, bracketing was used as an ongoing reflective practice rather than the complete suspension of all previous knowledge. Given her proximity to the topic, the researcher recognised that setting aside personal experience completely was neither simple nor possible. Rather, bracketing involved a deliberate effort to identify, question, and contain preconceptions throughout the research journey (Tufford & Newman, 2012). This process began before data collection, when the researcher engaged in audio-recorded self-reflections, highlighting her personal motivations, assumptions, and expectations about visually impaired people's experiences of online dating. These reflections continued during and after interviews, enabling the researcher to note emotional reactions, moments of resonance, and areas where participants' accounts challenged or differed from her own understandings (Finlay, 2011).

Bracketing also informed the analytic process. During coding and theme development, the researcher repeatedly revisited the transcripts to ensure interpretations remain grounded in participants' words rather than being primarily shaped by her own experiences. Particular attention was given to instances where participants' perspectives diverged from the researcher's expectations, as these points of difference were analytically important in preventing the collapse of participants' voices with the researcher's own familiarity (Creswell

& Poth, 2018). The researcher also documented challenges encountered in this process, including difficulties in separating personal resonance from analytic insight, and the tension between empathic understanding and interpretive discipline. Rather than treating these challenges as methodological weaknesses, they were recognised as inherent to insider qualitative research and managed through sustained reflexive engagement (Berger, 2015).

By so doing, reflexivity extended beyond personal narrative or empathy. It functioned as an analytic lens in which the researcher examined how knowledge was produced, meaning co-constructed, and how her insider position both enriched and complicated the research process. By making these dynamics explicit, the study strengthens its methodological transparency and demonstrates a more critically engaged approach to phenomenological inquiry.

1.2.Problem statement

Online dating has evolved from platforms such as Match.com to mobile-based applications like Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, and OkCupid, transforming how romantic relationships are initiated and sustained (Kuefler, 2022; Schwartz & Velotta, 2018). Although these platforms have increased opportunities for connection, they still remain inaccessible to individuals with visual impairments. Assistive technologies, including JAWS (Job Access With Speech), Seeing AI, and built-in accessibility features offer partial support. However, their effectiveness is constrained by the features that prioritise image-based interaction, visual verification, and gesture-driven navigation (Bhagat et al., 2024; Panchanathan et al., 2018; Vrysis et al., 2023).

This inaccessibility cannot be reduced to only a technical issue. Crip Theory provides a critical lens that both enhances and reframes the challenge by shifting the focus from individual's impairment to the normative assumptions embedded within digital design and dating culture. From this perspective, online dating platforms are not neutral tools that fail

some users; rather, they are structured around compulsory able-bodied-ness and visual normativity. This defines who is eligible as a desirable subject (Bailey, 2023; Kafer, 2013). Simply put, crip theory suggests that the problem is not that the inability of visually impaired users to access these platforms, but that they are built on logics that exclude non-visual forms of embodiment from recognition, participation, and desire.

This theoretical framing intensifies the problem by revealing how digital dating environments operate as sites of both material and symbolic exclusion. At a material level, inaccessible interfaces restrict navigation and meaningful participation. At a symbolic level, the emphasis on visual self-presentation and rapid aesthetic judgement reinforces cultural norms that equate visibility with desirability, thereby marginalising visually impaired individuals in social and relational contexts. From this perspective, crip theory not only explains the presence of barriers but also critiques the underlying values that sustain them, demonstrating how ableism is embedded in both technological systems and broader social expectations. Furthermore, visually impaired users must navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, including stigma, partner preferences, safety concerns, and diminished confidence, which are all shaped by dominant ideals of attractiveness, independence, and normative embodiment (Ip et al., 2022; Malekitibar et al., 2024 Shpigelman & Vorobioff, 2021). Crip theory illuminates how these experiences are interconnected with broader systems of power, where exclusion is simultaneously designed, enacted, and internalised.

Despite the rapid growth of online dating, there is still lack of qualitative research that critically examines these issues from a disability-informed perspective. In particular, little attention has been paid to how visually impaired individuals navigate, interpret, and challenge these exclusionary environments. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of visually impaired users with online dating platforms. The study

employed crip theory not only as a descriptive framework but as a critical tool to examine and challenge the assumptions underpinning digital intimacy. By so doing, the study positions online dating as a key site for examining the intersection of technology, disability, and relational justice, while also contributing to more inclusive and transformative understanding of connection in digital spaces.

1.3. Research questions

This study focuses on the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of visually impaired people in online dating?
2. What are the challenges and opportunities encountered by visually impaired people in online dating?

1.4. Purpose of the study

Dating is a key aspect of human connection (Finkel *et al.*, 2012). However, the rise of the internet and visual media has transformed how relationships are formed and maintained (D'Angelo, 2021; Ellison *et al.*, 2006). Popular applications such as Tinder, Bumble, Koer, and Grindr emphasise visual cues, making them less accessible to users with visual impairments (Disabled World, 2023; Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024). By prioritising appearance-based judgments, these platforms reinforce narrow beauty standards while marginalising those who cannot fully engage with visual content (Ha *et al.*, 2020; Malekitabar *et al.*, 2024).

This study aims to explore how visually impaired individuals navigate online dating. It utilised qualitative methods to examine their experiences, strategies, and adaptations within a system mainly designed for the sighted (Bhagirathi, 2021; Carmichael, 2022).

1.5. Research goals and objectives

The primary **goal** of this study is to critically explore the lived experiences of visually impaired individuals as they navigate romantic initiation within a digital landscape designed

primarily for visual consumption. This research seeks to address gaps in existing literature by examining how this group negotiates the tensions between digital ableism and personal agency, ultimately identifying pathways toward more inclusive social technologies.

To achieve this goal, the following **research objectives** have been established:

1. **To evaluate the impact of visual-centric interface design** on the accessibility of online dating platforms for visually impaired users.
2. **To analyse the strategies and creative adaptations** visually impaired individuals employ to navigate appearance-based interactions and digital visual cues.
3. **To investigate the negotiation of self-presentation and disclosure**, specifically how participants manage the timing and method of revealing their impairment to potential partners.
4. **To identify the socio-emotional challenges and social stigmas** encountered by visually impaired individuals within the online dating market.
5. **To explore the opportunities for empowerment and community formation** that digital dating platforms may provide, despite inherent accessibility barriers.

1.6. Understanding visual impairment

1.6.1. *Definition and types of visual impairment*

Visual impairment is a condition that limits a person's capacity to perceive and interpret visual data, including both partial and complete loss of sight. This disability significantly impacts multiple aspects of daily life, including communication, navigation, education, employment, and interpersonal relationships (Assi *et al.*, 2021; Bonsaksen *et al.*, 2025; Friedman *et al.*, 2004; Jones *et al.*, 2019). The psychosocial implications are also considered, often contributing to reduced autonomy, increased dependency, and mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression (Brunes & Heir, 2020; Kempen *et al.*, 2012).

There are several types of visual impairment, categorised by type and severity. The two major classifications are:

- **Low Vision:** This refers to individuals who retain some functional vision but struggle with tasks requiring detailed visual input, even with corrective lenses. According to the World Health Organisation (2020), low vision is defined as a visual acuity of less than 6/18 (20/60), but equal to or better than 3/60 (20/400) in the better eye, or a corresponding visual field loss to less than 20 degrees in the widest diameter.
- **Legal Blindness:** This term refers to individuals with severe visual impairment, where functional vision is significantly compromised. Legal blindness is often defined as a visual acuity of 6/60 (20/200), or worse in the better eye with the best possible correction, or a visual field of 20 degrees or less (American Foundation for the Blind [AFB], 2022).

Although these classifications are important for clinical and policy purposes, this study is not restricted to a single category. Rather, it examines the experiences of individuals across the **spectrum of visual impairment**, including both low vision and legally blind participants, as they navigate online dating platforms. This approach is intentional, as the study is concerned with how **digitally mediated environments privilege visual interaction**, thereby creating barriers for users who rely on non-visual or limited-visual modes of engagement.

By adopting this broader framing, the study foregrounds the shared structural challenges faced by visually impaired individuals, while remaining attentive to variations in experiences shaped by differing levels of vision. Therefore, these definitions serve as contextual benchmarks rather than strict inclusion criteria, supporting an analysis that centres accessibility, embodiment, and digital participation (Flaxman et al., 2017; WHO, 2023).

1.6.2. Prevalence and statistics

Visual impairment varies globally, with disparities shaped by geography, income, and healthcare access. The World Health Organisation (2020) estimates that 285 million people globally are visually impaired, with 246 million with low vision and 39 million blind. These statistics are projected to rise due to population growth, ageing, and chronic diseases like diabetes and hypertension (Flaxman *et al.*, 2017; Pascolini & Mariotti, 2012).

Although Africa comprise approximately 12% of the global population, it contributes **nearby** one-fifth of the global burden of vision loss, reflecting significant disparities in access to eye-care services across the region (Bourne et al., 2020; Naidoo et al., 2020). In South Africa, blindness has historically been said to affect approximately 0.75% of the population, although more recent estimates suggest prevalence may be closer to 0.9%. Furthermore, cataracts, refractive errors, and glaucoma are noted to be among the leading causes (Naidoo et al., 2020).

Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) face a disproportionate burden due to limited access to eye care, higher rates of infectious diseases, and inadequate prevention (Gilbert *et al.*, 2024; WHO, 2023). Conditions like cataracts, uncorrected refractive errors, and trachoma remain leading, and largely preventable causes of blindness in these regions (Burton *et al.*, 2021; Flaxman *et al.*, 2017; Marques *et al.*, 2022).

1.6.3. Impacts of visual impairments on daily life

Visual impairment significantly affects daily life, including social interaction, mobility, education, and income.

- **Social Interaction:** Difficulty interpreting facial expressions, body language, and visual cues can hinder effective communication in friendships and romantic relationships (Powis, 2020; Qiu *et al.*, 2020; Shpigelman & Vorobioff, 2021).
- **Mobility:** Navigating unfamiliar spaces, identifying landmarks, and reading signs pose challenges, often limiting independent movement and social participation (Bishop & Rhind, 2011; Real & Araujo, 2019).
- **Access to Information:** Barriers to written and digital content, including dating apps, restrict participation in visually-driven activities (Powis, 2020; Santos, 2024; Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024).
- **Self-Esteem:** Appearance-based judgments can lower confidence, complicating dating experiences for individuals with vision loss (Powis, 2020; RNIB, 2024).

Therefore understanding these impacts is essential for designing inclusive environments that support the dating experiences of people with visual impairments.

1.7.Theoretical framework: crip theory

Crip theory, a fusion of queer theory and critical disability studies, examines how cultural norms around ability, gender, and sexuality shape exclusion (Bailey, 2023; Hamraie, 2017; Wright & Manuel, 2025). It argues that disability is a socially constructed experience maintained by ableism systems and not an individual deficit (Wrights & Falck, 2024). This study draws on crip theory to explore how visually impaired individuals navigate dating platforms designed for visual users.

Three key concepts guide this analysis: embodiment, intersectionality, and ableism. Embodiment refers to how disabled individuals experience the world through their bodies and interactions with social and physical environments (Martiny & Aggerholm, 2024). Intersectionality highlights how overlapping identities such as race, gender, and sexuality shape

access and oppression (Evans, 2022; Ruiz et al., 2021). Ableism refers to societal norms that devalue or exclude disabled people (Abrams & Abes, 2021; Campbell, 2009).

“Crip Time,” introduced by Kafer (2013), critiques rigid temporal norms that privilege speed and productivity. Studies applying Crip Time in education (Ljuslinder *et al.*, 2020; Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2024) indicate how institutional pacing marginalises disabled bodies. These insights extend to digital dating, where visual-first design and fast-paced interaction can exclude those who move, perceive, or express connection differently.

Therefore, crip theory provides a framework for challenging ableism assumptions in online dating platforms. It calls for inclusive features such as audio bios, customisable avatars, and flexible interaction timing that accommodate diverse embodiments and ways of engaging. Ultimately, this perspective promotes more just, equitable, and accessible digital spaces for all users.

1.8. Research approach

Selecting an appropriate research paradigm is critical for shaping a study's methodology and theoretical framework (Pretorius, 2024; Shannon-Baker, 2016). This study; *Experiences of People with Visual Impairments in Online Dating Platforms*, aims to explore how visually impaired individuals navigate dating. A phenomenological approach is well-suited for capturing the lived, embodied experiences central to this topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

1.8.1. Rationale for phenomenology

Phenomenology, rooted in Husserl's (2012) philosophy, seeks to understand how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences. This paradigm enables deep engagement with the subjective realities of visually impaired individuals, as they form connections in a visual-centric dating landscape (Majerova & Ludikova, 2017; Na *et al.*, 2020).

1.8.2. Core principles

Bracketing - Researchers must avoid personal biases to realistically engage with participants' perspectives (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Sorsa & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). This promotes openness to the unique experiences of visually impaired daters (Grajzel, 2025; McLeod, 2025).

Intentionality - Human consciousness is directed and purposeful. Therefore, understanding how visually impaired individuals focus on certain aspects of dating demonstrates how intention shapes their interactions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Rich Description - Phenomenology emphasises detailed narrative accounts to convey the emotional, sensory, and relational dimensions of experience (Van Manen, 2023). Through in-depth descriptions, this study aims to illuminate the complexity of dating with visual impairment.

1.9. Quality criteria

Rigour in qualitative research refers to the systematic and reflexive processes through which researchers ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of a study, including maintaining awareness of potential biases during data collection and analysis. Dependability and confirmability relate to reliability and external validity, respectively, while credibility and transferability refer to the extent to which findings are trustworthy and can be applied to other contexts (Gunawan, 2015; Liu, 2022).

1.10. Dissertation layout

The dissertation consists of five chapters:

Chapter 1 - This chapter introduces the study, along with the subject of: "***Experiences of People with Visual Impairments in Online Dating Platforms.***" It highlights the study's history, emphasises the research topic, and outlines the study's goals. Its

significance is also explored together with discussing the scope and restrictions of the study. To provide clarity, key terms used in the study are also defined.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review - This chapter reviews the research on dating and relationships, primarily focusing on the dating experiences of people with visual impairments. It explores the societal and cultural viewpoints on dating with visual impairment, addresses how technology can enhance their dating experience, and examines its psychological and emotional effects of dating while visually impaired. Additionally, the chapter includes pertinent existing research and studies on the subject. The literature review and theory will be discussed in the chapter.

Chapter 3 - Research Methodology - Chapter 3 outlines the research design adopted for the study. It provides a detailed description of the participants and the sampling strategies used. The chapter also explains the data collection method, particularly interviews, as well as the approaches used for data analysis. In addition, ethical considerations relevant to the study are discussed.

Chapter 4 - Findings, Analysis, and Interpretation - The investigation conducted with visually impaired people in the dating environment yielded the results presented in this chapter. The chapter highlights the participants' dating issues and experiences as well as their demographic makeup. It also examines societal attitudes towards visually impaired individuals in the dating context. The chapter analyses how technology facilitates dating for people with visual impairments. In addition, it highlights participants' coping mechanisms and support systems. The findings are then analysed and compared with existing literature.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations - The primary study findings are outlined in chapter 5 together with the conclusions reached after data analysis. The study's

consequences are examined, primarily focusing on the advances made in the dating and visual impairment contexts. The chapter identifies the study's limitations and makes recommendations for further investigation. Finally, suggestions are provided based on the study's findings to enhance visually impaired people's dating experiences.

The study concludes with appendices containing interview and survey questionnaires, consent forms, and relevant transcriptions. Furthermore, a comprehensive list of references is included, citing all sources used throughout the dissertation.

1.11. Conclusion

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of visually impaired individuals using online dating platforms. By centring these embodied practices, the study extended beyond general experience to explore how participants strategically resist normative visual standards of attraction and communication. By employing a qualitative methodology grounded in phenomenology, the analysis of semi-structured interviews provided deep insights into the essence of navigating romantic initiation with visual impairments.

The existing literature highlights critical factors influencing these interactions, including pervasive societal stigmas, the challenges of digital disclosure, and the systemic barriers of image-heavy interface designs. Building upon this foundation, the study generated new insights into "access hacking" and the prioritisation of emotional presence over physical aesthetics, offering a roadmap for inclusive universal design and specialised advocacy initiatives.

To ensure academic integrity, the study adhered to ethical principles, including informed consent and robust participant anonymity. Trustworthiness was established through rigorous strategies such as member checking, extensive audit trail, and persistent reflexivity, ensuring that the findings remain a true reflection of participants' lived realities.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.Introduction

This literature review critically examines how visually impaired individuals navigate online dating within a predominantly visual and digital culture. Although applications such as Tinder and Bumble dominate modern romance, their emphasis on visual interaction often excludes those who are visually impaired. The chapter explores how visual impairment intersects with sociocultural narratives of desirability, highlighting barriers such as accessibility, disclosure, stigma, and fetishisation, as well as strategies of resistance and resilience. The literature review and theory will be discussed in the chapter.

The review is thematically structured. It draws from crip theory and intersectionality to explore how dominant ideals marginalise disabled users, especially in Western contexts. In addition, it identifies research gaps, including the lack of first-person narratives and Global South perspectives. Attention is given to adaptive technologies and user-devised strategies as tools of empowerment. Although crip theory offers useful insights, its Western and theoretical standing limit its applicability, thereby calling for more inclusive and intersectional approaches. The chapter also recognises the psychological impact of online dating for visually impaired users. Thus, this study is framed within broader conversations on digital inclusion and relational equity.

2.2.Visual Impairment and Social Context

2.2.1. Defining visual impairment

Visual impairment includes various vision loss conditions, from partial sight to blindness which cannot be corrected with standard treatments (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2025). Over 250 million people globally are affected, with refractive errors and cataracts as leading causes (WHO, 2025). These impairments hinder access to visual

information - such as text, images, and nonverbal cues, thereby impacting communication, mobility, and independence.

In addition to functional challenges, visually impaired individuals often face social isolation and psychological distress. Studies associate perceived vision loss to reduced social participation and mental health challenges (Alma *et al.*, 2011; Watermeyer *et al.*, 2024). In low- and middle-income countries, stigma and systemic exclusion further compound these barriers.

However, advances in assistive technologies like screen readers, AI-driven applications, and wearable devices, together with mobility training, have improved autonomy and inclusion (American Foundation for the Blind [AFB], 2025; Naayini *et al.*, 2025).

2.2.2. Lived experiences and social implications

Visual impairment often limits access to romantic opportunities due to structural and social barriers. For example, visually impaired individuals reported reduced social capital, making the use of visual-centric platforms like Tinder and Bumble particularly challenging (Bassey *et al.*, 2018). However, romantic relationships are crucial for psychological well-being. While people participating in romantic spaces enhanced self-acceptance and mental health, especially for women in conservative contexts, while exclusion led to loneliness and insecurity (Edwards, 2017). Visually impaired students in Ethiopia reported that negative experiences such as theft and social exclusion contributes to anxiety and mistrust in adult relationships (Eliakor *et al.*, 2019). Despite these challenges, individuals adapt by using audio communication, self-disclosure, and assistive technologies to promote trust and emphasise shared values over appearance (r/Blind, 2024).

2.2.3. *Historical context: sexual erasure and eugenics*

The marginalisation of disabled bodies within contemporary dating cultures cannot be understood without recognising its historical backgrounds. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, eugenics movements in North America and Europe promoted the elimination of “undesirable” traits through practices like forced sterilisation (MacKellar, 2021; Turda, 2022). Policies such as the ruling in *Buck v. Bell* legitimised the sterilisation of individuals which was deemed “unfit,” resulting in numerous coerced procedures (Lombardo, 2022).

These practices were grounded in the belief that disabled individuals were incapable of sexual agency, thereby reinforcing their exclusion from intimacy and reproduction (Da Silva & Hubbard, 2024). This historical removal of disabled’s sexuality continues to shape contemporary attitudes, with visually impaired individuals being desexualised or perceived undesirable (Silverman, 2018).

From a crip theoretical perspective, these legacies demonstrate how intelligibility and desirability have been regulated through systems of power, connecting past forms of bodily control to present-day exclusion in digital spaces.

2.3. Digital dating in a visual age

2.3.1. *Evolution of online dating platforms*

Online dating has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades. It has evolved from early text-based desktop platforms to highly visual, mobile-first applications that prioritise rapid, image-driven interaction. Early platforms such as Match.com and OkCupid prioritised written profiles, compatibility algorithms, and extended user engagement through narrative self-presentation. However, the rise of mobile technologies and location-based services has shifted online dating toward swipe-based interfaces, as popularised by applications like Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. These platforms focus on visual immediacy,

where decisions about attraction are often made within seconds based primarily on profile images rather than detailed personal information (D'Angelo et al., 2021; Hobbs et al., 2017).

This shift reflects a broader cultural movement towards visual-centric digital interaction, where appearance is prioritised as a key determinant of desirability and trust. The aesthetic usability effect suggests that visually appealing interfaces are often perceived more trustworthy and easier to use (Perrig et al., 2023). Although this design principle enhances user engagement for sighted users, simultaneously, it reinforces exclusion for individuals who cannot interpret visual content. For visually impaired users, reliance on images, visual verification systems, and gesture-based navigation creates barriers to usability, meaningful participation, and self-representation within these platforms (Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024).

Recent developments in online dating indicate some movement towards diversification and inclusivity, although these efforts remain irregular. Similarly, emerging features across mainstream platforms, such as voice prompts, audio bios, and video-based interaction suggest a gradual expansion beyond visual modes of engagement (Hobbs et al., 2017). Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have also led to the development of tools capable of describing visual content, potentially improving accessibility for visually impaired users. However, these technologies are still in early stages and not yet widely integrated into mainstream dating applications (Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024).

Simultaneously, recent trends such as avatar-based dating, virtual environments, and identity-fluid digital representations introduce additional layers of complexity. Although these innovations increase possibilities for self-expression, they often remain rooted in visual interaction, thereby reproducing existing accessibility challenges in new forms (Collins et al., 2024). Furthermore, the increasing use of filters, edited images, and curated digital personas

raises concerns about authenticity and transparency, particularly for visually impaired users who cannot independently verify visual cues (Tinwell et al., 2013).

Overall, the evolution of online dating platforms reflects a trajectory toward greater visualisation, speed, and aesthetic emphasis. This has enhanced engagement for many users while simultaneously intensifying barriers for others. Although emerging features and alternative platforms indicate a potential shift toward more inclusive design, accessibility remains a persistent challenge. This highlights the need to critically examine technological innovation and the underlying assumptions about visibility, desirability, and interaction shaping digital dating environments.

2.3.2. *Visual aesthetics and exclusion*

Online dating heavily prioritises visual aesthetics, with profile images significantly affecting first impressions and match rates. A 1.5-point boost in perceived attractiveness can increase matches by 20%, while bios have little effect (Rosenbusch, 2025). Eye-tracking studies confirm that users focus on images (Gale *et al.*, 2024), while sleek interfaces enhance trust (Perrig *et al.*, 2023). This image-centric model disadvantages visually impaired users who cannot observe or present visual cues.

Without alt-text or audio descriptions, they are excluded from the core visual narratives of dating profiles (Sikapa *et al.*, 2024). Although minor photo edits may enhance authenticity, heavy editing reduces trust (Olivera La Rosa *et al.*, 2024). Visually impaired users often rely on bios, voice notes, or niche applications. However, these alternatives do not fully counteract visual bias (Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024).

Facial features heavily influence attraction, reinforcing the “beauty-is-good” bias, where physical appearance is equated with positive traits (Eagly *et al.*, 1991; Olivola &

Todorov, 2017). Algorithms often strengthen these norms, further excluding those who are visually impaired (Hutson *et al.*, 2019). Although inclusive tools may help, there is need for structural design changes for true accessibility (Everyday Sight, 2024).

2.4.Dating with visual impairment

2.4.1. Barriers and accessibility challenges

Visually impaired individuals face exclusion on image-driven dating applications like Tinder and Bumble, where images dominate first impressions (D'Angelo *et al.*, 2021). These platforms lack essential accessibility features like alt-text, screen reader compatibility, and user-friendly navigation. Thus, it limits autonomy and increases reliance on sighted assistance (Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024). CAPTCHAs and poorly designed interfaces further restrict participation (Lazar *et al.*, 2017; User Way, 2024).

Social stigma exacerbates these barriers, as visually impaired users are often perceived as inspirational rather than potential romantic partners, leading to rejection (Anderson, 2023; Ubisi, 2021). This bias, entrenched in dating culture, reinforces exclusion (McKee, 2021).

Despite these challenges, visually impaired users demonstrate resilience. In South Africa, being involved in romantic relationships enhance emotional well-being and gender affirmation (Edwards, 2017). Many rely on verbal cues, tone, humour, shared values, and detailed bios to create authentic connections (Bhagirathi, 2021; Shpigelman *et al.*, 2014). However, they do not fully overcome accessibility gaps, which compromise privacy and emotional safety, as well as reinforcing ableism norms.

This review, drawing on crip theory and intersectionality, advocates for inclusive, user-centred design that challenges visual-centric dating norms (Garland-Thomson, 2005). Therefore, there is need for a more accessible and affirming approach to digital intimacy.

2.4.2. *Stigma, stereotypes, and desexualisation*

Visually impaired individuals often encounter societal stigma and stereotypes that portray them as nonsexual or undesirable partners. These biases, which associate disability with a lack of sexual interest or capability, are internalised by both disabled and nondisabled individuals. This limits their romantic aspirations and reduces self-esteem (Hunt *et al.*, 2021; Omnilogos, 2024). Consequently, visually impaired individuals often lack the motivation to pursue romantic relationships. In South Africa, disabled women report that stigma and normative expectations hinder their access to romantic relationships. Moreover, most nondisabled individuals express concerns about caregiving burdens or visible disability (Hunt *et. al*, 2021; Omnilogos, 2024).

Visually impaired individuals also encounter desexualisation, infantilisation, and fetishisation in dating contexts. For example, a blind lesbian was asked: "How do you know you're gay if you're blind?" This reflects the presumption that sexual identity cannot exist without vision (u/Blind, 2020). Disability advocates highlight that disabled women often encounter micro aggressions, such as patronising pet names or intrusive questions, reinforcing their status as perpetual care recipients instead of romantic partners (McKee, 2021). These interactions invalidate their sexuality and contribute to emotional distress. These dynamics are rooted in historical practices such as forced sterilisation and eugenics, which emphasised the belief that disabled bodies lack sexual legitimacy (Ubisi, 2021). Although overt coercion has ended, these societal norms persist in indirect forms, underscoring the need to address ableism and reclaim sexual autonomy within dating cultures.

2.4.3. *Embodiment, identity, and self-presentation*

Visually impaired individuals encounter unique challenges in romantic contexts, where visual cues often define attraction. Studies indicate that blind individuals, especially women,

mainly prioritise non-visual attributes like personality and voice rather than physical appearance (Scheller et al., 2021). Blind women are also more attuned to societal judgments regarding their looks, reflecting how visual impairment influences their experiences of attraction and identity (Hauff & Silberschmidt, 2020; Malekitabar *et al.*, 2024). A study conducted in the UK emphasised that the ability to form romantic relationships is shaped by the reliance on auditory and emotional cues, rather than the visual stimuli often prioritised in dating platforms (Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024). This shift from visual to non-visual forms of attraction in visually impaired individuals reflect an important adaptation to a mainly sighted world, where identity and romantic prospects are often dictated by appearance (Edwards, 2017). This suggests that visually impaired individuals prioritise non-visual qualities, thereby shifting from visual embodiment to a multisensory relational presence. In Ireland, visually impaired women navigate societal ideals of femininity, balancing authenticity with societal expectations to present themselves as confident romantic partners (Murphy, 2011).

Self-esteem and romantic confidence are closely associated. A study on sexual self-concept found that individuals with acquired blindness reported lower sexual self-concept compared to those with congenital blindness. This highlights how vision loss affects sexual confidence and necessitates adaptive self-narratives (Salehi, 2015; Scheller et al. 2021). Studies indicate that individuals with disabilities often develop confidence in romantic contexts by strategically managing disclosure, emphasising independence, and reframing disability as a meaningful aspect of identity rather than a limitation (Martino, 2022; Mazur, 2022). These practices enable individuals to challenge stigma and perceive disability as a valued component of self-presentation within relationships.

2.5. Disability, desire, and theoretical perspectives

2.5.1. Crip theory, butler, and the politics of desirability

Crip theory, as articulated by Robert McRuer (2006) critiques the social systems that define which bodies are considered desirable, valuable, and intelligible, particularly within cultures structured around able-bodiedness and heteronormativity. In the context of online dating, where visual appeal is central, crip theory highlights how visually impaired individuals may be marginalised because their bodies do not conform to dominant visual standards of attractiveness and sexual desirability (Bailey, 2023; Hall, 2019). These platforms do not simply reflect social norms, they actively reproduce them by privileging image-based interaction and rapid visual judgement.

The theoretical foundation of crip theory is deeply linked to Judith Butler's concept of intelligibility, which refers to the socially constructed conditions where bodies are recognised as meaningful, legitimate, and worthy of participation (Butler, 2020). Judith Butler argues that normative power structures determine which bodies are "readable" within social contexts, while those that fall outside these norms are rendered invisible, excluded, or misrecognised. Crip theory extends this argument into the domain of disability by demonstrating how able-bodiedness functions as a key condition of intelligibility. In this sense, disabled bodies are not inherently marginalised; rather, they are made unintelligible within systems that privilege normative forms of embodiment.

Within online dating environments, this relationship becomes particularly visible.

Emphasising on visual self-presentation through profile images, aesthetic curation, and swipe-based interaction, creates a framework where desirability is linked to visual legibility.

Visually impaired individuals who do not conform to these visual norms, are therefore positioned as outside the field of recognisable desire. According to Butler (2020), this form of

unintelligibility constitutes a type of symbolic exclusion, where individuals are overlooked and structurally excluded from being perceived as viable romantic subjects.

Crip theory builds on Butler's framework by associating intelligibility to the politics of desire. It argues that desire is not neutral or individual, but socially regulated through norms that privilege certain bodies while marginalising others (McRuer, 2006). In this study, participants' experiences demonstrate how visually impaired individuals are often framed through narratives of pity or inspiration, rather than being recognised as autonomous agents of desire (Bailey, 2023). This reinforces what crip theory identifies as compulsory able-bodiedness, where only bodies that align with normative standards are considered desirable or "datable."

These dynamics are further intensified at digital design level. Algorithmic systems and interface structures reinforce ableist assumptions by prioritising image-based matching and visual verification processes, thereby limiting the participation of users who rely on non-visual modes of engagement (Hutson et al., 2018; Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024). Therefore, online dating platforms function as technological sites of intelligibility, where visibility determines relational possibility.

However, both Butler and crip theory leave room for resistance. Butler (2020) highlight that unintelligible bodies can disrupt normative frameworks by exposing the limits of what is considered recognisable. Similarly, crip theory emphasises how disabled individuals actively challenge dominant norms by redefining desirability and connection. In online dating context, participants' use of non-visual communication, such as voice, narrative, and emotional expression, can be understood as forms of crip resistance, which expand the boundaries of what counts as intimacy and attraction.

By integrating Butler's concept of intelligibility with crip theory, this study demonstrates that exclusion in online dating is not just a matter of accessibility, but of recognition and relational legitimacy. Visually impaired individuals are excluded from being perceived as desirable. Simultaneously, their practices of adaptation and resistance challenge these norms, shifting towards a more inclusive and expansive understandings of embodiment, desire, and connection.

2.5.2. Critiques and limitations of crip theory

Although crip theory offers a powerful framework for analysing ableism and desirability, it has its limitations. One key critique is its level of theoretical abstraction, which can obscure the practical realities of accessibility. For visually impaired individuals navigating online dating, barriers such as screen-reader incompatibility and visual interface design are immediate and material concerns that may not always be fully addressed within theoretical discussions (Kafer, 2013).

Additionally, critiques have highlighted the need for more attention on intersectionality. Although crip theory challenges able-bodied norms, it may inadequately account for how disability intersects with race, gender, and class to shape experiences of desirability and exclusion (Erevelles, 2014). For example, visually impaired individuals who are also marginalised may experience increased forms of invisibility within digital dating contexts.

Finally, emphasis on resisting normative relationship structures may overlook the legitimacy of individuals who seek conventional forms of intimacy. Rather than perceiving such desires as assimilationist, they should be recognised as adaptive responses to exclusionary systems, highlighting the need for a more inclusive framework that accommodates diverse relational aspirations.

2.6. Intersectionality and cultural variation

2.6.1. Gender, race, class, and sexuality

Visually impaired individuals navigate dating through the intersection of disability, gender, race, and socioeconomic status. A study from Northern Uganda found that women with disabilities encounter compounded discrimination, and being dismissed as unfit for marriage or childbirth due to their gender and disability (Mac-Seing, *et al.*, 2020). This underscores how societal expectations of femininity and reproductive roles further marginalise visually impaired women, hindering their ability to assert sexual autonomy.

Global studies highlight similar patterns of discrimination. In South Africa and elsewhere, disabled women of colour often encounter dehumanising stereotypes and increased vulnerability to intimate partner violence. In addition, race, gender, and disability intersect to shape their romantic exclusion (Chappell, 2019). These intersecting identities contribute to increased vulnerability, making it more difficult to access safe and fulfilling intimate relationships.

Socioeconomic factors further complicate dating. Visual impairment is often associated with lower education, limited employment, and reduced cultural capital, which in turn restricts access to dating opportunities (Mac-Seing *et al.*, 2020). Those from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in the Global South, may struggle to access assistive technologies and inclusive social platforms, thereby exacerbating exclusion from romantic spaces.

Moreover, intersectionality influences experiences within disability communities. Blind LGBTQ+ individuals report feeling invisible and fearful of experiencing both ableism and homophobia in dating (Kempapidis *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, men with disabilities often experience emasculation and mistreatment due to normative masculinity expectations (Nyathi & Ubisi, 2024). These intersecting identities indicate the complexity of visually impaired

individuals' dating experiences, highlighting the need for intersectional approaches to platform design and support.

2.6.2. Cultural norms and Global South perspectives

Cultural norms and societal attitudes significantly shape the dating experiences of visually impaired individuals (Kleege, 2005). These norms vary across countries, influencing the possibilities and challenges faced by those with visual impairments in romantic contexts. In some cultures, misconceptions and stigmas around disability may limit dating opportunities, as well as lead to prejudice and discrimination (Correa *et al.*, 2021; Ip *et al.*, 2022). In contrast, other cultures may adopt more inclusive and supportive attitudes, fostering an environment where individuals with visual impairments can freely form relationships (Hunt *et al.*, 2017; Yeshanew *et al.*, 2023).

Cultural expectations regarding gender roles, sexuality, and marriage also influence the dating experiences of visually impaired individuals (Kleege, 2005). Traditional gender roles can shape behaviours during the search for romantic relationships, while cultural norms surrounding marriage and family may impact decision-making during the dating process (Linton & Rueda, 2015; Muthukrishna *et al.*, 2009).

A cross-cultural study by Shpigelman and Vorobioff (2021) conducted in Israel and Argentina, found that cultural differences significantly affect how visually impaired individuals navigate dating. In Israel, participants acknowledged the importance of individual autonomy in romantic relationships, while in Argentina, familial influence and societal expectations play a crucial role. These findings highlight the need for considering cultural context in understanding various dating experiences of visually impaired individuals.

2.7.Strategies for navigating online dating

2.7.1. Assistive technologies and App accessibility

As digital dating becomes more visually oriented, visually impaired users rely on assistive technologies and adaptive strategies to engage in romantic interactions. This section discusses how built-in accessibility features, screen readers, AI tools, and community-driven methods help users navigate platforms that are not designed for visually impaired individuals. Although some applications have integrated features like alt-text, voice commands, and high-contrast modes, overall accessibility remain inconsistent, compelling users to rely on workarounds or avoid certain applications altogether (Belle, 2021; Lee, 2017).

The section also highlights tools like JAWS, NVDA (NonVisual Desktop Access), Voice Over, and apps such as Be My Eyes and Seeing AI, which convert visual information into accessible formats. Although these technologies are critical, users face challenges such as gesture control limitations and cognitive overload from dense audio feedback (Hossain & Yeasin, 2011; Kim, 2022; Web AIM, 2020). In response, visually impaired individuals have developed adaptive techniques, such as using voice introductions or providing detailed profile descriptions. They also actively share tips and accessibility hacks in online forums, highlighting their resourcefulness in navigating online dating.

Modern dating apps are beginning to recognise the need for accessibility features to support visually impaired users. Although compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) is essential, many platforms fail to implement basic standards such as alt-text, high-contrast themes, and clear button labelling (Awad, 2022). Effective alt-text can provide essential information about profile images, helping users form meaningful impressions when visual cues are inaccessible. However, dating apps remain less accessible than other web-based platforms, creating barriers for users who rely on assistive technologies.

Screen reader compatibility is another significant issue. Popular applications like Tinder, Bumble, and Ok Cupid vary widely in their support for Screen Reader tools such as JAWS, NVDA, and Voice Over (Audio Eye, 2024; Moore *et al.*, 2019). Although Ok Cupid and Tinder have made significant improvements, many applications still struggle with inconsistent navigation, unlabelled icons, and focus order issues, making it difficult for visually impaired users to interact with profiles and initiate conversations.

Advancements in assistive features like voice prompts and audio clips present new opportunities. For example, Hinge has introduced voice-prompt options that enable users to convey personality without relying on visuals (Awad, 2022). These features benefit visually impaired users by shifting the initial evaluation from sight to voice, emotion, and content, thereby creating more inclusive dating experiences.

Despite these improvements, accessibility remain secondary in most dating application designs, often driven by user petitions or accessibility audits (Audio Eye, 2024; War box Creative, 2024). To truly support visually impaired users, dating applications must prioritise inclusive design from the beginning, integrating flexible navigation, alternative input methods, and semantic mark up. This approach will ensure dating platforms better support autonomy, equity, and romantic potential for all users.

Visually impaired individuals rely on screen readers like JAWS (for Windows) and Voice Over (for iOS) to access dating application content, to converts text and User Interface elements into speech or Braille. However, many applications lack proper labelling or focus control, making features such as chat buttons or match list inaccessible (Audio Eye, 2024). A Web AIM survey found that JAWS is widely used by visually impaired users (40.5% of respondents), but its effectiveness is compromised when dating platforms are not optimised for accessibility (Web AIM, 2025).

AI-powered tools like Microsoft's Seeing AI, Envisions Ask Envision, and Be My Eyes help visually impaired users to interpret visual content in real-time. These tools describe photos, such as facial expressions and environments, improving users' confidence in assessing dating profile pictures (Robles, 2023). Be My Eyes now uses GPT-4 to enhance its descriptions, offering AI-generated summaries to better assess profile images (Robles *et al.*, 2023). However, these technologies have limitations, and errors or "hallucinations" can mislead users (Robles, 2023).

Audio descriptions (AD), already used in media are being adapted for dating apps. AD can describe profile images with emotional tone, such as "smiling in an outdoor setting," helping convey context and personality. Early prototypes like Met a Four's "Real Voice" feature integrated voice clips and audio descriptors, demonstrating how AD can reshape dating interactions by providing non-visual insights (Bhagirathi, 2021).

Despite these advancements, users report challenges when switching between assistive tools, and interactions can be slow or unintuitive (Reddit user, 2021). AI descriptions may also contain inaccuracies, such as misidentifying objects or facial expressions, which undermines trust (u/Blind, 2021). Developers must prioritise accuracy, user control, and continuous feedback loops to improve reliability, ensuring that technology enhances visually impaired individuals' social and romantic agency.

Self-devised tactics and peer support

Visually impaired daters often use self-devised strategies to navigate dating platforms that prioritise visual media. Some record audio introductions or design detailed text bios to express personality, humour, and values, shifting focus from appearance to voice and narrative (Bhagirathi, 2021; Shrestha & Vadlamani, 2024). On Reddit, users report that openly

disclosing blindness early in bios improves match quality and builds confidence through authenticity (u/Blind, 2021).

In addition to self-presentation, visually impaired individuals create community-driven forums for sharing advice, support, and advice (Bhagirathi, 2021; u/Blind, 2021). Initiatives like the "Real Voice Profiles" prototype foster peer support, allowing users to exchange dating strategies and encourage each other, helping combat isolation (Bhagirathi, 2021).

Offline, organisations like World Services for the Blind (WSB) offer community events that enable visually impaired individuals to practice disclosure, build confidence, and connect with others (WSB, 2022). These combined online and offline support networks provide safety and reinforce the resilience of the visually impaired community, thereby enabling them to engage in romantic interactions despite limitations.

Through adaptive strategies, peer support, and social group engagement, visually impaired daters challenge exclusion and expand the possibilities of romantic connection, upholding their visibility, voice, and sexual autonomy.

2.8. Psychological and emotional dimensions

2.8.1. Body image and self-esteem

Body image and self-esteem significantly impact dating experiences. However, visually impaired individuals face unique challenges in these areas, thereby relying on tactile experiences or others' descriptions to form their self-concept (da Nóbrega Fiho *et al.*, 2024; Fatima *et al.*, 2022). This dependency can foster ambiguity and insecurity, particularly in visually normative dating cultures that emphasise physical appearance (Fatima *et al.*, 2022).

A study in the United Kingdom by Papadopoulos *et al.* (2013) found that blind or visually impaired individuals often report lower self-confidence regarding their appearance

compared to their sighted peers. This lack of visual feedback can increase self-consciousness, making dating and romantic engagement more challenging. In societies focused on visual beauty standards, this leads to body dissatisfaction and hinders the development of romantic self-efficacy (Csernák & Gombás, 2022; Shakespeare, 2014; Shpigelman & Vorobioff, 2021).

However, visually impaired individuals often prioritise non-visual cues such as tone of voice, personality, and shared values in forming connections (Malekitabar *et al.*, 2024; Mandell & Hecht, 2023; Rokach *et al.*, 2021). These alternatives foster deeper relational connections based on emotional compatibility rather than physical aesthetics (Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2012; Young, 2021).

A study in Germany by Pinquart and Pfeiffer (2012) highlighted how societal beauty ideals that prioritise sight, marginalise those unable to engage with these norms. Thus, emphasising the need for inclusive representations of beauty and body positivity, particularly for youth with disabilities.

In the United States, Young (2021) explored how communication barriers regarding limited access to visual information affect self-confidence and social interaction in dating. Csernák and Gombás (2022) emphasised the need for greater awareness of visual impairments among fully sighted individuals to foster inclusivity in dating. According to Shpigelman and Vorobioff (2021), internalised ableism and societal stigma complicate romantic experiences for visually impaired adults, highlighting the importance of self-acceptance, social support, and inclusive relationship education.

2.8.2. *Mental health and romantic engagement*

Visually impaired individuals encounter unique psychological challenges in dating, which significantly affects their mental health. Studies demonstrate that anxiety related to

romantic interactions is common, driven by fears of rejection, social awkwardness, and concerns about being misunderstood due to their impairment (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2013; Shpigelman & Vorobioff, 2021). This anxiety is worsened by societal stigma, inaccessible environments, and internalised ableism, which undermine self-confidence and contributes to emotional distress (Botha, 2021; Shildrick, 2009).

A study in the United Kingdom by Papadopoulos *et al.* (2013) found that young adults with visual impairments often experience social anxiety in dating contexts, being concerned about how others would perceive their disability, and fears being pitied. These anxieties led to avoidance behaviours and hesitancy in pursuing romantic relationships. Similarly, in South Africa, Botha (2021) found that societal beauty ideals and emphasis on visual cues worsened feelings of low self-worth among visually impaired individuals, fostering emotional vulnerability. A study conducted in Israel by Shpigelman and Vorobioff (2021) also highlighted that dating anxiety often stemmed from past rejection experiences. This leads to long-term negative impacts on mental health, including shame and feelings of unworthiness. The stress of navigating dating norms that prioritise visual attraction was also noted by Shpigelman and Vorobioff (2021), who observed that many individuals with disabilities internalise societal standards, leading to difficulties in forming intimate connections.

Depression is another concern, as the challenges in forming and maintaining romantic relationships, along with social isolation, contribute to feelings of loneliness (Csernák & Gombás, 2022). A UK-based study by Saltes (2012) found that blind adults in public and dating spaces often experienced depressive symptoms due to social exclusion and limited access to opportunities. The intersection of ableism with broader social factors, such as gender and race, also compounds these challenges, as marginalised groups face compounded barriers in navigating romantic spaces (Erevelles, 2011; Schalk, 2017).

These findings emphasise the need for accessible mental health services that address the intersection of disability, sexuality, and mental well-being. Disability-affirmative counselling, peer support, and inclusive relationship education are essential for mitigating the mental health impacts of dating (Csernák & Gombás, 2022; Piquart & Pfeiffer, 2012). Therefore, raising public awareness about the unique experiences of visually impaired individuals can help reduce stigma and create more supportive social environments (Shakespeare, 2014).

2.8.3. Resilience and coping mechanisms

Visually impaired individuals demonstrate resilience in navigating the dating world, where visual norms often dominate. To cope with structural and interpersonal challenges, many develop adaptive strategies that promote emotional well-being, self-esteem, and relational engagement (Botha, 2021). These strategies reflect both responses to exclusion and expressions of agency and identity.

One common strategy they adopt is developing strong interpersonal communication skills. In a South African study, Botha (2021) found that participants used humour, personality, and empathy to counter ableism attitudes and assert agency during dating encounters. This is consistent with a study in the United States by Houtenville *et al.* (2023), emphasising how communication skills and active listening foster intimacy and emotional safety for visually impaired individuals.

There is also need for social networks and peer support. Support groups and online forums offer opportunities to share experiences, validate challenges, and receive advice. These peer-led spaces provide emotional support and reduce isolation, thereby promoting self-worth (Houtenville *et al.*, 2023). In Germany and the Netherlands, disability rights movements have

strengthened these community-based strategies, helping build resilience and romantic autonomy (Ozyurt, 2021).

Advancements in assistive technologies such as screen readers, AD software, and voice-command features, further enhance empowerment and resilience. According to a study conducted in the United Kingdom by Hersh (2013), these technologies improved accessibility, confidence, and participation in online dating. Similarly, Bhagirathi (2021) in India noted that visually impaired users relied on audio introductions and detailed profiles to communicate their identities.

These coping strategies demonstrate how visually impaired individuals adapt to visually oriented dating cultures by leveraging communication skills, technology, and social support, ultimately fostering romantic fulfilment and emotional resilience.

2.9.Gaps in the literature

The experiences of visually impaired individuals navigating dating in a visual digital world remain under explored, despite growing interest in disability and sexuality. Existing literature primarily addresses general disability access or technological accommodations, neglecting the nuanced, first-person experiences of visually impaired individuals, especially in romantic contexts (Shakespeare, 2013). This gap silences those directly affected, particularly in intimate settings where personal perspective is crucial. Moreover, most studies are from the Global North, reflecting Western assumptions about disability, sexuality, and technology, which may not be applicable to those in the Global South or low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Grech, 2015).

Another critical gap is the lack of longitudinal and intersectional research on dating and visual impairment. Many studies are short-term and fail to consider the impact of intersecting

factors such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation on access to love and intimacy (Erevelles, 2011). Given the visual bias in online dating platforms, these perspectives are essential for understanding compounded exclusions. There is a pressing need for long-term, inclusive research, particularly in non-Western contexts where infrastructural and cultural barriers may differ significantly.

2.9.1. Lack of first-person narratives

First-person narratives from visually impaired individuals are underrepresented in research, particularly in the context of dating and romantic relationships. Much of the existing literature relies on second-hand accounts or theoretical abstractions, thereby overlooking the lived experiences of visually impaired people (Goodley, 2017). In the context of online dating, where identity is often shaped by visual cues, personal accounts are crucial for understanding how individuals navigate spaces that are not designed for accessibility. These narratives reveal emotional, psychological, and social aspects often overlooked in technical assessments (Kafer, 2013).

The lack of first-person voices contributes to the desexualisation of disabled individuals, reinforcing the stereotype that they are excluded from romantic life. This marginalisation limits our understanding and perpetuates structural silences in both academic and public discourse (Shildrick, 2009). Therefore, including these voices challenges ableism assumptions about bodies and relationships. Future studies should prioritise participatory approaches, such as phenomenology, life history interviews, and auto ethnography, to ensure that visually impaired individuals are co-creators of knowledge, especially in online dating contexts (Thomas & Milligan, 2018).

2.9.2. Underrepresentation of Low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) perspectives

Studies on the experiences of visually impaired individuals in digital dating mainly focuses on the Global North, leaving a gap in understanding from LMICs. This geographic angle overlooks the distinct cultural, technological, and infrastructural contexts of the Global South, where issues like limited smartphone access, poor internet coverage, and low digital literacy affect dating experiences (Grech & Soldatic, 2016). These regional differences contribute to digital exclusion and marginalisation, particularly in societies with limited disability rights support and awareness (Grech & Soldatic, 2016).

In LMICs, visually impaired individuals also encounter unique cultural barriers that influence dating dynamics, such as increased social exclusion or familial control over romantic choices, particularly in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Moodley & Ross, 2015). These cultural attitudes reinforce the belief that disabled individuals are asexual or unworthy of romantic relationships, further isolating them. However, this intersection of challenges is often overlooked by current studies, which is often biased toward Western perspectives on disability, technology, and intimacy.

To address this gap, empirical studies should focus on the experiences of visually impaired individuals in LMICs, incorporating community-based participatory research, and intersectional frameworks. This study could inform more inclusive technology design and policymaking, ensuring dating platforms are accessible and relevant to diverse users (Grech & Soldatic, 2016).

2.9.3. Need for longitudinal and intersectional research

Another significant limitation in research on visually impaired individuals and digital dating is the lack of longitudinal studies. Most studies rely on cross-sectional data, which only

capture experiences at a single point and fail to reflect changes over time in romantic relationships, identity development, and adaptation to technology (Booth & Booth, 2003). Therefore, longitudinal research could provide insights into how engagement with dating platforms evolves with age, technological advancements, or changes in social support and confidence. This will help to understand the long-term emotional and psychological effects of digital dating.

Moreover, much of the existing literature lacks an intersectional analysis, which is essential for understanding how overlapping identities such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation shape unique dating experiences (Ruiz *et al.*, 2021). For instance, a visually impaired queer woman of colour in a rural area may encounter different challenges compared to a middle-class, heterosexual blind man in an urban setting. By treating visually impaired individuals as a homogenous group, studies often overlook the compounded barriers created by intersecting identities (Schalk, 2017).

The lack of intersectional research also limits the development of inclusive recommendations for digital dating platform design and policies. Platforms that aim to implement accessibility features often cater for a narrow user group, typically white, male, and Western, ignoring how cultural values and socio-economic disparities affect the engagement of visually impaired users from diverse backgrounds (Hankivsky & Kapilashrami, 2020). Intersectional studies could lead to more responsive and inclusive platform design, ensuring broader access and meaningful participation in digital romantic spaces.

Finally, the lack of longitudinal and intersectional data also limits advocacy efforts aimed at improving social inclusion in romantic spaces. Therefore, policymakers, educators, and healthcare professionals need comprehensive evidence to design effective interventions

that address both the immediate and long-term needs of visually impaired individuals (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1.Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to explore the lived experiences of visually impaired individuals navigating online dating. The study employed a qualitative design due to the subjective and socially embedded nature of these experiences. A phenomenological approach was adopted to gain in-depth insight into how participants perceive and make meaning of dating in a visually driven digital context (Creswell & Poth, 2022; Moustakas, 2023).

A phenomenological approach was well-suited for this study, as it focuses on the essence of experiences as described by those who experience them (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This method allows the collection of rich descriptions on how individuals with visual impairments confront challenges and cultivate digital intimacy.

The chapter highlights the research design, including purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis. It also addresses ethical considerations, reflexivity, and strategies employed to ensure rigour and trustworthiness. Overall, the methodology enables a meaningful exploration of how visual impairment intersects with identity and online dating practices.

3.2.Research paradigm: epistemological and ontological positioning

The present study is situated within an **interpretivist research paradigm**, which provides the philosophical foundation for its methodological choices. Interpretivism assumes that reality is not objective or fixed, but socially constructed and experienced subjectively through

individuals' interactions with the world (Pretorius, 2024). Ontologically, this study adopts a relativist position, recognising that there are multiple realities which are shaped by participants' unique social, cultural, and embodied contexts. Epistemologically, it aligns with a subjectivist stance, where knowledge is understood as co-constructed through the interaction between the researcher and participants, rather than being discovered as an external truth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pretorius, 2024).

This philosophical standing is particularly appropriate for a study concerned with lived experience and meaning-making. The focus on how visually impaired individuals experience and interpret online dating within a visually oriented digital environment necessitates an approach that values subjective meaning, context, and interpretation. By situating the study within an interpretivism paradigm, conceptual coherence is maintained between the research aim, the phenomenological approach, and the use of thematic analysis as an interpretive analytic tool.

3.2.1. Phenomenological orientation

Within this interpretivist paradigm, the study adopts an interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological approach, drawing on Heideggerian and contemporary phenomenological traditions (Finlay, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). In contrast to Husserlian descriptive phenomenology, which aims to identify universal essences through rigorous bracketing, interpretive phenomenology acknowledges that understanding is shaped by context, language, and prior experience. As such, it foregrounds interpretation as an inherent and necessary aspect of engaging with lived experience.

This approach aligns with the study's aim of exploring how visually impaired individuals *navigate* online dating, rather than just describing their experiences. It enables an examination of how meaning is shaped through the interaction between embodiment,

technological design, and broader social norms. In this sense, experience is understood as situated and relational, emanating from engaging with a visually structured digital world.

3.2.2. Operationalising phenomenological principles

Three core phenomenological principles; intentionality, bracketing, and rich description guided the research process and operationalised in relation to the study's interpretive orientation.

Intentionality: refers to the directedness of consciousness toward objects and experiences. In this study, it informed both data collection and analysis. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences with online dating, and how they perceived, interpreted, and responded to these interactions. This enabled the study to capture the meanings ascribed by participants to their experiences, including how they navigated visibility, desirability, and connection within visually dominant platforms (Zahavi, 2021).

Bracketing was employed as a reflexive and iterative practice rather than a complete suspension of the researcher's prior knowledge. In line with interpretive phenomenology, the researcher acknowledged that complete bracketing is neither entirely possible nor desirable, given the co-constructed nature of meaning (Oluka, 2025; Thomas & Sohn, 2023). Rather, bracketing involved critically engaging with and highlighting the researcher's assumptions, particularly regarding her partial insider position. This was achieved through reflective journaling and audio-recorded self-reflections conducted throughout the research process, as well as deliberate efforts during analysis to remain grounded in participants' accounts.

Rich description was central to the study's analytic approach. Detailed, contextually situated accounts of participants' experiences were generated through semi-structured interviews and supported by verbatim quotations. These descriptions captured the practical challenges of

navigating online dating platforms, as well as the emotional, relational, and perceptual dimensions of these experiences. Such depth is essential for phenomenological inquiry, as it enables the researcher to extend beyond surface-level description towards a more nuanced understanding of lived experience (Van Manen, 2023).

3.2.3. Methodological coherence

By positioning the study within an interpretivist paradigm and employing an interpretive phenomenological approach, coherence is achieved across the overall research design. Therefore, thematic analysis is not viewed as a separate or competing methodology, but as an analytic approach that aligns with interpretivist and phenomenological inquiry when applied interpretively (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This alignment ensures coherence between the study's philosophical assumptions, methodological approach, and analytical processes.

Overall, the interpretivist paradigm holds the study's ontological and epistemological commitments, while interpretive phenomenology provides a framework for exploring lived experience as meaningfully constructed and contextually situated. This integrated positioning strengthens the study's methodological intelligibility and supports a more rigorous and theoretically grounded analysis of visually impaired individuals' experiences of online dating in a visual world.

3.3. Methodological approach

Phenomenology foregrounds the principle of intentionality, asserting that consciousness is always directed towards something. That is, individuals experience the world through purposeful focus shaped by their goals, values, and personal contexts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022; Zahavi, 2021). This concept is particularly relevant in understanding how visually impaired individuals navigate romantic and dating experiences. Rather than passively receiving sensory input, individuals with visual impairments engage

intentionally with potential partners by emphasising non-visual cues such as voice, language, emotional resonance, and shared values. Such engagements reflect a purposeful interaction with the social world shaped by their lived realities and subjective priorities (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Zahavi, 2021). Therefore, investigating these intentional acts can yield deeper insights into the adaptive, meaningful ways through which visually impaired individuals interpret and connect with romantic possibilities.

3.4. Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the lived experiences of visually impaired individuals navigating online dating. Qualitative research was suitable for understanding individuals' perceptions and experiences within their natural contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Willig, 2021). Thus, it was employed for investigating how visually impaired individuals navigate a visually oriented dating culture.

An exploratory approach guided the research design, participant selection, and data collection, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the complexity of online dating experiences, qualitative methods enabled rich, in-depth insights into how participants perceive and manage digital intimacy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method, offering a balance between flexibility and consistency. This method enabled participants to express their unique experiences while addressing key topics (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The exploratory approach informed this choice and helped align methodological decisions with the study's aims.

Careful planning during this phase ensured that the methodology, data collection strategy, and participant selection were well aligned to capture the complexities of visually

impaired individuals' online dating experiences, thereby contributing valuable insights to an under-researched area.

3.5. Research design

The research design plays a critical role in shaping the overall structure and approach of a study.

An in-depth understanding of people's experiences, perceptions, and meanings attached to particular contexts can be attained through the use of qualitative research design. A qualitative research design is well-designed for exploring complex phenomena (Cresswell, 2013). It enabled a detailed analysis of visually impaired individuals' distinct views, feelings, and obstacles when examining their online dating experiences.

Phenomenology emphasises the understanding of essence and significance of their experiences within a certain event (Cresswell, 2013). By employing a phenomenological approach, the study seeks to understand the underlying meanings and structures shaping participants' online dating experiences. In addition, it aims to acquire an understanding of the challenges associated with online dating for visually impaired individuals.

3.5.1. Multiple case study design

This study adopted a multiple case study design. Therefore, each participant was treated as an individual "case," representing a bounded instance of the broader phenomenon: navigating online dating within a visually oriented digital environment. The study purposefully includes multiple participants to allow for systematic comparison across cases, rather than an in-depth exploration of a single case. This design enabled the researcher to explore how similar processes unfold under different personal, social, and technological conditions (Yin, 2018).

Data were analysed at two levels. First, a within-case analysis was conducted to develop a rich, contextualised understanding of each participant's experiences, preserving the depth and

uniqueness of their narratives. Second, a cross-case analysis was undertaken to identify patterns, similarities, and points of divergence across participants. This dual analytic strategy strengthens the explanatory power of the study by revealing both shared structures of experience and context-specific variations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

A multiple case study design was well-suited for this study, as it enables the examination of complex, real-life phenomena where disability, digital media, and intimate relationships intersect. By comparing multiple cases, the study extends beyond isolated individual accounts to generate more robust, analytically generalisable insights that can inform inclusive digital design and psychosocial practice (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate rich, first-person accounts of participants' experiences. They were conducted through online video calls, lasting between an hour to two hours. Data were analysed through thematic analysis both within and across cases. This approach is consistent with the aims of case study research, preserving the integrity of each case while identifying broader patterns. It also reinforces the study's phenomenological emphasis on both individual meaning-making and shared lived experience (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.6.Sampling

The study employed criterion sampling, often known as purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling involves selecting participants with specific characters or experiences to gather rich information (Stratton, 2024). In this study, visually impaired individuals with online dating experience were chosen based on age, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural background to ensure diverse insights.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria

Visually impaired individuals	Non-consenting individuals
Age 18 or older	Age below 18
Online dating experience	Lack of online dating experience
English Proficiency	Language Barrier: Non-English Speaking
Informed Consent	Incapacitating cognitive impairment

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

3.7. Sample and setting

Individuals with visual impairments aged at least 18 years old and have online dating experience were recruited for this study. The UNISA Advocacy Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities (ARCSWiD), Cape Association for the Blind, the South African Guide Dog Society were used to identify potential participants. Additionally, verbal consent was obtained. The director of each were contacted and asked to enquire if there would be any volunteers who would like to participate in this study. Social media was also used to locate participants by advertising the study on blind Facebook groups, to ask if anyone was willing to participate. Visually impaired individuals with online dating experience using applications like Tinder, Bumble, and OK Cupid and willing to discuss their experiences, met the inclusion criteria. Those who did not wish to talk about their previous online dating experiences were excluded, as the core of the study is about dating experiences. The final sample consisted of 11 visually impaired participants. Rather than determining the sample size in advance only by number, recruitment and interviewing continued alongside preliminary data analysis. During this process, the researcher reviewed interview transcripts and emerging codes to assess whether new information was still being generated. Saturation was considered to have been reached after the eleventh interview, as the final interviews reflected recurring patterns already identified in earlier interviews, including experiences of inaccessible platform design, visual expectations in dating, emotional exclusion, disclosure, adaptation, and resistance. At this

point, no substantially new themes or analytic insights were emerging, and the available data was considered adequate to answer the study's research questions. All participants underwent one or two interviews using guided questions designed to facilitate meaning-making and support the identification of themes, experiences, and patterns through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.8.Data collection and documentation

In this study, semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible, yet systematic approach for exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and emotions, while maintaining a coherent structure through guiding questions (Knott et al., 2022; Ruslin et al., 2022). This approach is well suited to exploring the complex experiences of visually impaired individuals using online dating, given the intricate and private nature of the phenomena under investigation.

The primary language of communication for the study participants is English. Therefore, interviews were conducted in English to guarantee effective and clear communication, allowing participants to express their ideas and experiences with ease and accuracy (Kajzer, 2023). This strategy also aligns with the international aspect of online dating, where English is often a widely used language on multiple platforms, making it easy to understand the participants' experiences.

According to ethical standards, all interviews were recorded with the participants' consent (American Psychological Association, 2020). The interviews were recorded for the data to remain rich and authentic. Recording the interviews enables detailed analysis, a complete evaluation of participant responses, and ensures that no important insights are missed during the data analysis stage (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Pseudonyms were used in the study to protect participants' privacy, and they were assured that their identities will be kept anonymous.

3.8.1. *Semi-structured individual interviews*

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore the online dating experiences of visually impaired individuals. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate because they allowed the researcher to use a prepared interview guide while still giving participants the freedom to describe their experiences in their own words. This method also enabled the researcher to ask follow-up questions, clarify responses, and explore unexpected issues that emerged during the interview process (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Kallio et al., 2016). Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful in qualitative research because they provide both structure and flexibility, allowing the researcher to gather comparable data across participants while still capturing the depth and uniqueness of individual experience (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

The interview questions focused on participants' experiences of using online dating platforms within a digital environment that often privileges visual interaction. The interviews explored how participants accessed and navigated dating applications or websites, including the strategies they used to overcome barriers related to visual impairment. Participants were also asked about communication challenges, particularly where online dating depended on visual cues such as profile photographs, swiping, emojis, screenshots, or image-based interaction.

In addition, the interviews examined how participants presented themselves on dating platforms, including whether, when, and how they chose to disclose their visual impairment. Attention was also given to the nature of participants' social and romantic interactions online, including how they formed connections, built trust, interpreted interest, and negotiated vulnerability. A further focus of the interviews was on barriers and accessibility, including

participants' experiences of inaccessible design, assistive technology, platform limitations, and features that either supported or restricted their participation.

Overall, the semi-structured interviews provided rich and detailed accounts of the obstacles, opportunities, emotions, and strategies that shaped participants' online dating experiences. This approach helped capture the complexity of dating in a visually dominant digital space while allowing participants' own meanings and interpretations to remain central to the study (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

The final sample consisted of 11 participants. Recruitment and interviewing continued alongside preliminary analysis until the data began to show repeated patterns across participants' accounts. Saturation was considered to have been reached after the eleventh interview, when no substantially new themes or insights were emerging and the data collected was sufficient to address the research objectives. This approach is consistent with qualitative research guidance that defines saturation as the point at which additional data no longer generate new codes, themes, or meaningful analytic insights (Guest et al., 2020; Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). Guest et al. (2020) further note that saturation should be assessed and reported transparently rather than simply asserted. In this study, saturation was therefore identified through the repetition of key patterns across the later interviews, including inaccessible platform design, reliance on visual presentation, emotional exclusion, disclosure decisions, adaptation strategies, and resistance to ableist dating norms.

3.8.2. Phenomenological methodological framework and thematic analysis process

This study is grounded in an interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological framework. Although participants may be understood as individual cases in a loose descriptive sense, the primary methodological orientation is phenomenological. This methodology is concerned with exploring and interpreting the *lived experiences* of visually impaired individuals

navigating online dating within a visually dominated digital world. Therefore, the analytic focus is on identifying shared structures of meaning across participants' experiences. This positioning aligns the study with a Heideggerian, interpretive tradition of phenomenology, which recognises that experience is already situated, interpreted, and embedded within social and technological contexts (Finlay, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Within this framework, three core phenomenological principles; intentionality, bracketing, and rich description were operationalised throughout the research process. Intentionality, which is understood as the directedness of consciousness towards the world, informed both data collection and analysis by foregrounding how participants make meaning of online dating through their embodied and perceptual engagements. Semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' experiences, focusing on what they encountered on dating platforms, and how they perceive, interpret, and respond to these encounters regarding their own identities and relational intentions.

To support the interpretive phenomenological orientation, a systematic process of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), was employed. Thematic analysis was employed to retain analytic flexibility and accommodate a broader exploration of patterns across participants, rather than an idiographic focus on a small number of cases. This approach is consistent with a theoretically informed thematic analysis, where themes are developed inductively from the data and in dialogue with the study's phenomenological and critical theoretical framing.

The analytic process involved several iterative stages. Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to facilitate immersion. Initial open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units of text relevant to the research question. These codes were then refined, compared, and grouped into broader categories through focused coding. From these

categories, candidate themes were developed to capture patterned meanings across the dataset. Importantly, theme development moved beyond descriptive summarisation toward interpretive analysis, considering how participants' experiences were shaped by the interaction between embodiment, technological design, and social norms.

Themes were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and external distinction, referencing the phenomenological framework. This included revisiting the data to verify that themes were grounded in participants' accounts and supported by illustrative extracts, while also examining how these experiences could be understood regarding broader structures of meaning. In this context, analysis was both data-driven and theoretically informed, reflecting the hermeneutic commitment to interpreting lived experiences within its contextual and relational dimensions.

Through this integrated methodological approach, the study maintains coherence between its epistemological positioning, data collection methods, and analytic strategy. By situating thematic analysis within an interpretive phenomenological framework, the study moves beyond surface-level description to offer a nuanced account of how visually impaired individuals experience, interpret, and navigate online dating within a visually oriented digital environment.

Table 1: Data Analysis Mapping (Codes → Categories → Subthemes → Themes)

Raw Data Extract	Initial Code	Category	Subtheme	Theme
"I'd have to turn VoiceOver off... then back on"	Navigation difficulty	Platform inaccessibility	Emotional labour of engaging in inaccessible platforms	Theme 1: Challenges of Navigating a Visual Dating World
"They stopped replying when I said I'm blind"	Rejection after disclosure	Social stigma	Frustration, exclusion, and invisibility	
"I don't know what I look like in these photos"	Lack of visual self-access	Visual identity tension	Pressure of visual appeal in non-visual bodies	

Raw Data Extract	Initial Code	Category	Subtheme	Theme
“Apps aren’t made for people like me”	Design exclusion	Ableist platform design	Design as disabling: intended user	Theme 3: Systemic Exclusion and Emotional Impact
“I stopped trying... what’s the point?”	Withdrawal	Emotional impact	Psychological consequences: resignation	Theme 3
“I feel like I don’t exist in that world”	Invisibility	Symbolic exclusion	Feelings of defeat and otherness	Theme 4: The Implied Message in Exclusion
“It feels like I’m not allowed to date”	Loss of identity	Romantic marginalisation	Loss of romantic identity and autonomy	Theme 4
“You memorise where buttons are”	Adaptive navigation	Workarounds	Accessible platform workarounds	Theme 5: Strategies of Resistance
“I focus on conversation, not photos”	Non-visual connection	Redefining intimacy	Redefining relational norms	Theme 5
“Voice tells me more than a photo”	Voice-based connection	Alternative communication	Voice, vulnerability, non-visual cues	Theme 5
“Not showing my photo avoids bias”	Resistance strategy	Disrupting visual norms	Embodiment, resistance, access as political acts	Theme 2: Crip Theory & Politics of Access
“We create our own ways of connecting”	Alternative practices	Cripistemology	Foundations and exploratory power	Theme 2

3.8.3. *Field notes*

To enhance reflexivity and maintain a transparent audit trail, an audio recorder was used to document researcher’s self-reflections immediately after each interview. This practice enabled the researcher to capture initial impressions, emotional responses, and emerging thoughts while the interaction was still fresh in mind. Audio-recorded self-reflections are a valuable tool in qualitative research, as they support continuous self-awareness and help researchers to identify potential biases that could shape data interpretation (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). Reflexive recordings also function as a form of remembering, which facilitates analytic clarity and contributes to methodological rigour (Saldaña, 2016). By engaging in this process, the researcher was able to remain critically aware of how her positionality and assumptions may influence the research process and interpretation of participants’ narratives (Tracy, 2010).

3.9. Rigour, reflexivity, and epistemological positioning

Rigour in qualitative research extends beyond the procedural application of techniques and requires a transparent account of how knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and validated within a particular epistemological framework. This study is grounded in a phenomenological paradigm, which assumes that reality is subjectively experienced and co-constructed through individuals' interpretations of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Finlay, 2011). As such, the researcher does not occupy a detached, objective position but is actively involved in meaning-making. Recognising this, rigour was approached through established criteria; credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability as well as through sustained reflexive engagement with the research process.

The researcher occupies a position of partial insider status, given her professional background in counselling and her engagement with issues of accessibility and psychosocial well-being. This positioning offered both advantages and potential limitations. It facilitated rapport-building, empathetic attunement, and a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences (Berger, 2015). Simultaneously, it introduced the possibility of interpretive bias, particularly in over-identifying with participants or privileging certain meanings. To address this, a process of reflexive bracketing was conducted throughout the study. This involved consciously identifying and setting aside pre-existing assumptions, expectations, and experiential knowledge during both data collection and analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Reflective journaling served as a key tool in this process, enabling the researcher to document evolving thoughts, emotional responses, and potential biases, as well as to critically examine how these may have shaped interpretation (Finlay, 2011).

Credibility, which is understood as the extent to which findings authentically represent participants' lived experiences was strengthened through multiple, explicitly enacted

strategies. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms, while iterative probing ensured depth and clarity. Member checking was conducted by sharing emerging interpretations with participants, allowing them to affirm, refine, or challenge the researcher's understanding. In addition, prolonged engagement with the data through repeated immersion in transcripts and iterative cycles of coding ensured that findings were based on participants' accounts rather than premature analytic closure (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

Dependability was established through methodological transparency and consistency in the research process. A comprehensive audit trail was maintained, documenting each stage of the research process, including recruitment decisions, interview protocols, transcription conventions, coding development, and theme refinement. This audit trail provides a clear record of procedural steps and captures the evolution of analytic decisions, allowing the research process to be traced and evaluated (Miles *et al.*, 2014; Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The systematic application of thematic analysis further supported dependability by ensuring that data were analysed through a coherent and replicable analytic framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Transferability was addressed through the provision of rich, contextualised descriptions which position participants within their specific social, cultural, and technological environments. Detailed accounts of participants' experiences of online dating, alongside relevant demographic information, enable readers to make informed judgments about the transferability of the findings to other contexts. The inclusion of verbatim quotations further strengthens this by preserving the nuance and texture of participants' voices, thereby supporting a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Confirmability was strengthened by ensuring that findings were grounded in the data and not shaped by researcher's bias. This was achieved through the integration of the audit trail, reflexive journaling, and the consistent use of participant quotations to substantiate analytic claims. Importantly, reflexivity was not treated as a peripheral activity but as an ongoing methodological commitment, embedded throughout the research process. By explicitly acknowledging and critically engaging with the researcher's positionality, the study enhances the transparency and trustworthiness of its interpretations (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2011; Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

Through this integrated approach, the study demonstrates a rigorous and credible account of how visually impaired individuals experience and navigate online dating within a visually oriented digital world.

3.10. Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of online dating, intimacy, and disability, ethical considerations in this study were not just treated as procedural requirements but as ongoing, reflexive practices embedded throughout the research process. Attention was paid to the potential emotional vulnerability, issues of privacy in digital contexts, and the researcher-participant relationship, especially where shared experiences of visual impairment may influence disclosure and meaning-making.

3.10.1. Ethical approval and governance

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review body. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined by the American Psychological Association (2017; 2020), including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. These principles guided all stages of the research, that is from recruitment to dissemination.

3.10.2. Informed consent as an ongoing process

Informed consent was implemented as a **continuous and dialogical process**, rather than a once-off agreement. Participants were provided with accessible information sheets (in formats compatible with screen readers) detailing the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and their rights. These included the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty and to decline answering any questions.

Before each interview, consent was reconfirmed verbally, and participants were reminded of their right to pause, refuse to answer any question, or stop the interview at any time. This approach was particularly important given the potential sensitivity of discussing personal dating experiences, rejection, and stigma, as sensitive interviews may evoke emotional discomfort and therefore require careful attention to participant safety, privacy, autonomy, and ongoing consent (Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Westland et al., 2025). Consent was therefore treated as an ongoing ethical process rather than a once-off procedural requirement, ensuring that participation remained fully voluntary, informed, and responsive to participants' emotional well-being (Boden-Stuart & Thompson, 2026; Westland et al., 2025).

3.10.3. Managing emotional risk and participant well-being

Recognising that discussing dating, exclusion, and identity may evoke emotional discomfort, specific measures were implemented to **minimise and respond to potential harm**.

Interviews were conducted in a supportive, non-judgmental manner, allowing participants to guide the depth and direction of disclosure.

The researcher remained attentive to verbal and emotional cues during the interviews and offered breaks where necessary. Participants were also provided with information about relevant support resources in case any distress arose after participation. Importantly,

questions were framed sensitively to avoid reinforcing stigma, and participants retained control over what they chose to disclose.

3.10.4. Confidentiality, anonymity, and data security

Given the personal and potentially identifiable nature of participants' experiences, **strict confidentiality protocols** were followed. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all identifying information were removed or altered during transcription.

Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected devices, with access limited to the researcher. Data will be retained and disposed in accordance with institutional and ethical guidelines. These measures ensured that participants' identities and personal experiences could not be traced back to them (Guest *et al.*, 2020).

3.10.5. Privacy and digital sensitivity

This study involved discussion of **digitally mediated relationships**, which introduce additional privacy considerations. Participants were not required to disclose identifying information about partners or specific platforms beyond general use. Measures were taken to avoid collecting or reporting sensitive third-party information.

Furthermore, participants' control over their narratives was prioritised, recognising that online dating involves complex negotiations of self-presentation, privacy, and vulnerability.

3.10.6. Respect for dignity, diversity, and power dynamics

Respect for participants' dignity and diverse experiences was central to the research design and implementation. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity to **power dynamics**, particularly given the researcher's partial insider position. Although shared experience may facilitate rapport, it also requires reflexive awareness to avoid assumptions or over-identification.

Participants were treated as **experts of their own experiences**, and their accounts were represented in the analysis. Efforts were made to ensure that the findings reflected both common patterns and individual differences, while avoiding the homogenisation of visually impaired experiences (Morrow, 2005).

3.10.7. Researcher reflexivity as an ethical practice

Ethical integrity was further supported through **ongoing reflexivity**, where the researcher critically examined her own positionality, assumptions, and influence on the research process. This included maintaining reflective journals and engaging in bracketing to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than researcher bias.

This reflexive approach was particularly important, given the study's focus on lived experience, where meaning is co-constructed between the researcher and participants.

3.10.8. Social responsibility and beneficence

The study was conducted with a commitment to **social responsibility**, which aims to produce knowledge that contributes to greater awareness of accessibility challenges and promotes more inclusive digital practices. By centring the voices of visually impaired individuals, the study seeks to challenge ableist assumptions and inform the design of more equitable online dating environments (APA, 2020).

3.10.9. Professional competence

The researcher ensured that the study was conducted with appropriate **methodological and ethical competence**, drawing on training in qualitative research, interviewing on sensitive topics, and thematic analysis. This supported both the rigour of the research and the ethical treatment of participants throughout the study (Willig, 2001).

3.11. Conclusion

This chapter clarified the methodological logic underpinning the study, demonstrating how a qualitative, phenomenological design was used to explore the lived realities of visually impaired individuals navigating online dating. By treating participants' accounts as situated, meaning-making processes, the study prioritised depth, context, and subjective interpretation over generalisation.

The integration of purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis created a coherent methodological framework which enabled both detailed individual accounts and the identification of broader experiential patterns. Importantly, these methods were not applied in isolation; rather they worked together to capture the complexity of dating within a visually dominated digital environment where personal, social, and technological factors intersect.

Overall, the methodological choices position this study to generate nuanced insights into how visually impaired individuals negotiate visibility, connection, and identity in online dating spaces. The emphasis on both individual narratives and shared patterns provides a foundation for understanding not only *what* participants experience, but also *how* they interpret and respond to these experiences.

The following chapter presents the study findings, drawing on participants' narratives to illustrate key themes and patterns that emerged from the data. It extends the methodological framework outlined here by providing an in-depth analysis of both within-case experiences and cross-case insights.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION

4.1.Introduction

This section presents the study's key findings, exploring the lived experiences of visually impaired individuals using online dating platforms. It demonstrates how participants navigate these spaces, the challenges they encounter, and how they adapt to engage meaningfully in a predominantly visual environment.

Table 2: Participants demographic information

<i>Participant pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Totally blind/Partially blind</i>
Anna	44	Female	Not Married	Totally blind
Peter	28	Male	Not Married	Totally blind
Kate	31	Female	Not Married	Totally blind
Carl	25	Male	Married	Partially blind
Dave	40	Male	Not Married	Partially blind
Darren	41	Male	Not Married	Partially blind
Dan	41	Male	Married	Totally blind
Steve	32	Male	Not Married	Partially blind
Jane	34	Female	Not Married	Totally blind
Jack	24	Male	Not Married	Totally blind
Nathan	31	Male	Not Married	Totally blind

4.2.Synopsis

4.2.1. *Participant 1: Anna*

Participant Anna was a 44-year-old female. She holds a Bachelor's degree and teaches school children English. Her retinas are damaged and detached. *"It's been kind of complicated for me (regarding dating). I think in my country especially. If you are a woman with 100%*

disability it is very hard to find (someone) that takes you seriously.” She has dating experience mainly with people from other countries: *“most of my experiences (are) from guys from other countries”*. *“One from Macedonia, one from my Facebook group and we were pen pals and friends first and the third one I met on another list . . . So, in real life I met one of them.”* *“Many guys don’t realise what it takes to date someone from another country or another culture”*.

She had not used mobile dating applications before: *“use an iPhone and it’s not very accessible. Even on online dating apps . . . I have tried a couple of sites for the disabled.”* When explaining her disability, she said:

“When you tell that you are blind, most of the time they either get put off, or they laugh at you. They just block you. Like you’re wasting your time. Sometimes I get very upset because you can’t go so long or again, no matter what you do. I don’t have much time to find someone because I’m now 44, so I think I will find someone while I still can have kids.”

4.2.2. Participant 2: Peter

Peter was a 28-year-old unemployed male. He was familiar with applications like OK Cupid and Tinder. *“Ok Cupid was quite accessible and works quite nicely”*. *Tinder . . .” the swiping thing. All I needed to do is left, right, left, right . . . it was more accessible”*. He explained that one of his favourite dating platforms was:

“Hinge. Because I find there is more to go by there. You have 3 written prompts, and you have a certain amount of characters, and I think it’s quite sufficient and good to kind of learn a few things about people and you know, some people record voice prompts, including myself. So, there’s that whole real feeling of there might not catfishes there. It’s easier to tell what profile is genuine. He feels “most of my good experiences have come from Hinge.”

4.2.3. Participant 3: Kate

Kate was a 31-year-old female. Her visual impairment was retinopathy of prematurity, which means her retinas were detached due to premature birth. She had been in a relationship for 4 years; long distance at first, but they moved in together approximately a year ago. She tried dating applications to see how accessible they were. She used OK Cupid and Coffee Meets Bagel.

Her overall experience with online dating ability was good. She said:

“The reason I stopped doing it, had nothing to do with accessibility. It was more of an added stress of do I tell them I’m blind. And if I do tell them, do I put it in my profile? And if I don’t put it in my profile, when do I bring it up? And I feel like it just made me less confident in my disability because it was just unnecessary. It wasn’t mentally making me feel very good about myself.”

4.2.4. Participant 4: Carl

He was a 25-year-old male, with some level of sight. He could identify silhouettes, shapes, and movement. He had not had more than two serious relationships. *“The first relationship I was in for four years and the second . . . I got married so we only dated for six months before we got married.”*

He used Facebook dating and tried signing up for Tinder, but: *“never made it to talk to anyone because I couldn’t finish signing up for the account.”* *“Through the Facebook app itself, I’ve met several people like in Facebook groups.”*

4.2.5. Participant 5: Dave

Dave was a 40-year-old male, and his vision was limited to seeing silhouettes. The nerves at the back of his eyes were disintegrating. He had used Facebook for dating. *“It seems*

to be the most accessible,” and also tried Plenty of Fish. He noted that the screen reader did not work well with the other applications.

He was looking for someone that is family oriented like him: *“comes from a religious background”* and *“as long as they’ve got a good heart.”* Additionally, Dave liked someone with similar interests to him. He noted that, in general, dating is heavily visual, so visual cues get lost.

When asked if he would prefer dating a person with or without a disability he said:

“I’m not worried about that as much, as long as the person, I’m with wouldn’t be relying on me all together. I could help the other person in some ways but if you need something that was visual, I will struggle. I shouldn’t be the designated driver.”

4.2.6. Participant 6: Darren

Darren had monocular blindness, which is complete blindness in one eye. He is a queer male, and had mostly met people through online dating due to his community.

Darren was attracted to: *“... individuals who are slightly older than him. Professionals, people with formal forms of employment. Similar cultural backgrounds. And I generally enjoy intelligent individuals from whom I learned different and new things from.”* He added: *“I feel like my relationships have to be emotionally and mentally stimulating.”*

4.2.7. Participant 7: Dan

Dan was a 41-year-old male who was legally blind. He had been married for 10 years. *“But we did meet online dating,”* they met on Tinder.

He preferred a partner who connected with his personality and values.

Tinder was easily accessible for him: *“I found the accessible enough. It’s the usual challenges of starting conversations and then arranging to meet and that kind of thing. But overall, I met some interesting people, and some are still friends on social media.”*

Regarding dating with an impairment, he wished people to be more aware of:

“Obviously, you’re going to have to meet at some stage and that can bring challenges if you don’t know where they are, if you are meeting in a bar or restaurant. They would usually have to find you rather than you find them if they’re not visually impaired themselves . . . But I guess for a visually impaired person, you need to give them the heads up before and if they’re not comfortable with that, then that’s fine because you know the relationship probably wouldn’t work anyway. So just to be open in the beginning.”

4.2.8. Participant 8: Steve

Steve was a 32-year-old male, born with a juvenile illness that progressively took his sight. He was partially sighted.

Steve used to visit dating applications and realised that they were not user-friendly for him as someone with low vision.

“You sometimes navigate through it, then you find that your screen reader doesn’t read everything in some cases, and in other cases you’ll find the text is very little. You cannot read it, and it doesn’t give you the option of zooming in and out.”

Other obstacles included: *“being unable to go through someone’s profile, screen readers translating the emoji’s, being unable to interpret pictures . . .”*

Revealing his disability was a big challenge for him: *“... because I’ve got a fear of rejection.”*

4.2.9. Participant 9: Jane

Tinder and Bumble have been identified as somewhat accessible platforms by Jane, who is completely blind. Jane has an auto inflammatory disease that causes swelling of her mucous membranes when under high stress, which resulted in damage to her optic nerve and loss of vision. She met her current boyfriend through Tinder. She had been on Tinder for about

3 years. *“I had a good time like swiping through and like looking at everybody’s profiles and stuff, it definitely consumed a lot of my time.”*

Regarding obstacles encountered whilst online dating, she mentioned that:

“. . . a lot of people are turned off by blindness. They have a tendency to think that it’s a burden or a strain on them some way. Like having a relationship with me will be like more complicated because I can’t see, when in actuality like, I just can’t drive.”

4.2.10. Participant 10: Jack

Jack was a 24 year old male who was diagnosed with bilateral retinoblastoma, which resulted in the loss of his left eye; he now wears a prosthetic eye. He also underwent cataract surgery when he was in 4th grade, but his vision began to deteriorate again by the time he was in 6th grade, due to the recurrence of the cataract, which was subsequently removed in 8th grade. In 9th grade, he completely lost his sight. However, by 10th grade, he regained some light perception and wears glasses. By the time of the interview, he was using a white cane to move around, with the help of an application called Seeing AI, while waiting for a guide dog.

Jack had tried dating applications over the past year but was not successful. He tried Bumble, which he had membership with, but had not been successful. He also tried Tinder and found that often: *“they don’t have a bio, just their Instagram handle.”*

4.2.11. Participant 11: Nathan

Nathan was a 31-year-old male with a Master’s degree, currently searching for employment. Nathan lived in Pennsylvania in the US. He had been dating occasionally for the past 15 years, since he started his undergrad.

Nathan had tried various online dating platforms, as he explained, *“I tried at least four of five different ones over the past . . . I had a relationship that was about 6 months, but that was with another person that was blind.”* Online dating is: *“easier than trying to meet like in a bar or something like that.”*

Obstacles when it comes to online dating is the, “*most obvious one, which is pictures.*” “*You have to really go off of basically purely what their bio says.*” Because he depended on the bios to see whether it was a good match, those that did not have bios did not “*do it for me* [him].”

The table below presents the main themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis, highlighting how visually impaired participants experienced, interpreted, and responded to online dating within a visually dominated digital environment. Together, these themes reflect both the exclusionary impact of inaccessible dating platforms and the strategies participants used to resist, adapt, and reclaim connection.

Table 3: Themes and subthemes

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Subtheme</i>
Theme 1: Challenges of navigating a visual dating world	Emotional labour of engaging in inaccessible platforms
	Frustration, exclusion, and invisibility in digital spaces
	The pressure of “visual appeal” in non-visual bodies
Theme 2: Revisiting crip theory and the politics of access	Revisiting crip theory: foundations and exploratory power
	Embodiment, resistance, and access as political acts
Theme 3: Systemic exclusion and emotional impact	Design as disabling: Who is the “intended” user?
	Psychological consequences of exclusion: loneliness, resignation, self-silencing
Theme 4: The implied message in exclusion	Navigating feelings of defeat, shame, and otherness
	Hidden emotional toll: loss of romantic identity and autonomy
Theme 5: Strategies of resistance and reclaiming connection	Accessible platform workarounds and user adaptations
	Advocating for inclusion and redefining relational norms
	Voice, vulnerability, and non-visual cues of connection

4.3.Theme 1: Structural barriers in navigating a visual dating world

This theme focuses specifically on the structural and technical barriers embedded within online dating platforms that shape how visually impaired individuals access, navigate, and participate in digital dating environments. Participants' accounts position these platforms not as neutral technologies, but as systems designed around sighted norms, in which interface design, functionality, and interaction patterns privilege visual engagement. Viewed through the lens of crip theory, these barriers can be understood as manifestations of ableism at the design level, where visibility is assumed as the default mode of interaction. Rather than foregrounding emotional or psychological consequences (addressed in Theme 3), this theme isolates how platform architecture leads to exclusion through inaccessible features, reliance on visual verification, and interaction mechanisms that are incompatible with non-visual modes of engagement.

4.3.1. Inaccessible interfaces and the structuring of “crip time”

Participants consistently described the technical challenges of navigating dating platforms which are not optimised for screen readers or non-visual interaction. Tasks designed to be seamless such as swiping, messaging, or verifying profiles become fragmented and effortful.

Jane's (Female, Totally Blind) account; *“With Bumble, messaging is difficult... and with Hinge, you can't even use it all”* illustrates how platform functionality is unevenly distributed among users. From a crip theoretical perspective, this reflects “crip time,” where disabled users must operate outside normative temporal expectations due to systemic design constraints (Kafer, 2013).

Importantly, in this context, the disruption is structural rather than individual. Time delays are not caused by impairment itself, but platforms that assume visual immediacy. This indicates

how temporal efficiency is designed around able-bodied assumptions, rendering alternative modes of interaction inefficient by design.

4.3.2. Access labour and reliance on assistive workarounds

Participants described engaging in significant **access labour** to use these platforms. This included switching between assistive technologies, memorising layouts, or relying on external tools to interpret visual content.

For example, Nathan's (31, Totally Blind) need to toggle Voice Over on and off to perform basic functions. This demonstrates how access is not embedded within the system but must be actively constructed by the user. Similarly, Carl's inability to complete registration demonstrate how exclusion can occur at the beginning.

From a crip theory perspective, this reflects a redistribution of responsibility, where the burden of accessibility is shifted onto disabled users rather than designers. These systems require users to compensate for structural limitations, supporting the idea that access is an individual problem rather than a design failure.

4.3.3. Visual verification and the privileging of sighted embodiment

A key structural barrier identified by participants is the reliance on visual verification systems and image-based interaction. Features such as photo validation, profile images, and swipe-based engagement assume that users can see, interpret, and curate visual representations themselves.

Jane's (34, Totally Blind) statement "I don't even know what I look like in these pictures, but I know people are swiping on that," captures how platform design enforces visual modes of self-presentation, even for those who cannot access these representations. This reflects

aesthetic normativity identified by crip theory, where visual appearance becomes a primary criterion for participation (Garland-Thomson, 2002).

Structurally, this creates a mismatch between the expectations embedded within the platform and participants' lived modes of perception. Users are required to engage with systems that prioritise sighted embodiment, thereby reinforcing exclusion at the level of interface design rather than through interaction outcomes.

4.3.4. Structural invisibility and exclusion at the point of entry

Participants' accounts also highlight how exclusion is embedded at the entry point of digital dating platforms. Carl's (25, Partially Blind) inability to complete sign-up processes demonstrates how systems can effectively block access before relational interaction begins.

This reflects what is understood as structural invisibility, where certain users are not anticipated or accommodated within the design process. From a crip theoretical perspective, this is a reflection of who is imagined as the "intended user," and not an oversight.

Thus, exclusion is experienced during interaction and designed into the architecture of participation itself, shaping who can enter, navigate, and remain within these spaces.

4.4. Integrative link to research questions and theoretical framework

This theme directly addresses the research question regarding how visually impaired individuals navigate online dating platforms. It demonstrates that navigation is fundamentally shaped by structural and technological constraints rather than individual capability. Through the lens of crip theory, these findings illustrate how ableism operates at the level of design, leading to exclusion through interface logic, temporal expectations, and visual norms.

Importantly, this theme establishes the external conditions of exclusion, the structural barriers that shape participants' engagement with digital dating. This provides a necessary foundation for Theme 3, which shifts focus toward the internal, psychosocial consequences of these barriers, including emotional impact, identity negotiation, and relational withdrawal.

Although Theme 1 established how structural and technological barriers shape visually impaired users' access to online dating platforms, they are not merely technical limitations. Rather, they reflect deeper ideological assumptions about embodiment, desirability, and normativity. Therefore, theme 2 extends beyond describing exclusion to critically interrogating how these structures are underpinned by broader power relations. The theme draws explicitly on crip theory to understand the politics of access and participation.

4.5.Theme 2: Revisiting crip theory and the politics of access

This theme extends beyond describing exclusion to critically interrogate how participants' experiences highlight the politics of access, embodiment, and normativity embedded within digital dating platforms. Through a crip theoretical lens, access is not a neutral technical issue but a site of power, where decisions about design implicitly determine whose bodies are legible, desirable, and included.

4.5.1. Crip theory as analytic lens: from lived experience to structural critique

Participants' narratives demonstrate that exclusion from dating platforms is not incidental but structurally produced through ableist assumptions about perception and desirability. Jane's (34, Totally Blind) reflection, "*people are swiping on that, not on who I am*" illustrates how attraction is reduced to visual evaluation, thereby privileging sighted embodiment.

In this context, crip theory provides more than a vocabulary, it reframes these experiences as evidence of compulsory able-bodied-ness (McRuer, 2006), where visibility becomes a

prerequisite for participation. Participants are not just excluded, they are rendered unintelligible within dominant relational frameworks.

Phenomenologically, this reveals how perception is structured by technological environments. Crip theory extends this insight by demonstrating that these environments are not neutral, they actively produce normative ways of seeing, desiring, and relating.

4.5.2. Embodiment, resistance, and access as political acts

Participants' adaptive strategies such as prioritising conversation, withholding photos, or navigating interfaces through non-visual means can be understood as forms of daily resistance. These practices challenge dominant assumptions about how dating "should" occur.

Carl's (25, Partially Blind) decision to avoid uploading photos disrupts the expectation that visual disclosure is necessary for relational engagement. Similarly, Jack's (24, Totally Blind) use of workaround strategies demonstrate persistence within exclusionary systems. Although these actions may appear pragmatic, crip theory interprets them as political acts that challenge normative forms of design.

These practices also reflect cripistemology (Johnson & McRuer, 2014), forms of knowledge generated through disabled experience. Participants are not passive users, they actively generate alternative ways of knowing and navigating digital intimacy. Therefore, access is redefined not as accommodation, but as continuous negotiation and resistance.

Having examined how digital dating environments are structured through ableist norms and how participants resist and negotiate these constraints, it is necessary to consider the impact of these dynamics on individuals. Theme 3 builds on this by exploring how structurally

embedded exclusion is internalised, thereby shaping participants' emotional experiences, relational expectations, and sense of self within romantic contexts.

4.6.Theme 3: Systemic Exclusion and Emotional Impact

Building on Theme 1, which established how online dating platforms are structurally inaccessible, this theme examines how these external barriers are internalised and experienced at the psychosocial level. Although Theme 1 demonstrated that exclusion is produced through design, this theme explores how repeated encounters with such exclusion shape participants' emotional worlds, relational identities, and expectations of intimacy.

From a crip theory perspective, these experiences are not interpreted as individual vulnerability, but as the affective and relational consequences of systemic ableism. In this sense, participants' emotional responses are not separated from structural barriers, but *produced through them*.

4.6.1. Internalising exclusion: from structural barriers to lived emotional reality

Participants' narratives highlight that persistent exposure to inaccessible and exclusionary environments gradually reshapes how they perceive themselves within romantic spaces. Theme 1 illustrated that platforms restrict access, while this theme demonstrates how such restrictions are experienced as messages about personal value and relational legitimacy.

Kate's (31, Totally Blind) statement; "*there's no space for me to even try*" captures this shift from external limitation to internalised constraint. The challenge is no longer about platforms being inaccessible, but that participants begin to experience themselves as misaligned with the possibility of connection itself.

Crip theory conceptualises this as the internalisation of ableism, where structural exclusion becomes embedded in self-perception. Participants are not only excluded from platforms,

they are deemed unfit for participation, shaping how they imagine their own relational futures.

4.6.2. Loneliness and relational withdrawal: the contraction of possibility

Participants often described withdrawing from online dating altogether, due to repeated experiences of exclusion and rejection. Darren's (41, Partially Blind) reflection "*what's the point anymore?*" illustrates how engagement becomes emotionally unsustainable over time.

This can be understood as relational contraction, where individuals reduce their participation in response to environments that consistently deny recognition. From a phenomenological perspective, this reflects a narrowing of one's relational horizon, thus, what is possible becomes limited through repeated negative encounters.

Crip theory extends this by demonstrating that such withdrawal is not passive resignation, but a response to structurally produced conditions. When access requires disproportionate effort and yields limited reciprocity, disengagement becomes a rational and protective strategy.

4.6.3. Self-silencing and anticipatory marginalisation

Participants highlighted modifying their behaviour and communication in anticipation of rejection. Dave's (40, Partially Blind) statement "*I don't say anything anymore because I know they won't get it*" illustrates how they regulate their self-expression within dating contexts.

This reflects anticipatory marginalisation, where individuals internalise dominant norms to an extent where they begin to pre-empt exclusion. Rather than waiting for rejection, participants adjust their disclosure, tone, or level of engagement to minimise potential harm.

From a crip theory perspective, this demonstrates how ableism operates externally (through design) and internally (through self-regulation). Participants' voices are shaped by environments that implicitly signal whose experiences are valid, understandable, or desirable.

4.6.4. Diminished agency and the erosion of romantic identity

A particularly significant consequence identified by participants is the gradual erosion of romantic identity and personal agency. Anna's (44, Totally Blind) reflection, "*I'm not even allowed to have that part of my life*" highlights how exclusion extends beyond interaction into identity formation.

This theme demonstrates how restriction affects participants' ability to perceive themselves as romantic subjects. This aligns with Kafer's (2013) argument that ableist systems limit present access and the imaginability of disabled futures.

Participants' reliance on others for profile creation or navigation further complicates agency, reinforcing a sense of dependency. Resultantly, participants experience a loss of control over self-representation, contributing to reduced relational confidence and autonomy.

4.7. Integrative link to research questions and theoretical framework

This theme directly addresses the research question regarding how visually impaired individuals experience online dating. It demonstrates that their experiences are shaped not only by structural barriers (Theme 1), but the psychosocial consequences of repeated exclusion.

Through the lens of crip theory, these findings demonstrate how:

- Ableism becomes internalised, shaping self-perception, and relational expectations

- Crip time extends into emotional domains, where prolonged efforts lead to fatigue and withdrawal
- Embodiment is experienced relationally, through recognition or lack thereof
- Agency is constrained, not by impairment, but by systemic conditions

Although Theme 3 highlighted the psychosocial consequences of exclusion, these emotional responses are not produced in isolation. They are deeply associated with the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences. Therefore, theme 4 focuses on the symbolic and interpretive dimension of exclusion, examining what inaccessibility communicates about worth, desirability, and belonging within visually dominated digital spaces.

4.8. Theme 4: The implied message in exclusion

This theme deepens the analysis by examining what is communicated by exclusion. Beyond functional barriers, participants interpret inaccessibility as conveying messages about worth, desirability, and belonging.

4.8.1. Shame, otherness, and the affective dimension of ableism

Participants' experiences of shame and defeat are not simply emotional reactions, they are affective outcomes of structural exclusion. Darren's (41, Partially Blind) statement "... these platforms were never meant for people like me," highlights how exclusion is internalised as a judgment of value.

Crip theory conceptualises this as the affective dimension of ableism, whereby social systems produce emotions that reinforce marginalisation. From a phenomenological perspective, shame emerges when one's body is experienced as out of place. Crip theory extends this understanding by demonstrating that such misalignment is socially produced and not inherent to the individual.

4.8.2. *Loss of romantic identity: the politics of desirability and futurity*

Participants' accounts of losing a sense of romantic identity "*I'm not even allowed to have that part of my life*" highlight how exclusion operates at the level of identity and futurity.

Kafer (2013) argues that ableist systems render disabled futures unimaginable. This is evident in participants' narratives, where exclusion from dating platforms limits present opportunities and the ability to envision oneself as a romantic subject.

The loss of autonomy in self-presentation further reinforces this dynamic. Reliance on others to construct profiles disrupts agency and challenges normative ideals of independence. This demonstrates how ableism operates through control over representation, shaping who can define themselves within relational spaces.

Despite the pervasive nature of exclusion and its emotional impact, participants are not passive recipients of these conditions. Their narratives also reveal moments of agency, adaptation, and resistance. Theme 5 builds on this by examining how visually impaired individuals actively reconfigure digital dating practices, challenging dominant norms and reclaiming connection on their own terms.

4.9. Theme 5: Strategies of resistance and reclaiming connection

This theme shifts focus from exclusion to agency, demonstrating how participants actively resist, reconfigure, and redefine digital dating. In this context, crip theory is particularly generative, highlighting how resistance emerges through daily practices.

4.9.1. *Access labour and adaptive expertise*

Participants' use of assistive technologies, memorisation, and navigation strategies reflects what crip theory refers to as access labour (Hamraie, 2017). Dave's (40, Partially Blind)

comment “*you memorise where the buttons are,*” demonstrates how users develop embodied expertise in navigating inaccessible systems.

Although this demonstrates resilience, it also exposes structural inequality. Access is achieved through additional labour rather than inclusive design. Crip theory interprets this as a redistribution of responsibility, where disabled users bear the burden of inclusion.

4.9.2. Redefining relational norms: resisting visual dominance

Participants’ emphasis on conversation, textual engagement, and delayed disclosure indicates a reconfiguration of dominant dating norms. Anna’s (44, Partially Blind) statement, “*we’re not asking for special treatment, just inclusion,*” reflects a demand for structural transformation rather than accommodation.

These practices challenge visual normativity, demonstrating that intimacy can be constructed through alternative modalities. Crip theory views this as a disruption of dominant relational scripts, whereby participants actively reshape what counts as attraction and connection.

4.9.3. Voice, vulnerability, and alternative modes of intimacy

Participants’ emphasis on voice highlights a shift toward non-visual embodiment for connection. Anna’s (44, Totally Blind) reflection “*it tells me more than a photo ever could,*” illustrates how voice carries emotional and relational depth.

From a phenomenological perspective, voice becomes a medium of presence. Crip theory extends this by illustrating how alternative sensory modalities can challenge dominant hierarchies of perception. Thus, non-visual interaction becomes a site of possibility, rather than a limitation.

Kate's (31, Totally Blind) sense of safety in not being seen further complicates conventional assumptions about visibility. This suggests that invisibility can function as a form of resistance, enabling participants to engage without the pressures associated with visual performance.

4.10. Conclusion

This chapter explored the lived experiences of visually impaired individuals navigating online dating platforms, highlighting a dynamic tension between structural exclusion, embodied experience, and agentic resistance. Through an interpretive phenomenological analysis, the findings demonstrate that online dating is not a neutral or universally accessible space. Rather, it is organised around visual norms that privilege sighted embodiment and regulate desirability. By so doing, the chapter answers the research question by demonstrating that visually impaired individuals do not simply “use” dating platforms; they must actively negotiate, adapt to, and resist systems that shape how connection is made possible.

This chapter demonstrates how structural barriers are embedded within platform design. The dominance of photo-based profiles, swipe mechanics, and limited accessibility features creates both technical and symbolic exclusion. As a result, it positions visually impaired users as peripheral within spaces intended for intimacy and connection. According to Moore et al. (2019), such platforms reinforce normative assumptions about visibility and desirability, resulting in environments where non-visual bodies are rendered invisible or illegible. These findings extend beyond usability concerns, demonstrating that design is inherently ideological, reflecting assumptions about who the “ideal user” is, and how relationships should be formed.

However, the chapter extends beyond identifying barriers to examine how these exclusions are lived, interpreted, and internalised. Participants' accounts indicate that repeated

encounters with inaccessibility reshape their ability to engage with platforms as well as their sense of relational possibility, identity, and agency. Feelings of invisibility, withdrawal, and reduced romantic self-concept highlight how structural exclusion produces psychosocial consequences, reinforcing broader patterns of marginalisation. In this context, exclusion operates across multiple levels; technical, relational, and affective. This demonstrates the interconnected nature of digital design and lived experience.

Simultaneously, the findings complicate a purely deficit-oriented narrative by foregrounding participants' resilience, creativity, and resistance. Instead of passively accepting exclusion, participants actively reconfigured their engagement with online dating by utilising non-visual modes of connection, such as voice, tone, and narrative. These alternative forms of communication facilitated deeper emotional intimacy and authenticity. This aligns with Brueggemann's (2011) assertion that non-visual cues can foster meaningful relational bonds, as well as Shuttleworth and Sanders' (2010) emphasis on vulnerability as central to connection. By so doing, participants adapted to existing systems, and challenged dominant assumptions on how intimacy is constructed, offering new possibilities for relational engagement beyond visual paradigms.

Interpreted through crip theory, these findings reveal that online dating platforms function as sites where ableism, embodiment, and desirability are actively produced and contested. The privileging of visibility reflects broader cultural logics that equate visibility with worth, thereby rendering visually impaired individuals culturally marginal or unintelligible (Bailey, 2023). Simultaneously, participants' adaptive strategies ranging from the use of assistive technologies to the prioritisation of personality and voice, illustrate forms of daily resistance that challenge these norms. These practices highlight what crip theory conceptualises as alternative ways of knowing and relating, where intimacy is not confined to

visual recognition but instead emerges through diverse sensory and communicative modalities. Importantly, the findings suggest that inclusion cannot be reduced to technical accessibility alone. Although there is need for improvements in interface design, it is insufficient if underlying assumptions about desirability and relational legitimacy remain unchanged. Erevelles (2011) argues that meaningful inclusion requires a broader cultural shift, one that challenges the norms that define whose bodies are valued, visible, and worthy of love. Therefore, participants' experiences call for a reconceptualisation of digital dating as not just a technological space, but a social and ethical domain which require greater attention to diversity, embodiment, and relational justice.

In synthesising these insights, this chapter demonstrates that participants' experiences of online dating are shaped by a complex interplay between structural constraint and human agency. Although platforms impose limitations through ableist design and visual norms, participants actively negotiate these constraints, highlighting both the limitations of current systems and the possibilities for more inclusivity.

Thus, this chapter provides a critical foundation for the discussion that follows, in which these findings are situated within the broader literature and their implications for theory, practice, and the design of inclusive digital environments are further explored.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1.Introduction

This chapter presents a synthesis of the findings from the study: *Experiences of People with Visual Impairments in Online Dating Platforms*. This is a qualitative exploration into how individuals with visual impairments navigate the digital dating landscape, which is often dominated by visual cues and able-bodied design assumptions. The study highlighted the tensions between exclusion and agency, underscoring both the structural inaccessibility of mainstream dating platforms and the creative adaptations employed by users to foster meaningful interactions. This study examined the challenges visually impaired users encounter on dating applications like Tinder, Bumble, Ok Cupid, and Facebook dating, where visual appeal often dominates. Participants reported major barriers such as poor screen reader compatibility, unlabelled buttons, and visually biased interfaces (Moore, Chapman, & Miller, 2019; Wentz *et al.*, 2016). These exclusions reflect a broader disregard for diverse embodiments in digital design (Ellcessor, 2016; Bailey, 2023). Apart from functionality, participants described emotional impacts, where fear of fetishisation, rejection, and the stress of disclosing disability is rooted in ableism norms (Erevelles, 2011; Shuttleworth & Sanders, 2010). By echoing disability studies, these findings demonstrate how digital exclusion shapes both access and self-worth (Brueggemann, 2011; Kempapidis *et al.*, 2024). Users also found dating applications to be spaces for agency, that is enabling boundary-setting, emotional expression, and redefinitions of intimacy (Hoban, 2018; Kafer, 2013; Moore *et al.*, 2019).

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews to gather detailed, first-hand accounts of participants' online dating experiences. This method offered insights into how visually impaired users navigate dating platforms (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002). The interviews lasted between 1 to 2 hours. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns, emotional responses, and strategies of resistance (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

Participants emphasised the importance of non-visual cues, such as voice and tone, in fostering connection and vulnerability, thereby challenging visual-centric attraction paradigms (Bailey, 2023; Brueggemann, 2011; Muñoz, 2019). Their experiences highlight the need for inclusive digital spaces that embrace multisensory engagement and validate diverse expressions of desire (Ellcessor, 2016; Shuttleworth & Sanders, 2010).

Key themes included emotional labour navigating ableism platforms, the pressure of visual appeal on non-visual bodies, and the role of voice in building relationships. Crip theory, particularly McRuer's (2006) concept of compulsory able-bodies, provided lens for understanding how participants survived and reshaped a visual culture. The emphasis on aesthetics and normative embodiment in dating applications perpetuates exclusion (Ellcessor, 2016; Garland-Thomson, 2009). However, participants resisted through alternative communication methods. By prioritising voice, emotion, and narrative, they contested the values of platform design and romantic culture, reimagining intimacy around access, authenticity, and relational presence rather than visual conformity (Bailey, 2023; Brueggemann, 2011; Kafer, 2013).

This study revealed that although technological fixes like screen reader compatibility are essential, they do not address deeper issues of stigma, exclusion, and social norms. Participants highlighted that the real barrier is not just the applications' interface but the culture it reflects. This aligns with Ellcessor's (2016) view that digital accessibility is both a technical

and social issue. Kafer (2013) and McRuer (2006) also argue that inclusion must challenge cultural assumptions about legitimate bodies and relationships. This underscores the need for inclusive design that values diverse embodiments and ways of connecting (Bailey, 2023; Brueggemann, 2011).

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the broader literature, highlighting implications for developers, practitioners, and policymakers. It also offer recommendations for more inclusive digital dating platforms. It concludes with suggestions for future research, emphasising intersectional analysis, longitudinal perspectives, and further exploration of crip-aligned digital intimacy.

5.2.Summary of the main findings

This study explored how individuals with visual impairments experience online dating in a visually-dominated world. Participants described a combination of empowerment and exclusion, with digital platforms disadvantaging users with disabilities due to their reliance on visual norms. Photo-centric applications like Tinder and Bumble posed challenges for profile creation, contact initiation, and fair representation. The lack of meaningful alt-text and non-visual alternatives often left visually impaired users feeling invisible in spaces designed for connection (Moore *et al.*, 2019).

Participants demonstrated significant agency and creativity, despite facing these constraints. Users with visual impairments employed various alternatives, such as screen readers, prioritising written bios, using detailed audio descriptions, and leveraging assistive applications with accessibility features (Swati *et al.*, 2022). These adaptations align with crip theory (McRuer, 2006), which challenges normative assumptions about ability, desirability, and relational practices. Participants' strategies demonstrates resistance against a system that excludes them.

Resilience emerged as a key theme in participants' experiences. Although many were being judged or rejected due to inaccessible profiles or ableism assumptions, others used online dating to assert their identities and form meaningful connections. Some participants challenged mainstream ideals of attractiveness, disclosed their disability gradually, and fostered emotional intimacy beyond physical appearance. As noted by Fekler, Cohen, and Braw (2019), visually impaired individuals' dating lives are influenced by both external prejudice and internalised stigma. In this study, participants reflected on these dynamics and how they navigated and resisted them.

Support networks were crucial in sustaining emotional resilience. Several participants highlighted the value of peer communities and shared lived experience, particularly when dilemmas addressing challenges such as when to disclose their disability or how to handle fetishisation. These communities created a sense of solidarity and belonging. As highlighted by Dave after being asked how do you come out with your disability: *"Having someone who just gets it - who knows what it's like to come out on a dating app about your disability - makes all the difference."*

This study demonstrates that technical accessibility alone is insufficient. Although screen-reader compatibility and voice navigation are essential, they cannot address the broader cultural ableism in dating platforms. Therefore, crip theory stresses the need to challenge the ideologies shaping digital design (Bailey, 2023; Kafer, 2013). McRuer's concept of "compulsory able-bodiedness" highlights how social systems exclude disabled bodies and actively construct norms of desirability, particularly within intimate and romantic contexts (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2016). Ellcessor (2016) highlights that accessibility is a cultural and political issue, while Garland-Thomson (2005) notes that beauty and desirability norms reinforce ableism. Thus, the exclusion of visually impaired users reflects a visual culture that

marginalises non-normative bodies, suggesting that true inclusion requires more than technological fixes. It necessitates a cultural shift toward valuing diverse embodiments and rethinking relational norms in online dating.

In conclusion, this study reveals the paradox of digital romance for the visually impaired: the coexistence of possibility and rejection. Participants actively reshaped their dating experiences, challenging exclusionary design (Brueggemann, 2011; Moore *et al.*, 2019). Their strategies indicate the need for more inclusive platforms and rethinking of beauty, connection, and worth in the digital world (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Shuttleworth & Sanders, 2010). Crip theory frames accessibility as a political and cultural project, urging structural change in how intimacy is designed and perceived online (Bailey, 2023; Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). According to Erevellles (2011), digital inclusion is tied to broader struggles for justice and equity, which require a confrontation with the systems of power that define normativity.

5.3. Answering the research questions

Research Question 1: How do visually impaired individuals experience online dating? Visually impaired individuals experienced both empowerment and marginalisation when navigating online dating platforms. They valued the autonomy and flexibility of digital communication, such as initiating conversations, designing self-written presentations, and disclosing feelings at their own pace. This environment felt more manageable and liberating than traditional dating. However, these benefits were often undermined by inaccessible designs. Platforms focused on images, swiping, and visual navigation, creating significant barriers, making tasks like profile creation, browsing, and messaging challenging without external help or assistive technology (Moore *et al.*, 2019). These challenges reflected a broader disregard for disabled users in platform design.

According to McRuer (2006), crip theory highlights the systemic exclusion of visually impaired users, rooted in the concept of compulsory able-bodies. This framework positions able-bodied and visually-oriented experiences as normative, rendering disabled users as "other." Dating platforms that prioritise visual appeal and image-based interactions reinforce these cultural norms, excluding individuals whose forms of engagement fall outside them. Consequently, accessibility issues should not be understood merely as technical flaws, but also as cultural issues tied to dominant ideals of desirability and relational legitimacy.

Participants also faced challenges with disclosure. Most of them expressed hesitating to disclose their disability, in fear of rejection or fetishisation, while others exposed it to filter for more accepting partners. These decisions were influenced by confidence, past experiences, and the perceived openness of others. As noted by Hoban (2018), digital platforms control visibility and access, shaping how users are seen and perceived, particularly for visually impaired individuals navigating stigma and connection.

Despite these barriers, participants found ways to build meaningful connections. By not focusing on physical appearance, some users embraced deeper conversations about personality, shared values, and emotional resonance. This non-visual intimacy, through text, voice, and emotional presence, challenged mainstream ideals of attraction and romance. Crip theory frames this as crip resistance: a redefinition of intimacy that disrupts ableism assumptions in dating culture (Bailey, 2023). Visually impaired users reimagined connection on their own terms, rather than conforming to existing norms.

Research Question 2: What are the challenges and opportunities faced? The Participants reported the inaccessibility of mainstream dating applications as their primary challenge. Despite guidelines like the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), many platforms still lack basic accessibility features, such as descriptive alt-text or voice command

compatibility. This excludes disabled users technically and symbolically erases them as valid participants in digital dating spaces. McRuer (2006) argues that able-bodied norms create environments where disabled individuals are rendered unintelligible unless they conform to these expectations, reflecting cultural tendencies to centre visualise and able-bodies in attraction and intimacy.

In addition to these technical barriers, participants also faced emotional and cultural stigma. They reported encountering ableism assumptions, such as being perceived as asexual or incompetent, as well as objectifying fetishisation. These experiences often ranged from subtle exclusion to overt offensive comments, thereby reinforcing narratives of disability as deficiency and undesirability (Sandell, 2007). In romantic contexts, these narratives are especially potent, positioning visually impaired individuals as outside the realm of romance unless they challenge societal scripts.

Despite challenges, participants embraced empowering strategies to navigate dating applications. Many visually impaired users prioritised communication, emotional intelligence, and shared values, to create meaningful connections that subverted cultural norms about romance and desirability. McRuer (2006) highlights this as a form of resistance, where disabled individuals reshape cultural spaces and assert alternative ways of being and desiring.

Peer support was also crucial, with participants exchanging strategies, easing emotional burdens, and collectively fostering resilience. These communities assisted users to reclaim agency; from deciding when to disclose their disability to navigating rejection and micro aggressions (Miron *et al.*, 2022). These practices are forms of crip agency that challenge and reimagine dominant relational norms.

In conclusion, visually impaired individuals continue to transform online dating spaces through relational creativity, strategic navigation, and community support. Crip theory frames these experiences as transformative, envisioning a future where disability is not a barrier but lens to redefine intimacy and connection.

5.4.Implications for inclusivity in digital spaces

This study highlights that digital accessibility in dating applications requires more than technical fixes. It requires a complete rethinking of design, usage, and underlying assumptions. Although features like alt-text, screen reader compatibility, and voice navigation are essential, true accessibility should also address user experience, representation, and emotional safety, thereby affirming disabled identities and dignity.

Mainstream dating applications are image-driven and swipe-based, reflecting what crip theory identifies as compulsory able-bodied-ness and visibility (Bailey, 2023). These norms privilege sight and visual appeal, thereby structurally excluding visually impaired users from dominant ideals of romance and desirability. As participants reported, this exclusion is both functional and symbolic, reinforcing feelings of invisibility and devaluation.

To create inclusive platforms, dating applications should shift away from visual-first designs and incorporate tools like audio bios, detailed text profiles, and interest-based matching to offer more equitable ways of connecting. However, these features must be embedded from the onset and not added later, to ensure disabled users are part of the intended audience, not an afterthought (Goggin & Newell, 2005).

Universal design must include the direct input of blind and visually impaired users from the earliest stages of platform development. Their lived experiences can guide accessible

layout, content alternatives, moderation, and communication tone. Moreover, they foster platforms that serve diverse users with dignity.

Inclusion is not just a technical goal but an issue of social justice. As emphasised by McRuer (2006), it requires dismantling systemic ableism across digital infrastructure and representation. This includes how disabled users are portrayed, protected, and empowered through tools like customisable disclosure, strong moderation, and privacy settings that support emotional safety and agency.

Ultimately, inclusive dating platforms must shift beyond functionality to embrace cultural representation, ethical design, and accountability. Through addressing both technical and cultural dimensions, these spaces can support equitable, meaningful connection for all users.

5.5.Limitations of the study

Although this study provides valuable insights into the online dating experiences of visually impaired individuals, several limitations must be acknowledged. As typical of qualitative research, the small sample size enables in-depth exploration but limits generalisability. A more diverse sample across age, gender, education, vision level, and socio-economic status could reveal broader patterns (Liamputtong & Rice, 2022).

Most participants lived in urban, Western contexts with reliable internet and smartphone access, potentially overlooking the experiences of those in rural or Global South settings, where infrastructure, digital literacy, and cultural views on disability may pose additional barriers.

Also, focusing on mainstream applications like Tinder, Bumble, and Ok Cupid excluded disability-specific platforms such as Glimmer or Whispers-4-U. Thus, future research

should explore these alternatives to compare inclusive design practices and better understand varied dating experiences.

This study is limited by the absence of formal accessibility audits. Although participants shared rich experiential insights, usability testing (such as screen reader trials or WCAG checks) could have provided additional objectivity. Future research should combine lived experience with technical assessment to explore dating over time, as its emotional and relational impacts may evolve (Martino & Moumos, 2022).

Furthermore, the study did not examine how visual impairment intersects with race, gender, sexuality, or class, which can shape exclusion or resistance in unique ways. Crip theory highlights the importance of addressing these intersecting systems of power (Bailey, 2023; Erevelles, 2011).

Ultimately, meaningful research must challenge the cultural norms which marginalise disabled bodies. Therefore, future studies should explore how ableism and aesthetic ideals shape dating, while centring the agency and strategies of visually impaired users to build more inclusive digital spaces.

5.6.Recommendations

5.6.1. Guidelines for those developing dating Applications

Enhance Screen Reader Compatibility and Voice Navigation. Applications should fully support screen readers like Voice Over (iOS) and Talk Back (Android). All images, icons, and buttons must include descriptive alt-text, and users should be able to navigate using voice commands or keyboards. Regular testing of these tools can help ensure consistent usability (Swati *et al.*, 2022).

Introduce Non-Visual Profile Features. To move beyond image-based profiles, platforms can offer audio bios, expanded text fields for values and interests, and haptic or sound-based cues. These features enhance accessibility for blind users and improve engagement for all (Moore *et al.*, 2019).

Involve Visually Impaired Users in Design. Meaningful inclusion requires early and ongoing consultation with the blind and low-vision users. Their feedback will ensure that accessibility is a core design principle, and not an afterthought, thereby improving usability for all.

Build Accessibility into the Core Design. Accessibility settings like font scaling, colour contrast, voice input, and error guidance should be integrated from the onset, and not buried in menus. Thus, universal design benefits all users and supports legal, ethical, as well as financial goals.

5.6.2. *Recommendations for Visually Impaired Online Dating Users*

Although dating platforms bear the responsibility of accessibility, visually impaired users can also adopt strategies to navigate online dating more confidently. These strategies are drawn from participants' insights and relevant studies.

Craft Descriptive Bios and Disclose at Your Pace. A strong, detailed bio can help convey identity and values, especially when photos are not used. Users are encouraged to authentically share interests, personality traits, and relationship goals. Disclosure of visual impairment is a personal choice, some prefer to disclose it upfront to filter out bias, while others wait until trust is built (Martino & Moumos, 2022).

Choose Inclusive Platforms. Research applications before joining. Platforms like Ok Cupid and Hinge, which offer longer bios, interest-based filters, and fewer visual demands,

were preferred by participants over more image-heavy ones like Tinder. Applications with clear diversity policies often foster more respectful communities.

Join Peer Support Networks. Support groups on Reddit, Facebook, or through disability organisations offer shared advice, emotional support, and guidance on accessible platforms and disclosure strategies. These spaces help reduce isolation and build confidence. Participating in user feedback or accessibility testing also helps improve dating application's inclusivity (Goggin & Newell, 2005).

Although accessibility should not rely on users, informed and connected individuals can better advocate for themselves and contribute to more inclusive digital spaces.

5.6.3. Policy and advocacy recommendations

Improving accessibility on dating apps requires systemic action, not just individual effort. The following suggestions are designed for governments, tech regulators, developers, and advocacy groups to support visually impaired users more equitably.

Enforce WCAG Compliance on Dating Platforms. Although the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are internationally recognised, dating applications rarely comply. Governments and digital regulators should mandate WCAG adherence for all major dating platforms, with enforcement mechanisms, regular audits, and penalties for non-compliance. Regulatory bodies like the U.S. Department of Justice and UK Equality and Human Rights Commission should explicitly include dating applications under digital inclusion mandates.

Embed Disability in Tech Policy and Innovation. Digital inclusion should be recognised as a fundamental right. Thus, policymakers should integrate disability perspectives into national tech strategies, incentivising inclusive design through grants, tax benefits, and

innovation awards. In addition, they should prioritise investing in accessible features like screen less browsing and voice-driven interfaces (Bartley, 2018).

Train Developers and Moderators in Accessibility and Bias Awareness. Beyond technical skills; developers, designers, and moderators should be trained on the lived realities of disabled users. Accessibility education should also be part of on boarding and include user-led sessions. Also, moderators and support staff should be equipped to address issues like harassment or fetishisation with sensitivity and care.

Ultimately, online dating is about connection, dignity, and self-worth; hence, ensuring accessibility is not a bonus, but a right. Therefore, policy and advocacy must protect that right by building inclusive digital spaces where everyone can participate fully.

5.6.4. *Future studies*

This study offers valuable insights into online dating for visually impaired users and highlights areas that need further exploration.

Future research should examine how intersecting identities such as gender, race, and sexuality shape online dating experiences. Blind women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of colour may face unique biases not fully captured in this study. Understanding these overlaps can inform more inclusive and equitable design.

Longitudinal studies are also required to explore how relationships develop over time, what challenges arise after initial connections, and how time spent on dating applications affects self-perception and emotional well-being.

Finally, researchers should assess the real-world impact of accessibility features like audio profiles, customisable prompts, and screen reader optimisation across both mainstream

and disability-focused platforms. Thus, comparing user satisfaction, match success, and emotional safety can help identify effective, inclusive design.

Inclusive, interdisciplinary research remains key to building a digital dating landscape where everyone can access love, connection, and self-expression on equal terms.

5.7. Conclusion

This chapter synthesised the findings of the study *Experiences of People with Visual Impairments in Online Dating Platforms*, drawing together the key insights related to access, identity, and connection within visually dominated digital environments. The study aimed to explore how visually impaired individuals navigate online dating platforms. By so doing, it revealed a nuanced and often paradoxical reality: one in which possibility and exclusion coexist.

At a structural level, the findings confirm that mainstream dating platforms remain deeply embedded in visual and able-bodied norms, shaping usability, desirability, and relational legitimacy. Features such as image-based profiles, swipe mechanisms, and inaccessible interfaces limit participation and reinforce the marginalisation of non-visual users. These barriers are not just technical shortcomings but reflect broader cultural assumptions about what bodies are valued and how attraction should be expressed.

At the experiential level, participants' accounts demonstrate that these structural exclusions carry significant psychosocial implications. Feelings of invisibility, rejection, and uncertainty surrounding disclosure illustrate how digital environments shape not only access to relationships but also self-perception and confidence. In this sense, online dating platforms operate as both technological and social spaces, where identity, desirability, and belonging are continuously negotiated.

However, a key contribution of this study lies in foregrounding participants' agency and resistance. Visually impaired users did not passively accept exclusion; rather, they actively reimagined their engagement with digital dating. By prioritising non-visual cues such as voice, tone, and narrative, participants cultivated deeper forms of emotional intimacy and challenged dominant visual norms. These practices demonstrate that connection is not inherently dependent on visibility, but can instead be reconstructed through alternative modes of communication, thereby broadening conventional understandings of intimacy.

Framed through crip theory, these findings reveal that exclusion in online dating is not merely an issue of accessibility, but also one of power, recognition, and cultural legitimacy. Crip theory demonstrates how digital platforms reproduce "compulsory able-bodied-ness," by privileging certain forms of embodiment while rendering others unintelligible.

Simultaneously, it offers a lens through which participants' adaptive strategies can be understood as forms of crip resistance, where dominant norms are challenged and redefined.

Importantly, this study underscores that technical solutions alone are insufficient. Although improvements in accessibility such as screen reader compatibility and alternative formats are necessary, they do not address the deeper cultural dynamics shaping online dating. True inclusion requires a fundamental shift in how digital platforms conceptualise desirability, representation, and connection. This includes recognising diverse embodiments, embracing multisensory modes of engagement, and designing with—rather than for visually impaired users.

Overall, this study contributes to the fields of disability studies, digital sociology, and human-computer interaction by demonstrating that online dating is a critical site where technology, identity, and social norms intersect. It highlights the need to shift beyond deficit-based

understandings of disability and rather, recognise visually impaired individuals as active agents who reshape digital spaces in meaningful ways.

In conclusion, the experiences of visually impaired users demonstrate both the limitations of current dating platforms and the possibilities for more inclusive futures. By challenging visual dominance and reimagining intimacy, participants highlight a more equitable model of digital connection; one grounded not in appearance, but in authenticity, accessibility, and relational depth.

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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Biographical Information

These questions will be used to build rapport and ease participants into the study. Names will not be included to ensure anonymity.

1. How old are you?
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What is the highest level of education you have received? Are you employed? If yes, what kind
4. Are you a student?
5. Where did you grow up? (Urban or rural area)

DISCUSSION GUIDELINES

The moderator (researcher) will ensure to remind participants about consent, the right to withdraw and the importance of confidentiality in the group. In addition, participants will be encouraged to speak and allow others the same opportunity without moving away from the topic.

1. Tell me about your dating life.
2. Have you used online dating or dating apps?
3. What kind of partner is attractive to you?
4. What obstacles have you encountered?
5. How do you approach revealing your disability?
6. Do you prefer dating a person with or without a disability?
7. What are things that you look for in a partner?
8. How has your experience been on dating websites or apps?

Discussion questions

Thank you for participating in the study.

APPENDIX B: INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Prospective Participant

The dating world has changed dramatically over the past 10 years. It is far more visual with mobile dating apps and websites. As a result, I, Ilze van den Berg, am currently conducting research with Dr Lindokuhle Ubisi, a lecturer in the Department of Psychology. Aimed at understanding dating in a visual world – the visually impaireds' experience for a Master of Arts in Psychology qualification at the University of South Africa (UNISA).

Benefits of study include being able to understand what is the current experience visually impaired individuals have when it comes to dating and relationships.

You were selected as a possible participant because you form part of visually impaired in South Africa. Should you accept to participate in the study, you will participate in a recorded 30–40-minute interview. Participation is strictly voluntary and based on your acceptance to partake in the study. If you choose to withdraw after accepting, you are free to do so with no consequences.

Possible psychological harm is limited, but should you feel at risk at any point during the study, you may withdraw your participation and will be provided with a referral for further intervention. You may choose to refrain from answering some of the questions should you find them too personal or stressful.

You will also be required to sign an informed consent form and confidentiality agreement. There are no long or short-term benefits associated with taking part in this study and there is no compensation provided for participating. Final research findings will be provided should it be requested by you as a participant.

Data collected throughout the study will be kept safe and confidential. Any information which may expose the identity of participants will not be included in the study and the researcher will ensure that participants remain anonymous. Recordings of the interviews along with transcriptions will be locked away or stored in the researcher's password protected laptop and will be exposed of accordingly after 5 years.

For any further questions regarding the aspects of the study or concerns, **contact** me on **0824307500** or ilzevandenberg1@gmail.com.

Thank you for taking your time to read this information sheet and for participating in the study

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to participate in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunities to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the semi-structured interview proceedings. I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname.: _____ (Please print)

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name & Surname: _____

Researcher's Signature.: _____ Date: _____