

ISTANBUL BILGI UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAM

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF SAFETY AND AGENCY ON ONLINE  
DATING PLATFORMS

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ISTANBUL  
2022

Women's Experience of Safety and Agency on Online Dating Platforms

Kadınların Çevrimiçi Flört Uygulamalarındaki Güvenlik ve Eylemlilik Deneyimleri

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Tezin Onaylandığı Tarih:

Toplam Sayfa Sayısı :

Anahtar Kelimeler (Türkçe)

- 1) Çevrimiçi Flört
- 2) Güvenlik
- 3) Eylemlilik
- 4) Önlemler
- 5) Güvenlik işi

Anahtar Kelimeler (İngilizce)

- 1) Online Dating
- 2) Safety
- 3) Agency
- 4) Precautions
- 5) Safety Work

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by acknowledging the amazing guidance and input provided by my advisor Dr. Anıl Özge Üstünel Balcı, without whom this thesis would not be possible.

The time, effort, and feedback provided by my thesis jurors Prof. Dr. Hale Bolak, and Dr. Berna Ekal were greatly appreciated.

I would like to thank my friend Sıla Küçükosmaoğlu for her incredible effort to help me with participant recruitment for this study.

I would like to extend my greatest gratitude to all the women who so generously and candidly shared their experiences with me in the interviews.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, my dear fiancée, and my friends who supported me with their affection and encouragement during this arduous journey.

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## ABSTRACT

Online dating practices are transforming the way of meeting and connecting with potential partners. However, online dating and in-person dating have risks. While forming meaningful connections is important, experiencing dating violence can have severe long-lasting negative effects. Thus, safety in online and offline dating is crucial. In Turkey, users' motivations and preferences on online dating platforms, general attitudes toward and the stigma around online dating have been studied. Yet, no previous work addressed how heterosexual women experience safety and agency when online dating in the cultural context of Turkey. To address this gap, this study explored women's experiences of online dating, how they experience their agency, anticipate, and respond to risks. It also examined how young heterosexual women define and navigate safety, build security, and exert agency when online dating. Eleven women, aged 18-35, who online dated for at least 1 month, were interviewed individually. From a qualitative research frame, the data was analyzed with thematic analysis. Four main themes were developed: Anticipating Risks of Online Dating, Developing Online Strategies for Safety, Developing Strategies to Move Beyond the Risks, and Reaping Benefits Despite Challenges. Findings revealed that women faced gender-based, physical, and digital risks and challenges, yet developed strategies to move beyond the risks in pursuit of the benefits they identified. The results are discussed in the light of literature, and the clinical implications of the findings on women's freedom to safe dating and sexuality without being the sole carriers of the burdens of engaging in safety work are presented. The strengths and limitations of the present study, and how these limitations can be addressed in future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* online dating, safety, risks, benefits, agency, women's experiences, digital dating violence

## ÖZET

Çevrimiçi flört yaygınlaştıkça partnerlerle tanışma ve bağ kurma yollarında bir dönüşüme sebep olmuştur. Ancak çevrimiçi ve yüz yüze flörtün riskleri mevcuttur. Anlamlı bağlar kurmak önemli olsa da, flört şiddetine uğramanın süregelen olumsuz etkileri olabilmektedir. Bu sebeple çevrimiçi ve yüz yüze flört konusunda güvenlik elzemdir. Türkiye’de kullanıcıların motivasyonları, çevrimiçi flört platformlarındaki tercihleri ve çevrimiçi flörtü çevreleyen stigmaya dair genel tutumları incelenmiştir. Ancak, yapılan herhangi bir çalışmada Türkiye’nin kültürel bağlamında heteroseksüel kadınların çevrimiçi flört konusunda güvenlik ve eylemlilik deneyimleri araştırılmamıştır. Bu çalışmada kadınların çevrimiçi flört deneyimleri, bu süreç boyunca eylemliliklerini nasıl deneyimledikleri ve ortaya koydukları, riskleri nasıl değerlendirdikleri ve tepki verdikleri detaylıca araştırılmıştır. Genç heteroseksüel kadınların çevrimiçi flört platformlarını kullanırken güvenliği nasıl tanımladıkları, erkeklerle çevrimiçi flört platformları aracılığındaki etkileşimlerinde güvenlik oluşturmak için hangi davranışları uyguladıkları ve çevrimiçi eylemliliklerini nasıl ortaya koydukları araştırılmıştır. Çalışmada 18-35 yaşlarında, en az 1 ay çevrimiçi flört uygulamaları kullanmış on bir kadınla birebir görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Veriler kalitatif bir araştırma çerçevesinden tematik analiz ile incelenmiştir. Katılımcıların açıklamalarından dört ana tema geliştirilmiştir: Çevrimiçi flörtün risklerini öngörmek, güvenlik için çevrimiçi stratejiler geliştirmek, risklerin ötesine geçebilmek için stratejiler geliştirmek ve zorluklara rağmen fayda sağlamak. Katılımcıların hikayeleri kadınların cinsiyet temelli riskler ve çevrimiçi flörtün stigmatından fiziksel ve dijital şiddete varabilen zorluklarla karşı karşıya geldiklerini, ancak kadınların tespit ettikleri faydaları sağlama arayışı için bu risklerle başa çıkmak için stratejiler geliştirdiklerini ortaya koymuştur. Çalışmanın sonuçları var olan literatürün ve kadınların güvenli flört ve güvenlik konusunda tek taraflı uğraş vermenin yükünü taşımadan cinselliklerini yaşama özgürlüklerinin klinik ve önleyici çıkarımlarının ışığında değerlendirilmektedir. Mevcut çalışmanın güçlü yanları, sınırlılıkları ve bu sınırlılıklara gelecekte nasıl değinilebileceği değerlendirilmektedir.

*Anahtar Kelimeler:* çevrimiçi flört, güvenlik, riskler, faydalar, eylemlilik, kadınların deneyimleri, dijital flört şiddeti

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 THE CONTEXT AND THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Online dating refers to using paid or free, Internet-based websites or applications to meet potential partners for a variety of purposes that range from casual hook-ups to marriage (Fansher & Eckinger, 2021). Currently, many young adults use online platforms to enrich their social lives, and online dating websites and applications are among them, having become more common since the 2010's (Kaakinen et al., 2021; Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). Online dating use has become integrated into the dating culture of many, especially young adults (Sawyer et al., 2018). Because of their wide-spread use, these online dating platforms have been influencing and shaping the ways in which romantic and sexual partnerships are being established (Castro & Barrada, 2020; Gillett, 2018; Sawyer et al., 2018; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019).

In online dating platforms, users typically create profiles for themselves often involving pictures, a written form of introduction of themselves called the "bio," and additional information regarding lifestyle preferences - the details of which depend on the design of each platform (Fansher & Eckinger, 2021; Kaakinen et al., 2021; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). On some platforms, users can link other social media accounts such as their Instagram accounts (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). The more common and mobile form of these platforms are mobile phone applications or "apps," in which users are shown others' profiles and expected to indicate interest or disinterest by respectively swiping right or left (Kaakinen et al., 2021; Ward, 2017). If both users swipe right to indicate interest in one another, then the application puts them in contact by creating a "match" that enables them to initiate a conversation in the chat (Holtzhausen et al., 2020; Ward, 2017).

For many, one of young adults' main motivations is to establish meaningful romantic partnerships (Kaakinen et al., 2021). While the online dating platforms have made the search for dates easier by connecting users with others who, otherwise, would not be reachable through traditional dating, they have also

been criticized on several fronts (Anderson et al., 2020). Just as these services can have enjoyable and liberating effects on their users and create avenues for self-expression and social connection, they could at the same time be introducing risks to their users (Paat & Markham, 2020). These critiques have ranged from concerns regarding harassment and scams to frustration with hardship to establish more meaningful relationships (Anderson et al., 2020). On these platforms, there can be risks regarding privacy, cybersecurity, and safety of the users of said platforms, as data suggests that crimes and aggressive behaviors connected to online dating platforms have been increasing in recent years (Anderson et al., 2020; Mosley et al., 2020; Stoicescu & Rughiniş, 2021).

Online dating platforms are often established by technology companies, and the technical designs of these platforms are intertwined with current dynamics of sociopolitical, cultural, and economic scenes (Bivens & Hoque, 2018). Even though some theorists are optimistic that new technologies can make equality easier to reach, others contend that these technologies are nevertheless shaped by and reflect on the already existing inequalities, hierarchies, and social norms (Henry et al., 2020). Unfortunately, there is substantial evidence demonstrating that often users behave and make decisions on online dating platforms in a way that maintains or aggravates class, gender, and race divides and inequalities (Berkowitz et al., 2021).

To this date, attention has been paid to online forms of violence and crime such as fraud, identity theft and hacking, yet how technology may facilitate gender-based violence remains understudied (Henry et al., 2020). Many women experience gender-based violence in a way that is technology-facilitated (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Henry et al., 2020). In online spaces women may face several forms of threat, like bullying, hate speech, harassment, fraud and such (Henry et al., 2020). Women, especially those aged between 18-34 years-old, report having experienced harassment, receiving sexually explicit messages or images without consent, or being called offensive names online (Anderson et al., 2020).

While studies have shown that dating app use is more popular among non-heterosexual users (Castro & Barrada, 2020; Sumter & Vanderbosch, 2019), this

study would like to explore the experiences of heterosexual women in Turkey as they navigate online dating in the patriarchal culture of Turkey. In Turkey's current socio-political climate, women's bodies and choices have become the subject of the government's political discourse that aims to consolidate conservative gender norms by trying to regulate women's sexuality and morality (Cindoğlu & Unal, 2017). Furthermore, gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, prevalence in Turkey is as high as 1 in 3 women that experience it in their lifetime (Kahya, 2021). This research aims to demonstrate the ways in which women experience agency in their interactions with men they have met online, and how they perceive risks and respond to them in the current socio-political climate.

Exploring and understanding the inner workings of different forms of online dating violence, its risks, and strategies to combat these risks could help deepen the understanding of how these experiences shape young women's lives (Ismail et al., 2007). Furthermore, by exploring these areas, this study hopes to examine how safer and healthier online dating practices can be achieved. Women's experiences on and through online dating platforms and the risks they face must be recognized and documented to showcase the seriousness of the issue at hand. By shedding light on these experiences, this research aims to point out why safety and agency experiences in online dating deserves attention from academic and clinical perspectives. Thus, the present thesis explores the risks and safety behaviors, as well as the concept of agency when women use online dating platforms. In the introduction section, the literature on the history of online dating practices, motivations for use, date selection processes, risks associated with online and offline practices related to online dating, and the ways in which these risks are mitigated are presented to provide the necessary context to situate the current research.

## **1.2 ONLINE DATING**

### **1.2.1 A Short History of Online Dating Platforms**

In 1991, the World Wide Web was launched (Henry et al., 2020). Not long after, the first online dating platform Match.com launched in 1994 (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). In 2009, Grindr -catering to gay and queer users- became the first application that utilized the location information of users for online dating purposes (Fox, 2019). In 2012, Tinder launched and became the first globally known mobile online dating platform by gaining popularity in the heterosexual dating scene (Lozic, 2021). What distinguished online dating apps from online dating websites was their use of location-based data made available by mobile phones' Global Positioning System (GPS) which allowed users to match with other users in close geographical locations (Chin et al., 2019). Dating applications compared to online dating websites are relatively easier to set-up and use, and most are free of any costs (Sawyer et al., 2018).

After the successful launch of initial dating applications like Tinder and Grindr, many others have proliferated the market (Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019). With this proliferation, online dating platforms became quite varied, and these variations of platforms were often due to some unmet need of users or changing sociopolitical scenes (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Chin et al., 2019). While many features among platforms are similar, it is the differences that make them more or less appealing to users with varying motivations (Chin et al., 2019). In 2021, the most popular dating application was Tinder, followed by Bumble, Hinge, Badoo, Match and OkCupid in the United States market (Statista, 2022). There are many examples of dating apps efforts to distinguish themselves, Bumble differentiates itself by only allowing women to message first, OKCupid promotes its use of mathematics and algorithms to create matches from large amounts of data they gather from each user, and JSwipe caters to users only of Jewish descent (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Kirkegaard & Bjerrekar, 2016; Soll, 2020).

To take a closer look at the birth of alternative apps for instance, Bumble positions itself as a “feminist” online dating platform, born out of response to

Tinder's women users' complaints against receiving too many messages, at times reaching harassment levels (Bivens & Hoque, 2018). By designing the app in a way that only allows women to send the first message, Bumble had differentiated itself from Tinder, the platform where Bumble's founders were previously employed (Bivens & Hoque, 2018). In apps other than Bumble, while all users are allowed to initiate conversation, it is often men who initiate contact (Abramova et al., 2016).

### **1.2.2 Motivations for Using Online Dating Platforms**

Motivations for using online dating platforms may vary for users and they may change over time (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Castro & Barrada, 2020). In a systematic review of more than 70 studies on online dating use, Castro and Barrada (2020) have found that while dating apps are commonly viewed as platforms for casual sex and hook-up culture, this motivation was merely one of many motivations as such there was evidence that more than half of the users citing non-sexual motivations for their use. Vicarious learning about online dating applications have been found to influence motivations as users often refer to experiences of people within their social networks when they are setting up expectations (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). Consistent with this relationship-seeking motivation, research in the United States has found that a significant number of users have established long-term relationships or marriages with partners they have met online (Anderson et al., 2020).

Some gender differences have been identified about users' motivations. Studies around the world have also found evidence that women were more likely to be motivated to use apps to search for romantic relationships or friendships, whereas men were more likely to be motivated by the search for sexual or casual relationships (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Pozsar et al., 2018; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019). A study in Turkey has found gender differences in motivation of use: women users were more likely to be motivated by search for long-term romantic relationships (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). Yet, it is important to note that for neither gender these are exclusive motivations (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). At

this point, it is of importance to point out that research has found evidence that many women feel pressure to be engaged in romantic relationships (Ismail et al., 2007), which could explain why women are more likely to report initiation of romantic relationships as their main motivation to use online dating platforms.

It is often the case that users are motivated to use online dating apps for entertainment purposes like having fun, excitement or the “thrill of excitement” (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Castro & Barrada, 2020; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter & Vandebosch, 2019; Ward, 2017). In a study that conducted in-depth interviews with Tinder users, they found that “Entertainment” was one of the two main motivations for use, the other being “Connections” (Kallis, 2020). The motivation of having fun includes use of often gamified mobile applications, and the use of the platforms in the presence of friends as a social activity (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2022).

One aspect that may influence motivations is the user's characterological traits, as such extraversion, conscientiousness and openness qualities of a person's character have been found to be related to dating app use (Timmermans & Caluwe, 2017). One motivation for online dating use has been identified as “self-worth validation” (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter & Vanderbosch, 2019). It was found that “loneliness” significantly increased motivations for fun and self-validation (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). Those rating higher on dating anxiety were more likely to prefer meeting on online platforms than meeting in person and may view online dating apps to prepare for in-person dating (Sumter & Vanderbosch, 2019).

### **1.2.3 Selection of Potential Matches**

The main dating application interface consists of the swiping - indicating likes and dislikes for potential matches-, and the chat features. These main parts of the interface aim at allowing the users to get a better impression of one another to assess compatibility (Kaakinen et al., 2021). Therefore, reaching one of the main motivations of making connections is only possible through selection of potential matches. Before matching with someone, each user must decide based on pictures

and available information whether to swipe right or left on a profile (Ward, 2017). However, even before profiles are presented to users to choose from, apps have internal algorithms that determine who get to view whose profiles (Ward, 2017).

A systematic review of 70 articles on online dating has found that users have certain criteria for selecting potential matches including but not limited to education level and income (Castro & Barrada, 2020). Applications allow for filtering when searching for a match, these filters are primarily for age and gender but could also include location, height, and lifestyle choices such as smoking and drinking (Ward, 2017). Most users who use online dating platforms use methods to screen potential mates (Castro & Barrada, 2020; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008), who are in current vernacular called “matches.” These screening behaviors often include filtering either through in-app filters through which one can exclude users with certain characteristics, and/or by applying some selection criteria throughout different phases of online dating (Castro & Barrada, 2020; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). Screening behaviors are, for many users, a significant method for managing potential risks (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008).

Among heterosexual online dating users in the United States, it was found that people often selected mates of their own race, or additionally people they perceived to be of the dominant race if they identified as a racial minority (Lin & Lundquist, 2013). A study on Tinder users in the Netherlands has confirmed these findings by showing that users mostly preferred to match and date those who they viewed as similar to themselves in terms of age, race, and educational background (Ward, 2017). While some of the selection criteria look for measurable or quantifiable attributes and qualities, users also screen for less quantifiable characteristics as well (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). These harder to measure characteristics include things like the quality of the rapport with potential dates, and trustworthiness of the information provided (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008).

Research has found some gender differences such that women’s date selection strategies were more likely to value socioeconomic status, whereas men’s strategies were more likely to be based on physical appearances of potential matches (Abramova et al., 2016; Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). It has been found that there

were critical differences in experience based on one's gender, as in the United States more than half of men who use online dating have reported not having received enough messages on these platforms (Anderson et al., 2020). This could also explain why men have been demonstrated to be less picky about partner selection (Abramova et al., 2016). It has been found that at times the date selection occurs as a socializing activity in peer groups (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021).

Overall, the literature on the use of online dating apps shows that many people in today's world use these services to find the kind of connection they are looking for, and this has been changing how connections are made from more traditional routes like through social circles to digitalized routes (Fansher & Eckinger, 2021; Sawyer et al., 2018). While these services provide many benefits by opening new channels for connectedness, they are also targets of criticism on several fronts since there are risks to privacy, cybersecurity, and safety of users, and online dating platforms' lack of adequate response (Anderson et al., 2020; Mosley et al., 2020; Paat & Markham, 2020). Women, those aged 18-35 are more at risk for experiencing digital harassment, bullying, receiving unwanted messages and/or images (Anderson et al., 2020). In the next section, existing research on risks associated with online dating, particularly for young women, is presented in more detail.

### **1.3 ONLINE DATING AND SAFETY**

#### **1.3.1 Research on Risks Associated with Online Dating Use**

Online dating platforms are at times criticized for potentially facilitating dangerous encounters for users (Anderson et al., 2020; Gillett, 2018; McCormick & Jones, 2021). Users often agree with this criticism. More than half of the women state that they do not find these platforms to be safe ways of meeting someone new (Anderson et al., 2020). It has been argued that online dating platforms incentivizes adherence to traditional heteronormative gender scripts (Berkowitz et al., 2021). Sumter and Vanderbosch (2019) have found that dating application use was higher

among those with the character trait of sensation seeking, implying that dating app use is perceived as a risky behavior. There is even more evidence from personality research that could explain the perception of risk on these platforms. Being male and using Tinder for mainly casual hook-up sex was a strong predictor of scoring high on psychopathy personality trait (Lyons et al., 2020).

To better conceptualize potential risks and violence occurring in online spaces and in person, the underlying gender dynamics that are at the root of gender-based violence must be understood (Ismail et al., 2007). Just as gender is learnt and experienced through socialization, so is violence learnt in the similar manner through social contacts throughout a person's life (Muniz-Rivas et al., 2019). Another criticism is directed at legislative institutions and dating app developers, since reporting of harassment and assault to the dating apps produces limited response from the apps (McCormick & Jones, 2021). Moreover, these risks are generally aggravated for people of marginalized identities such as race, ethnicity, disability status or sexuality (Chadha et al., 2020). In response, many users of these platforms employ strategies to mitigate perceived risks within the digital space (Castro & Barrada, 2020).

Moreover, exploring these risks is also important from a health care perspective, because experiencing dating violence is associated with other health risks such as smoking, binge eating, increased depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (Ackard et al., 2007). There have been studies examining the psychological risks of dating app use including but not limited to: increased feelings of depression, anxiety, loneliness and life dissatisfaction, and increased body image concerns (Castro & Barrada, 2020; Holtzhausen et al., 2020; Strubel & Petrie, 2017). An online survey of dating app users has found that 28.7 % of users reported that their use impacted their self-esteem negatively (Holtzhausen et al., 2020). Face and body dissatisfaction as well as body shame were higher among Tinder users compared to those who did not use it (Strubel & Petrie, 2017). Risks to physical safety are present during in-person interactions through the apps (Lundquist & Curington, 2019; McCormick & Jones, 2021). One area of concern that has been highlighted in relation to dating app use has been sexually transmitted infections and sexual risk

behaviors, since there is evidence that chances of having engaged in unprotected sex is higher among dating app users (Albury et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2018). Below, the risks that are associated with online dating app use and investigated in the literature are discussed in more detail.

#### **1.3.1.1 Risks associated with privacy**

Since an important aspect of online dating platforms is to meet potential romantic or sexual partners, users wish to assess compatibility and often share their personal information like age, occupation, or hobbies (Cobb & Kohno, 2017). Along with this information, they may also share more sensitive and private information such as identifiable details or sexual preferences and express their political worldviews or religious beliefs (Cobb & Kohno, 2017). Sharing this type of information about oneself may inherently bring about some risks associated with privacy, especially considering one's profile is visible to many even if a match is not present and that online dating app developers may store and share the data provided by users with third parties (Cobb & Kohno, 2017; Hayes & Snow, 2018). Increased online presence could also allow perpetrators to keep close watch of their victims who become more visible and accessible (Choi et al., 2018).

Another complication is the fact that a user may take screenshots of chats or profiles without the app notifying the other user of this situation (Cobb & Kohno, 2017). Cobb & Kohno (2017) used survey and in-depth interview results to find that many users had safety concerns and engaged in cyberstalking that may violate the other person's privacy to mitigate these perceived risks. Furthermore, a significant portion of users run into profiles of people they know offline with whom they may otherwise choose to keep their dating life private (Cobb & Kohno, 2017).

In today's world, users' online behavior and personal data can be accessed and collected by many organizations and governments (Henry et al., 2020). The same holds through for data generated on online dating platforms (Henry et al., 2020). Online dating companies collect and store data of their users for commercial purposes, since an analysis of the collected data when sold to third party companies

could be used for advertising purposes which online dating companies can financially profit from (Hayes & Snow, 2018; Ostheimar & Iqbal, 2019). Furthermore, these data may be stored even after a user closes their account (Ostheimar & Iqbal, 2019). A technical examination of the information storage of the five most popular online dating applications has revealed that each of the five applications had at least one privacy issue out of the four identified areas: location data, in-app chat, user profile information, and user credentials (Kim et al., 2018). Another study conducting static and dynamic analysis of online dating apps has revealed that developers of these applications had collected and shared user data beyond what they had publicly announced on their user privacy policies (Hayes & Snow, 2018).

#### **1.3.1.2 Risks associated with digital dating violence and harassment**

Online dating violence could happen through many behaviors which include but are not limited to threatening, ridiculing, and insulting through online platforms (Muniz-Rivas et al., 2019). The degree to which online harassment affects an individual depends on the severity of the harasser, on one hand it can be merely a cause of negativity, on the extreme end it could pose a threat to privacy or even to physical safety (Duggan, 2017). It could cause emotional distress, cause reputational damage, or cause one to fear for their safety (Duggan, 2017).

Online dating violence affects women disproportionately. Since dating practices are moving to online platforms, gender-based violence and harassment have been leaking into these platforms (Gillett, 2018). Gender-based nature of online harassment vulnerability is clear in numbers. In 2017, in the United States 1 in 5 women aged up to 30 years old reported having experienced online harassment, and this prevalence rate was roughly twice as much of what men of the same age reported (Duggan, 2017). In the same age group, a higher proportion of women than men called online harassment a problem (Chadha et al., 2020). Research in the United States has shown that more than half of the women users under the age of 35 reported digital harassment in the form of insistent contact despite rejection and

receiving of sexually explicit images or messages without consent (Anderson et al., 2020). About 1 in 3 users of women online daters have reported receiving too many messages (Anderson et al., 2020).

It has been argued that the concept of the gender-based violence continuum developed by Kelly (1987) can be applied to digital gender-based harassment, as this type of behavior, because of being non-criminal, is often dismissed as being “ordinary” (Gillett, 2018). This idea is further supported by a study conducted on young adults, which showed physical forms of abuse are more easily noticed than non-physical or digital forms of gender-based abuse (Harris et al., 2015). What happens in digital spaces is different from in-person interactions in the sense that in online communications users are less restricted in what messages they write and do not face the immediate reaction created in the other person (Melander, 2010).

Another form of digital dating violence is called “cyberflashing” in which users receive -without their consent- a sexually explicit or aggressive photograph from the person they are in contact with (McGlynn et al., 2021; Thompson, 2018). This behavior constitutes a coercive sexual intrusion of one’s private space (McGlynn et al., 2021). Cyberflashing affects younger women especially and they, too, are the ones reporting more negative impacts of receiving an unwanted image (McGlynn et al., 2021). In England, the prevalence of being a victim of cyberflashing was as high as 47 % of all women aged 18 to 24, and 53 % of women aged 18 to 29 in the United States, suggesting this behavior is quite common (McGlynn et al., 2021). Despite being this common, cyberflashing remains hard to criminalize and prosecute (McGlynn et al., 2021).

### **1.3.1.3 Risks related to dishonest representation**

Even though most social media websites like Facebook and Instagram promote connections between people who know each other outside of these platforms, online dating platforms promote connections between users who only get to know one another through these platforms (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). The lack of outside platform connections, combined with users’ motivation to present a desirable profile to match with other users

affect self-representation, increasing chances of misrepresentation (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2019). Many are concerned with the users they view having misleading photographs, misrepresenting gender or age, and lying in conversations (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). Most users agree with this and about two thirds state that users can easily alter how they present themselves to seem more attractive (Anderson et al., 2020). A survey conducted by Pew Research Center in the United States that most online dating platform users think it is quite easy to misrepresent oneself to be more appealing to potential matches, and only 3 % of survey takers reported misrepresentation was not commonplace in online dating platforms (Anderson et al., 2020).

There are several factors that have been identified for increased risk of misrepresentation. Romantic or sexual relationship seeking motivations have been associated with lowering risk for misrepresentation as most users with this motivation anticipate their matches in person (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2019). Whereas high social anxiety or low self-esteem predict increased chances of misrepresentation (Williams, 2020). Gender, too, influences what is misrepresented (Abramova et al., 2016). For example, a literature review on the subject had revealed that while women were more likely to enhance physical appearance, men were more likely to misrepresent their relationship status and their use motivations (Abramova et al., 2016).

In some instances, there could even be extreme forms of deception, dubbed “catfishing,” heavily targeting women (Mosley et al., 2020). In catfishing situations, a person may use a stolen identity or create a fake identity to deceptively initiate contact and potentially a relationship (Williams, 2020). In-depth interviews with Tinder users had found that some men engaged with catfishing practices as a game such that they created fake accounts to lure and make fun of friends (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). While men’s concern for being catfished are shown to be related to humiliation about being deceived, women’s concern for being catfished included being a victim of physical harm including sexual assault, violence, and murder (Berkowitz et al., 2021).

At times, profiles with stolen or misrepresented identities are formed for scamming purposes (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012). In these scams, scammers form romantic bonds with people they met online, pretend to have an emergency for which they require a certain amount of money, and fraudulently receive large sums from their victims (Whitty &

Buchanan, 2012). Moreover, research has found that people who have been victimized by those they have met online are more likely to underreport such instances due to the shame and stigma they may feel about being defrauded (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012).

### **1.3.2 Research on Risks Associated with Going on In-Person Dates**

Dating violence in the forms of physical, sexual, or psychological harm is unfortunately quite widespread, and poses a public health concern in many communities (Brown & Hegarty, 2018; Hebert et al., 2019; Ismail et al. 2007). This affects women's experience while they use dating apps. In one study, 42 % of women Tinder users reported fearing assault and violence occurring on dates with people they have met on the application (Berkowitz et al., 2021). The effects of experiencing dating violence can cause significant distress in several areas of life and run the risk of having permanent negative consequences (Hebert et al., 2019). While both men and women could be perpetrators and victims of dating violence, a review of the existing body of literature shows that women are more likely to be victims of severe forms of dating violence with exposure to serious harm and injury (Brown & Hegarty, 2018). Furthermore, because of its high prevalence dating violence could be normalized in many women's lives (Ismail et al., 2007).

In-depth interviews with online dating users have found that users have developed extensive risk management strategies when going on in-person dates with people they have met online, suggesting their concern for their physical safety on dates (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). This is also in response to a heightened sense of risk to their safety, because unlike dates facilitated by social networks, online dating applications facilitate meetings between two strangers (Berkowitz et al., 2021). The increase in alertness is understandable as research has shown that women are more likely to be aware of danger cues when in the presence of men who are unknown to them (Scott, 2003). Women's heightened sense of risk on dates with men they have met online is with good reason, an analysis of news articles published in the first three years of Tinder's launch has revealed that crimes linked to dating apps have increased sevenfold (Hopkins, 2016). Both one-year and

lifetime prevalence of sexual abuse was higher among online dating users than non-users (Choi et al., 2018). One other area that poses risks in in-person dates are sexual encounters with dates. Users reported concern for becoming infected with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and experiencing an unwanted pregnancy (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008).

In conclusion, there is a body of literature showing the various risks associated with using online dating platforms, and users agree with online dating platforms not being safe (Anderson et al., 2020; Gillett, 2018; McCormick & Jones, 2021). There are risks in online and offline spaces. These risks are threats to privacy from other users (Choi et al., 2018; Cobb & Kohno, 2017) and dating platforms storage and sale of personal data (Hayes & Snow, 2018; Henry et al., 2020; Ostheimar & Iqbal, 2019), and the risk of dishonest representation which could facilitate potentially fraudulent interactions (Anderson et al., 2020; Mosley et al., 2020; Whitty & Buchanan, 2012; Williams, 2020). In addition, dating application developers and legal institutions are often criticized for responding inadequately to the risks associated with these platforms (McCormick & Jones, 2021). Furthermore, there is the risk of gender-based violence and harassment and dating violence in digital and in-person interactions, which have several long term and potentially permanent negative consequences that range from depression and anxiety, to life and body dissatisfaction, particularly for women (Ackard et al., 2007; Castro & Barrada, 2020; Holtzhausen et al., 2020; Strubel & Petrie, 2017). In the next section, the safety precautions that have been adopted in response to these risks will be examined in detail.

## **1.4 ONLINE DATING AND WOMEN'S AGENCY**

### **1.4.1 Women's Experiences of Agency in the Online Dating Scene**

Women's agency refers to the capacity for autonomy and self-determination over one's life and body (Bowden & Mummery, 2009). However, in patriarchal cultures, it is often the case that women's agency and self-deterministic capacities

are impeded by societal forces and internalized oppression (Meyers, 2002). Because of this, women's desires and power for choosing and acting freely for their own best interests have been challenged to different degrees throughout history to differing extents by limiting access to the same degree of choice and actions that have been afforded to men (Bowden & Mummery, 2009). Today, women are negatively affected by the gendered power imbalance, and there is tangible statistical evidence suggesting so: they are more likely to experience sexual assault in their lives and they earn less on the dollar than man of equal qualifications do (Buerkle, 2021). Another crucial aspect of being the agent is the recognition that one can rightfully seek to fulfill their desires and needs by pursuing making their decisions and acting upon them without coercion or influence of others (Bowden & Mummery, 2009).

Online dating scenes present yet another area through which women may experience this unsanctioned interference on their agentic capacities. While online dating applications are positioned as new landscapes for sexual exploration for women, there are times in which gendered norms and expectations come into play (Farvid & Aisher, 2016). Qualitative interviews with women who use online dating apps have found that women, burdened with taking precautions for their own safety, may become limited in their capacity to freely take part in these platforms (Gillett, 2021). A review of 74 articles on gender-based violence against women show that women find ways of exerting their agency in response to various forms of violence and sexual harassment, either online or offline (Rajah & Osborn, 2020).

Another important aspect of online dating use is sexuality, in this regard, too, women's agency could be affected by imbalanced gender dynamics (Buerkle, 2021). Sexual script theory asserts that people rely on sexual scripts for their role and sequence of events in sexual interaction (Emmers-Sommer, 2015; Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Sexual scripts are learnt socially and, in the media, it is often the case in heterosexual encounters the man who proactively seeks a woman and it is often the woman who reacts to the man's advances (Emmers-Sommer, 2015). Adherence to these scripts may cause women to feel they have less agency during sexual interactions because internalized gendered scenarios may be reenacted (Buerkle,

2021). Online dating apps may impact how sexual agency is experienced because of the underlying assumption of romantic or sexual interest in the people women match, this assumption may in turn create expectations and behaviors that influence agency (Buerkle, 2021).

#### **1.4.2 Research on Women’s Strategies to Mitigate Risks Associated with Online Dating**

Even though, in most Western societies the notions of women’s sexuality have been changing to encourage women’s sexual freedom and exploration, women face the risks related to gender-based violence in this endeavor (Farvid & Aisher, 2016). In response to these risks, women often report being alerted to potential signs of threat and danger and taking precautions to avoid coming into harm’s way, highlighting that the burden of keeping themselves safe unfairly falls on women (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Farvid & Aisher, 2016; Gillett, 2021). Gillett (2021) has shown women engage in “safety work” in online dating platforms through in-depth interviews. Many users develop extensive risk management strategies to cope (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). Because of their fear for safety, during their search for dates and partners, women have been shown to be more risk-avoidant than men (Berkowitz et al., 2021). In-depth interviews have shown that along their motivation for having a “love match”, women’s decisions were heavily informed by their wish to stay away from potential dangers (Pruchniewska, 2020).

Safety work includes methods to mitigate against the risks associated with online and in-person encounters (Gillett, 2021). Online strategies included checking of user profiles by assessing personalities and ideologies of people through the chat and pictures, as well as determining the authenticity of users by cross-checking on other social media platforms (Farvid & Aisher, 2016; Gillett, 2021; Pruchniewska, 2020). Research suggests that online information seeking increases when one feels the need to protect themselves from potential dangers (Gibbs et al., 2011). Offline strategies included location sharing with friends, conservatively dressing (Gillett, 2021), sharing of date’s identity with friends and controlling time and place of

meeting (Lundquist & Curington, 2019), and assessing the date's trustworthiness intuitively in-person (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). To mitigate risks associated with sexual activity, users report measures such as STD testing prior to sexual contact, regular check-ups, and testing, and using sexual protection (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008).

Many users develop strategies for protecting their privacy (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Cobb & Kohno, 2017; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). These strategies include providing as little information as possible and managing the types of information shared with others (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). Users report preferring not to share their last names, phone numbers, addresses, and other identifiable information (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). However, choosing to keep identifiable information private or not providing links to social media accounts may also have unwanted adverse effects as profiles with fewer details are often perceived by users to be at high risk of being a fake profile (Cobb & Kohno, 2017).

Online forms of harassment such as unwanted contact or incessant pressure for women to share information or pictures, are often dealt with by being shrugged off and ignored (Chadha et al., 2020). Along these lines, another way women users have been found to mitigate the negative experiences with men they had matched was through social networks, as uncomfortable interactions were shared and humorously deescalated (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). This could be partially due to the perception that harassment, being an inevitable part of online dating platforms, makes users more likely to resign to online harassment (Chadha et al., 2020). This resignation, however, at least partially stems from how women find it unlikely that if reported online harassment would be taken seriously by authorities (Chadha et al., 2020). In face of online harassment, another strategy that has been employed was making an effort to educate the harassing party, yet, in interviews participants have stated that they often received backlash to their efforts (Chadha et al., 2020).

In response to harassment in digital spaces many women turn to humor as a coping response, either among friends or online (Gillett, 2018). One of the ways

harassment is diffused by use of humor is on Instagram pages like “Tinder Nightmares” and “Bye Felipe” that post screenshots of men’s messages to call out their sexist behavior and resist it by shaming and disapproving of it publicly (Thompson, 2018). These Instagram pages have amassed a great following, the former having 1.9 million and the latter having 454 thousand followers at the time of writing (“Bye Felipe”, 2022; “tindernightmares”, 2022). By posting on Instagram, this very private matter gains public attention (Thompson, 2018). Although the account does not restrict who can submit a post, the majority of posts that are published include a woman who receives unwanted or inappropriate messages or images from a man (Thompson, 2018).

In sum, agency is a person’s capacity for autonomy and self-determination according to their best interest, yet women’s agency may be impeded in patriarchal structures (Bowden & Mummery, 2009; Meyers, 2002). While online dating platforms are sometimes viewed as new opportunities for romantic and sexual exploration, the gendered norms and expectations still exist in these spaces (Farvid & Aisher, 2016). In response to these risks, women develop many precautions (Rajah & Osborn, 2020). Yet, burdened with precaution taking, women may not freely participate on these platforms (Gillett, 2021). In the next section, the topics related to online dating discussed so far will be examined in the research conducted in the context of Turkey.

## **1.5 RESEARCH ON WOMEN’S ONLINE DATING EXPERIENCES IN TURKEY**

To understand how women experience safety and agency in online dating, the backdrop of this research inquiry should be outlined. Turkey is relatively more gender equal than its Middle-Eastern neighbors, yet it has 130 points in Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) scores much higher than European countries’ scores (Beasley & Holmes, 2021). It has been argued that in recent years, in Turkey women’s rights and liberties have been used by the government as a tool for consolidating their power, and thus, the gender framework in Turkey became more

conservative and traditional (Arat, 2021). Before the current government came to power, a vibrant women's right movement in the democratization movement post a military coup in the 1980s was taking place, and in the early years of their rule between 2002 and 2007, the ruling party undertook a series of gender equality reforms (Arat, 2021). Still, a portion of the population adheres to more secular worldviews, and value freedoms and equality (Arat, 2021). Most recently, after the withdrawal of the government from the Istanbul Convention, feminist groups in Turkey have been protesting gender-based violence and high rates of femicides (Akbal, 2021).

In a related vein, how dating violence is perceived seems to be gendered in samples from Turkey. One study conducted among college students identified that women were more likely than men to state that psychological, sexual, or physical dating violence area serious issue (Toplu-Demirtaş et al., 2020). This study's results were in line with the gender schema theory which posits that more aggressive roles are associated with maleness (Toplu-Demirtaş et al., 2020). Şimşek and Kavas (2018) have also identified that as men held more traditional views on gender roles, they were more likely to commit both psychological and physical violence on the women they are dating. On the other hand, a study by Vefikuluçay and colleagues (2007) also revealed that the more women espoused traditional gender roles, they became more accepting of the violence they survived.

Dating remains a relatively new form of interaction between young people of Turkey (Hortaçsu, 2007), and young people in urban settings are freer to date than in rural settings (Thobaben & Kuğuoğlu, 2021). In Turkey, women are discouraged from pre-marital sexual interactions (Thobaben & Kuğuoğlu, 2021). Ustunel (2021) has found that the young women in Turkey feel the pressure of socio-cultural norms not viewing dating practices favorably, and this pressure limits their space to gain dating experiences. In addition, the age at first marriage remains relatively young leaving little room for experimentation (Boratav & Çavdar, 2011). A recent study examining how the current university students view relationships and intimacy has concluded that many must bargain between rising cultural conservatism and freedoms, and modernity, eventually taking a position that

respects non-confirming gender and sexuality expressions that are different from their own, yet personally idealizing heteronormative and more traditional expressions for themselves (Özbay et al., 2019).

Parallel to the attitudes towards dating, research also found that nation-wide attitudes toward online dating apps are mostly negative in Turkey (Eren, 2019). It is important to note that the cultural setting may affect the social stigma around use of online dating platforms and interact with gendered cultural norms and expectations (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). The perception of stigma associated with online dating affects users' behavior (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). However, this effect has been found to impact women's experiences more heavily than it does men's experiences, by causing some women that utilize these apps to keep their app use private as many women think the perception of online dating use by non-users is that these platforms are exclusively for sexual encounters (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). A survey conducted on Tinder users in Turkey in 2021 indeed established that Tinder users were mainly motivated by shorter term, casual relationships like hook-ups (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). Despite the challenges that fear for physical safety and societal pressure present, women often find ways to cope with these challenges and resist limiting gendered practices (Lordoğlu, 2018).

Keeping in line with these findings, a qualitative study conducted on women using Tinder in Istanbul has found that to ensure privacy of use, one of the common security measures employed by women was providing little to no information on their profiles that can be used to identify them and choosing locations with low risk of running into people they know (Deniz, 2020). Perhaps, these findings are not surprising as culture influences the way dating life is experienced, and especially in Turkey single women may often become the target of scrutiny and surveillance in their communities (Lordoğlu, 2018).

Several factors from potential date's identity are considered when women are deciding to swipe right or left on another user (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021; Deniz, 2020). When women's in-app match selection process was analyzed, it was found that physical appearance of potential dates played a significant role, as well as socioeconomic status such as having attended elite universities to ensure a cultural

fit (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). Another factor that was identified was the ethnic and racial identity of the potential match as some women Tinder users have stated a preference for, and against certain minority groups living within Turkey (Deniz, 2020).

## **1.6 THE PRESENT STUDY**

As it has been previously discussed, online dating applications and websites offer great freedom and ease to meet, date, and connect with potential romantic, non-romantic, or sexual partners (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Fansher & Eckinger, 2021). Yet, for many women, meeting men through these services poses online and offline risks (Anderson et al., 2020; Paat & Markham, 2020; Thompson, 2018). This study aims to explore how women identify, calculate, and respond to these risks and what they experience through these online services through a feminist lens.

Because each culture and subculture construct the concept of women's agency in a unique way, and each individual woman within these cultures and subcultures experience gendered cultural elements in their own unique ways (Meyers, 2002), the experiences of women who use online dating apps in Turkey should be studied. To this end, this study proposes that to achieve an in-depth understanding of the experiences of women's agency in online dating narratives, each account deserves close attention. To get a comprehensive understanding of the subject at hand, this research employs a qualitative design and utilizes in-depth interviews with its participants. This study aims to document and examine how risks and impediments in online dating are experienced and in which ways they are challenged and resisted by young women. By examining women's experiences and identifying needs for building safer online dating practices, this study aims to document and expand the literature on how online dating experiences can become safer and non-violent in a way that respects users' dignity, freedoms, and right to have experiences free of risks.

Accordingly, the research questions of the study are: a) How do young women define and navigate safety when using online dating platforms? b) What behaviors do women employ to build security in their interactions with men through online dating platforms? c) How do they exert their agency when utilizing online dating platforms?

## **CHAPTER 2: METHODS**

### **2.1 DATA COLLECTION**

Once the present study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Istanbul Bilgi University, the researcher proceeded with participant recruitment through convenience sampling. A digital flyer introducing the study was prepared and distributed through Whatsapp groups and two social media platforms: Instagram and Twitter personal accounts. Some followers of these accounts retweeted and reposted the flyer and increased the reach of the flyer. Four criteria for eligibility were determined: 1) being a woman, 2) being 18 to 35 years old, 3) identifying as heterosexual, and 4) having used an online dating platform for meeting and dating men for at least 1 month. The age group was determined considering the data suggesting that young women aged 18-35 are significantly more likely to have experienced harassment in online dating platforms (Anderson et al., 2020). The present study focused on women who identify themselves as heterosexual since previous research indicates that women are often targeted by men in terms of sexually aggressive behaviors occurring in digital spaces (Anderson et al., 2020). The participants were expected to have previous experience in creating a profile in online dating mobile applications or websites to meet and date men for at least one month. This time frame was set to ensure that participants have an adequate amount of personal experience relevant to the research topic (Gibbs et al., 2011). Exclusion criteria for the study was experiencing acute psychological stress or trauma symptoms due to being subject to dating violence, sexual harassment, and digital violence.

Eleven participants who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria were recruited for the study. Participation in the study was on a volunteer basis. Participants reached the researcher via the email address provided on the flyer. The participants were then assigned a participant number to use on the demographic form and were asked to fill out the demographic form (Appendix B) and provide a written statement that they have read and agreed to the informed consent form

(Appendix A) prior to the interview. These two forms were completed prior to the interviews. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher verbally informed the participants about the research procedures by telling that she will be asking open ended questions about their online dating experiences while getting an audio recording, the participants were free to answer to the extent they felt comfortable with, could skip any question they preferred not to answer, and that they could end the interview at any point they wanted should they chose to do so.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online. The researcher herself led the interviews with the participants on the Zoom platform. An initial interview guide (Appendix C) was developed and followed during the interviews to understand the participants' experiences and views related to safety and agency on and through online dating platforms. The initial guide was developed with six main questions on online dating experiences, per the advice from thesis advisor the interview guide was improved to have seventeen main questions, most with several follow-up probes. Following the suggestions of Braun and Clarke (2013), the questions were formed open-ended, not leading, and worded in a non-judgmental way. The interview guide had four main sections. The first section was the introduction. In this section, the participants were asked to introduce themselves and their lifestyles and were asked about their relationship history. The second section of the interview guide focused on the topic of the participants' views on and experiences with online flirting and dating apps to get an understanding of their use motivations, concerns they may had using these apps, and how they made decisions regarding different stages of online dating from the decision to choose to the decision to meet a man in person. In the third section, the focus was on the participants' experience of security on online dating platforms to address the research questions that have been outlined. In this section, women's experiences of coping with security risks, development of safety strategies, and the related decision-making processes were examined. In the last section of conclusion, the interview was wrapped up, any gains they had by using online dating was asked, and the participants were asked about the experience in the interview. Prior to data collection, a pilot interview took place to assess the interview questions and gain

experience as to how the interview flowed. The pilot interview was transcribed and reviewed between the researcher and her thesis advisor, no changes were made to the interview guide. The interviews lasted between 56 to 99 minutes. The interviews were audiotaped with the participants' expressed consent and then transcribed verbatim.

## **2.2 PARTICIPANTS**

Eleven women were recruited and interviewed for the research. Their ages ranged from 24 to 33. Ten identified as heterosexual and one identified as bisexual, having used online dating platforms for meeting and dating men exclusively. None of the participants were married. Their education levels ranged from university graduate to master's graduate and specialized in various professions. Most of them were in their psychotherapy processes. Ten lived in urban, metropolitan settings in Turkey, and one lived in Germany at the time of the interview. The length of dating application use stated in the demographic form ranged from 2 months to 3 years, and most participants told in the interviews that they took some breaks from use. The number of men they met through online dating ranged from 4 to 150. Their motivations for use were asked, and the participants were offered three options and a fill-in option. None filled in an option beyond what was provided, and they could select all the options that fit. Eight participants said they were motivated to meet new people, eight said they were motivated for romantic relationship seeking, and seven said they were motivated for sexual partner seeking. Their demographic information is presented in the table (Table 1).

**Table 1.***Demographic Information of the Participants*

<b>P. no</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Currently Working</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Dating Apps Used</b>	<b>Motivations for Use</b>	<b>Number of Men Met</b>	<b>Length of Use</b>
<b>1</b>	BA Graduate	Yes	Lawyer	Tinder	Meeting new people, Romantic relationship seeking, Sexual partner seeking	10	3 Years
<b>2</b>	MA Student	Yes	Psychologist	Tinder, Happn	Meeting new people, Romantic relationship seeking, Sexual partner seeking	9	10 Months
<b>3</b>	BA Graduate	Yes	Engineer	Tinder	Meeting new people, Sexual partner seeking	20	5 Months
<b>4</b>	BA Graduate	Yes	Manager	Tinder, OKCupid	Meeting new people, Romantic relationship seeking	8	2 Years

5	BA Graduate	Yes	Teacher	OKCupid, Slowly	Meeting new people, Romantic relationship seeking	10	5 Months
6	Ma Graduate	Yes	Psychotherapist	Bumble	Romantic relationship seeking	17	8 Months
7	BA Graduate	Yes	IT and programming	Tinder, OKCupid, Bumble	Meeting new people, Romantic relationship seeking, Sexual partner seeking	15	2 Years
8	MA Student	Yes	Marketing	Inner Circle, Bumble	Sexual partner seeking	4	2 Months
9	BA Graduate	Yes	Marketing	Tinder, Bumble	Romantic relationship seeking	15	6 Months
10	BA Graduate	No	English Teacher	OKCupid	Meeting new people, Sexual partner seeking	15	2 Years
11	MA Graduate	No	Psychotherapist	Tinder, Bumble	Meeting new people, Romantic relationship seeking, Sexual partner seeking	150	14 Months

## 2.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013) was used to understand the experiences of the participants who are using online dating platforms regarding their senses of security and agency. Thematic analysis was chosen, because it has been defined as an efficient approach to identify themes and patterns in the experiences described by participants (Braun & Clark, 2013). A feminist social constructionist perspective informed the present analysis. According to this perspective, this research aimed to expose the possible gender-based oppression occurring in the experiences on and through online dating platforms that heavily affect women, and advocate for social change by reflecting and representing the lived experiences of women (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). The data analysis, informed by feminist social constructionist perspective, the researcher focused on how the participants perceived how being a woman shaped their online dating experiences in a patriarchal cultural context, and how the participants resisted the gender-based challenges they were unequally affected by in their experiences.

During the analysis, six steps as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. The first step involved transcribing and repeatedly reading the collected data to increase familiarity with it. The researcher audiotaped and then transcribed all the interviews. The transcriptions of the interviews and the field notes were read and re-read at the beginning of coding while paying attention to reflections that were taken by the researcher after each interview. The second step involved systematically grouping the data to create initial codes. In this step, the researcher carried out line by line coding by reading each sentence and creating a code that captures its meaning. MAXQDA 2020 Software program was utilized to code each interview and form the themes. Some examples of the initial codes created in this step were “consent - in the flow,” “date’s dating life unknown,” “decisions made intuitively,” and “motivation - meeting new people.” After coding the first interview, the codes were discussed and reviewed with the advisor to check for their relevance and to increase trustworthiness of the analysis. After the discussion and some minor revisions, the rest of the coding was completed by the

researcher. In the third step, the researcher examined the data to produce potential themes by bringing together codes that may form overall themes. This was accomplished through a close analysis of the frequency list of the codes and grouping those codes with similar content and meaning. The researcher developed four initial themes. At this stage, the initial main themes were Dating Experiences, Concerns Throughout Dating Process, Decision Making, and Precautions in Response to Concerns. In the fourth step, the themes at the level of data extracts under the theme and at the level of whole collected data were reviewed to check whether the themes were reflective of the participants' experiences or not. In the fifth step, coherent themes were defined by delineating the essence of each theme. To increase trustworthiness of the analysis, investigator triangulation was carried out. Per Braun and Clarke's (2013) guides, interpretations of data and codes were discussed with the advisor and reinterpreted to determine final themes. The researcher kept field notes and discussed the research and analysis process with her advisor as a triangulated investigator. Upon the advisor's suggestions and inputs, the themes were revised, and each code was then assigned the corresponding theme and subtheme. At this point, the final themes have been identified as Anticipating Risks of Online Dating, Developing Online Strategies for Safety, Developing Strategies to Move beyond the Risks, and Reaping Benefits despite Challenges. In the last stage, a final report that represented the analysis and original accounts of the collected data was prepared (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Member checking was conducted after the themes are defined to ensure that the results reflect participant experience. For member checking, a single-page summary of the results was prepared and shared with the participants via email to seek their feedback. Only one participant responded with her approval stating that the results captured her experience. Because of the limited feedback, no changes or revisions were made to the themes.

## 2.4 REFLEXIVITY

I am a student in Istanbul Bilgi University Clinical Psychology Master's program. For the last two years, I have been working as an intern psychotherapist with adults in Istanbul Bilgi University Psychological Counseling Center. I have also gained clinical experience in private mental health hospitals' in- and outpatient clinics. Starting in my undergraduate education, I have been personally and academically interested in understanding the nature and nuances of romantic relationships and dating. I have worked as a research assistant at an experiment empirically examining romantic couples' experiences of shared reality and a research project involving heterosexual speed dating and focusing on factors that determine attraction and dating willingness. During my master's education, I have also co-led 4 and 8 week-long Non-violence and Safety in Dating atelier groups for three times under the roof of the Istanbul Bilgi University. With the impact of non-violence and safety groups, I began incorporating a feminist lens to how I viewed couple relationships and dating, since I had recognized that these relationships were heavily influenced by gendered cultural norms and expectations, as well as gender socializing starting at an early age. During these groups, I have observed how the participants had difficulty identifying non-physical forms of violence in romantic relationships. Meanwhile, in my work as a psychotherapist, I was remarking how the quality and nature of an individual's dating life and romantic relationships were central to their psychological well-being and quality of life.

With the global Covid-19 pandemic, I had observed that technology's role in all our social relationships became even more central and impactful because of the limitations on in-person socializing. This observation led me to wonder about how the dating scene was responding to these changes, and my curiosity for the inner workings of dating on online platforms grew. With a high prevalence of dating and intimate partner violence, I became invested in understanding how online dating was taking place in the context of Turkey, and how the online spaces responded to the need for safety and gender equality in dating relationships. My interest in how women's experiences of safety and agency in online dating manifest

in their decision making and behaviors led me to study how women define and navigate safety when using these platforms and how they build security in their interactions with men.

I grew up with a family that embodied more modern and liberal values in a conservative-leaning town in Turkey. I identify with a more Westernized culture within Turkey that values gender-equality and have lived within immediate social circles that also value gender equality and personal freedoms. Nevertheless, I sometimes find myself making decisions, in public and private spaces, under some pressure to keep myself safe from gender-based discrimination and violence. I lived in New York, United States for four years. Upon my return to Istanbul, Turkey, I was acutely aware of how much more safety work I had to engage in. Based on my observations, I could say that even in public and private spaces that promote gender equality and identify with Westernized values of personal freedoms, women face challenges. This also applies to online dating platforms which supposedly reflect sexual freedoms. Even when utilizing these platforms, the experiences are gendered, and the burden of safety and the role of sexual gatekeeping often fall on women.

Going into the data collection process, I had personally not used any online dating platforms. I think this allowed me as the researcher to remain very curious throughout the data collection process as I made an effort to build a whole picture of the inner workings of online dating. Without assumptions and prior knowledge of the experience, I wanted to understand what drove women to begin using these platforms, what kinds of risks they associated with online dating applications and websites, what kinds of experiences they have had with the men they had met, and how they responded to and coped with potential threats.

In the interviews, I aimed at creating a safe environment in which they could openly express their views and experiences while maintaining the participants' privacy. What I often heard from the participants during the interviews was their enthusiasm for participating in this research because they found it unique in the sense that they felt this area was understudied academically and not spoken of enough due to the stigma attached to using online dating platforms. In all

interviews, the rapport was strong with the participants and the oral reports they provided were very rich and descriptive. I was close in age to all participants. In some of the interviews, I noticed participants also relating with my psychotherapist role, in addition to my position as the researcher. At the times in which some of the participants were upset by the content of their narratives, I took on a more supportive role and normalized their reactions to their experiences.

In the process of analyzing the interview data, my approach was informed by my wish to document the ways in which women engaged in safety behaviors while using dating apps and on in-person dates with men they had met online. By documenting the safety work, I was mainly motivated by possible clinical implications that would promote safe and non-violent dating practices on and through online dating platforms by demonstrating that women were unfairly burdened with digital and physical labor of safety work in their dating practices. Women being burdened with safety work was also related to the social context of Turkey which heightened the sense of risk in the participants for gender-based violence. The findings of my study also showed that the lack of support from institutions add to the women feeling unsafe in their dating practices and lead them to find more informal ways of coping with potential risks, I hope this finding could inform policy change. The findings of my research could guide the development of potential avenues for safety building that engage the community, educate all that participate in dating practices on boundaries, consent, and safety, that could hopefully, lead to women not having to go to such great lengths for precaution taking. During the data analysis process, I noticed the women that took part in the research spent significant efforts to ensure their safety during a potential date selection process, in the chat, and before and during the in-person dates. I remarked that their decision-making processes were influenced by the threats to their physical and psychological safety, as well as their coping responses to these risks. In my observations, the efforts for safety were heavily spent by women and most believed men who used the platforms did not have the same level of scrutiny and intentionality in their decision-making processes.

### **CHAPTER 3: RESULTS**

Thematic Analysis method developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) was utilized to delineate notable emerging themes from the interviews on women's experiences of safety and agency in their online dating experiences. Upon the completion of the analysis, four main themes were determined: “Anticipating Risks of Online Dating”, “Developing Online Strategies for Safety”, “Developing Strategies to Move Beyond the Risks”, and “Reaping Benefits Despite Challenges”. Sub-themes were formed based on their common meaning and representations of different aspects of the main themes. These themes and subthemes can be found in Table 3.1. The results section presents the main themes and sub-themes in depth.

**Table 3.1***Themes and Sub-themes of the Research*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Anticipating Risks of Online Dating</b>	<b>Developing Online Strategies for Safety</b>	<b>Developing Strategies to Move Beyond the Risks</b>	<b>Reaping Benefits Despite Challenges</b>
Subthemes	Threats to Safety	Choosing and App and Utilizing In-App Settings	Building a Sense of Physical Safety	Forming Meaningful Connections
	Pressures of the Stigma around Online Dating	Screening and Selecting Potential Matches	Involvement of Social Networks	Building a Sense of Self-Confidence
	Threats to Integrity and Trust	Verifying and Assessing Potential Dates	Assessing Date in Person	Gaining Experience in Dating and Relationships
		Maintaining Privacy	Communicating Consent	

### **3.1 Anticipating Risks of Online Dating**

All the women that participated in the study reported being concerned about at least one risk factor they have identified associated with using online dating or meeting men in person they have met online. This theme illustrates what kinds of risks they anticipate in connection to their physical safety, privacy, psychological safety, and their integrity. This theme demonstrates the risks they try to calculate and respond to in various ways, which influence their decision making and behavior. Women's accounts revealed having concerns, anxieties, and fears while engaging with men on online dating platforms and in person. Although only a few participants recounted having experienced serious harm themselves, their worries had been shaped by what they observed in their social circles and media. The sub-themes defined under this theme are: "Threats to Safety", "Pressures of the Stigma around Online Dating", and "Threats to Integrity and Trust".

#### **3.1.1 Threats to Safety**

All of the participants reported feeling that there were risks to their safety in their interactions with men they had met online. This concern for their safety included a wide range of risks, including both online and in-person interactions. While most participants did not report personal experiences of being harmed, the cultural context, their observations and the zeitgeist led them to having these concerns. Many made references to the current rate of gender-based violence and femicides in Turkey and to comparisons with developed countries as they explained the reasons for their having concerns. The participants reported their concerns for their safety were influenced by the current context.

*"As I said, we hear such bad things here everyday, be it on social media or here or there... First of all, I am living in Turkey, I did not experience this when I was living in the Netherlands. In Turkey, when I match with someone and send them a message, I begin thinking 'Will he find out who I am? There are perverts and very weird people in the end. How should I know if they get obsessed, or stalk me, or this*

*or that?’ Therefore, I have serious problems with meeting someone in person in Turkey.” (P11)*

Most of the participants reported having fears for their physical safety during in-person interactions with men they met on online dating platforms. The threats they emphasized to their physical safety varied. These threats included murder, rape, harassment, and violent assault. One feared that even before meeting her date in person, a malign person could harm her through the information she provided online.

*“And there is the risk of being harmed physically. Unfortunately, we live in a country that is filled with many men who kill women on the streets. When this is the case, I don’t know what kind of psychology the person in front of me has, the person I am talking to can be a sociopath, I couldn’t tell that. He could find something to harm me with from a tiny detail I give. I don’t know, people can find where you are from a tiny detail in a photograph. This may be paranoid, but I am like ‘What if he harms me physically?’” (P5)*

The risks to their physical safety was anticipated and calculated through the femicides and gender-based violence incidents that drew great public attention in the news and media. The examples they gave in their accounts included violence against women perpetrated by men who to their victims were intimate partners, dates, and complete strangers.

*“This caused me to have worries, will I be cut and chopped into 38 pieces and be thrown into the garbage container like in the murder of Münevver Karabulut, if I keep using these platforms? In the real sense you (don’t know) who will exhibit violent behaviors, it could be even with people you think you know very well, there is that side to this... That kept me going on these apps, I can be harmed by the people closest to me or by this person (they have met online).” (P1)*

The participants that reported having fears for their physical safety also indicated that these risks informed the tone of their experiences through the platforms by having safety related questions at the back of their minds.

*“At the end of the day, there are questions in one’s mind like ‘Will I be raped? Will something happen to me?’” (P4)*

Notably, the threats to physical safety they associated with online dating came up in response to the question about how their experiences with safety have been like. The concept of safety was defined through the existence and level of potential threats.

*“When I think of safety, I think of ‘Will I be harmed by violence? Could I be abused in some way?’” (P10)*

Part of this risk was due to the unpredictability of who the perpetrator of violence was going to be. The date being unknown to them outside of the impression gained on the online dating platforms also contributed to the sense of threat. Some participants noted that compared to meeting someone through your social network, there were more limited resources to confirm the information provided by potential dates which made them feel riskier.

*“In the end, this is a new person, anything could happen, I don’t know them at all. You don’t know their social circle, their environment. Whatever he tells you, you are only exposed to what he tells you and what he shows you. For some people, there is no way to find them.” (P8)*

One participant likened her experience with safety on OkCupid to a gamble, as she found that it felt risky to pick a date online because of the vulnerability to varied threats.

*“When I think about my personal safety on OkCupid, I don’t find it very secure. Security on OkCupid is more like, if I had to give a definition, like Russian Roulette. Anything could happen. Because of this it is a riskier place. It’s like a gamble.” (P5)*

As described, all women identified security issues and most had unique ways of responding to these threats. Some of the participants highlighted that this cautiousness and fearfulness they experience towards meeting men unknown to them outside of online dating platforms came inherently and naturally to them, especially in the context of Turkey, which heightened their sense of insecurity.

*“You have no other solution, you are a woman, you live in Turkey, if you have a drop of commonsense these are things you know, you are aware of this when*

*you are talking to a stranger. Nobody told me to be this way, and I didn't even think about acting this way, because no other way came to my mind.” (P2)*

Overall, women identified many risks to their physical safety as they navigated online and the following in-person dating. These risks were viewed in relation the backdrop of current state of violence against women in Turkey. Who the perpetrators could be was unpredictable, this contributed to the feeling of riskiness. These risks were anticipated and responded to by taking some measures which will be discussed under the next two main themes.

### **3.1.2 Pressures of the Stigma around Online Dating**

The participants reported either having experienced or the possibility of stigma around their online dating habits, and this influenced the ways in which they engaged in online dating. However, this stigma did not always generate from people around them. Many women reported that they, too, had prejudice against using online dating platforms before they began using.

*“And it was not easy to socialize and meet someone, then I realized there was Tinder. But I was resistant to Tinder, more accurately to all dating apps, because I thought only people with IQ equal to Bonobo monkeys were there. I said who would be on there, I had prejudices. I even made fun of a friend who I saw swiping right and left, I was very sarcastic. Then, they made fun of me, they told me I was very prejudiced, they told me there was a case to be made about use, it made it easier to access people and it provides something.” (P2)*

One other commonly held belief was that online dating apps did not facilitate encounters that would lead to meaningful romantic relationships. Another noted that, she, too, held prejudices pre-use, but having used the apps allowed her to feel more comfortable about her use with time.

*“I was one of those who had a prejudiced perspective. And I even told people who met others online that they could hook-up, but they couldn't form something meaningful. I had prejudice against and concerns about forming*

*something serious with a person I met online. Maybe, after I began using it, my prejudice went away.” (P10)*

The reasons for this prejudice included perceiving online dating as some sort of social deficiency, the belief that it was mostly used for hook-ups, and the unlikeliness of forming a meaningful romantic relationship.

*“At the beginning, I was very disturbed by using such a thing. I thought to myself ‘Why do I need this? Can’t I meet someone naturally myself?’ Or I don’t know, I thought a relationship through here would be an artificial one.” (P8)*

Another reason for having a negative attitude towards app use was how it was perceived regarding the sexuality of women who used it. Some women shared that because there was a perception that women who used online dating were sexually or morally loose, they were disturbed by this perception even if they did not agree with it.

*“In our people there is this perception that women who use Tinder or Bumble are this way or that way, which I do not agree with, even if it is, what is it to people? But from what I have seen, people on Tinder think more like this.” (P11)*

Because of this stigma, many women preferred to not share their use with the people they believed would judge them for their experiences through online dating.

*“In my circle of close friends, there was no one else who used Tinder, and I could only share my experiences with a few people because I thought it was seen as despicable, I did not feel comfortable about sharing. I already was not comfortable with sharing about my sexual experiences, my concern about being judged went alongside that.” (P1)*

Some women especially noted that they were concerned about running into people they knew on dating apps. The reasons for this concern included awkwardness, violation of privacy, and harm to their academic or professional image. One participant had run into a family member, a coworker, and an academician of the university she was a student of. She reported that being seen by these people on dating apps made her feel negatively about her social image due to negative perception of online dating use as a social deficiency.

*“Anybody could be there. Your brother could be there, like my brother was. Because we have a relaxed and modern relationship with my brother, he was not the type to make it into an issue. Your schoolmates could be there, or for example, I had matched with an academician from another department, and we were on the same campus. He is an academician, you match, he sees your name, and those can be social problems. Or back then I felt like a person using online dating must be at a pitiful point, like you are unable to form a relationship and you end up there, and that made me feel really bad.” (P4)*

She also recounted the memory of running into a colleague and her concern for their dating potentially becoming problematic at the workplace.

*“Then, such a thing occurred, there was a guy that worked in the same company, we do not work for the same company, but we have the same client and therefore there were instances where we interacted with our professional identity. He added me on Tinder, and he used to spend time with people that I spend time with in my professional life, and we had a relationship, but he could have turned out to be a nonsensical person. Thankfully, he did not do anything to make me uncomfortable, but I was anxious about it.” (P4)*

For some vocational fields, running into a client could have ethical and moral implications. Psychotherapy is one such field. Concern for professional image was quite salient and one psychotherapist had concerns about being unable to work with a potential client. When asked about if she had any concerns about online dating, she provided a reply about her job.

*“Yes, my job firstly. Running into a client of mine, or a potential client... Because of the school of psychotherapy I work with, I don’t even share much on my social media and then I run into them on Bumble... My friends who signed me on to dating apps are also psychologists and we used to say we hoped not to run into a client. Thankfully, that did not happen until now, and it will not happen after this point, and no one who saw me there would come as a client.” (P6)*

Another participant who also reported having concerns about running into a coworker on dating apps told about how she made a mental formulation of the

situation that eased her concern. She decided that because both her and the colleague saw each other, that must have leveled the field for both of them.

*“First of all, I feared running into a coworker. But then I thought, if I have seen him, then he has seen me, we are equals, there is no problem. By thinking like this, I let go of that earlier concern, but I had it at the beginning.” (P7)*

Furthermore, the pressure of feeling a stigma around online dating may cause women to be deprived of the support they may need. In this regard, one participant noted she lacked social support about the men she dated, because her friends were judgmental of using dating apps. Another told how she was not able to include her mother in her safety network in the earlier times of using dating apps, because she was ashamed about letting her know.

*“The reason I did not tell her at first, I never told my mom when I was on Tinder, because you feel shame. She knew everyone used the apps to have sex, but I used it to find a beautiful relationship back then. But it was hard to tell because of the shame.” (P9)*

In all, facing the stigma around online dating was another challenge for women. Some participants experienced this stigma internally, while others felt it externally from their social interactions. Online dating was held in a negative light, when it was associated with sexual motivations for use, lack of social skills, or moral deficiency. Because of the stigma, the participants did not want to run into people they knew in real life on the dating applications. Experiencing stigma also made it harder to reach out for help which complicated safety building.

### **3.1.3 Threats to Integrity and Trust**

Truthfulness of profiles women view online was often described as hard to assess. Because of this, many women found they could bump into people who are different from what their online dating profiles suggest. This poses a risk, especially if a manipulative gain is sought through misrepresentation. Online dating caused almost all women in the study to have concerns about whether they could trust the

person's dating profile or not, due to the ease with which they thought a profile could be misrepresented.

*“People could have created themselves a different profile and you could not tell that easily. It takes a long time to tell. Such a thing happened to me. The guy was completely different from the profile he created. It was like he was the driver of the company that he told me he was the owner of. People think of sex when they think of apps, but the apps are a place for people to live out the fantasies they can't live out in real life and an effort to turn them into reality. People who are not respected want respect... In a way, it is easier to prove yourself on those platforms than in real life.” (P9)*

Misrepresentation was possible for everyone on the platforms, including the participants themselves. Some also recognized the ease with which one could misrepresent oneself, because they thought that if they chose to do so, it would have been extremely easy for them to present as someone else.

*“In truth, it is limitless... It is an amazing platform, no one on there is acquainted with you, no one knows who you are and this actually provides a huge comfortable space. I do anything I want there, appear as the person I want, tell the lies that I want to tell and behave in any way that I want.” (P1)*

Four participants especially noted that misrepresentation was relatively easy on online dating platforms because of their nature. They remarked that because online dating platforms lacked real life connections that would occur in meetings through one's networks, it was easy for users to misrepresent themselves and harder to verify.

*“You can lie there and sell yourself. But in real life things are more organic with someone you meet through friends, things are more real because you have common friends, you have to be truthful. If you meet at work, he is witnessing your professional identity as well. You both get to observe each other, and it becomes more real. But on Tinder, I could lie for hours, change my name, become Pelin, become a flight attendant... I never did that, but if you had the chance, you could do that. And because you know you could do it, you trust others considering that. It*

*could go on until you meet... Even after you meet, you could continue because you know no one in common, that is weird.” (P2)*

They identified many potential aspects of a person’s identity that could be untruthful. These included a potential date’s vocation, marital status, socioeconomic status, and physical appearance. Several participants noted especially having concerns for unknowingly engaging with a man who was not single, as they found this to be emotionally harder to bear.

*“One of the things I fear most on dating apps is matching with someone whose relationship status is married, and after having something with him learning that he was married...This is something that would be the most disappointing.” (P1)*

When such interactions occurred, the participants were disturbed. One participant reported two instances in which she had dated men who she later found out were not single. She also stated that these were the instances she knew about the untruthfulness. She recognized that she might have been deceived before even without knowing, because deception was harder to recognize.

*“For example, there was a man flirting with me who I later realized had a serious relationship to the degree of being engaged. I was very upset and broken. There was another one who I found out was married. If you had asked me on Tinder who the most single looking guy that I flirted with was, I would have pointed to him. He had pictures with iguanas on his head, amazing pictures, incredibly artsy, incredibly free... You would not say he was married with one child. [...] He told me that he was embarrassed to tell me that he was married. What am I supposed to do, thank you for your honesty? It was such a horrible moment. [...] I did not ask this person if he was married, because I did not think a married person would be on the app. It was an application that I assumed that everyone on it was single. And there could have been other ones as well without me ever knowing. Maybe he told me he was an architect, and he is in IT, but there are no references for you to know this, you have no common friends, coworkers or neighbors. You are not at all acquainted.” (P2)*

Some participants reported chatting online or meeting with men who they later discovered to have lied about some crucial aspect about themselves. The discovery of such misleading information caused women to have a range of reactions including shock, sadness, insecurity, disbelief, anger, and disappointment. One woman reported having dated a man who she was unable to verify and doubted the truthfulness of. After this unverifiable man disappeared, she experienced a period in which she found it hard to trust.

*“Then came the person who I felt very strongly for, we moved the conversation to Whatsapp, video chat, and because we were not in the same city, we couldn’t meet in person. But after a while, things he told me and mentioned started to become inconsistent. I started to feel I was being deceived. I did not know whether the person in front of me was doing the job he told me he had. Then came a point in which I noticed I was becoming paranoid. He told me he was a lawyer in Ankara, I searched on the Ankara Bar Association website and could not find him. He had told me he did not have social media, and the number of people who are not on social media is quite low. That created in me to question whether he was telling the truth or not. Because of this, I saw that I was becoming paranoid. Then he cut off all communications, deleted Whatsapp applications and disappeared. I thought that I was in a dreamland, and everything was so nice there. He treated me nicely, talked to me nicely, then suddenly the cloud bursted, puf! I fell back to the real world and there was no such person in front of me. [...] Then I had a hard time trusting myself and trusting others and began feeling not secure.” (P5)*

These misrepresentations being easy to manipulate and hard to recognize caused the participants to feel more cautious about trusting other users and led them to engage in verification behavior like in the previous excerpt. These verification behaviors are later discussed under the subtheme of “Screening and Selecting Potential Matches”.

Overall, the participants talked about various risks involved in using online dating apps. Three areas of risk had been identified. These areas included risks to safety, stigma attached to online dating, and possibility of misrepresentation of other users. Women responded to these risks by engaging in varied safety strategies.

As the participants navigated online dating and recognized the risks involved, they also developed some strategies to mitigate them. Some of the strategies they used started in the online platforms. In the next theme, these online strategies are explained in detail.

### **3.2 Developing Online Strategies for Safety**

The second main theme was identified as “Developing Online Strategies for Safety”, since all women who took part in the study reported engaging in at least one online safety strategy to respond to the risks that have been identified earlier. Within this main theme, four sub-themes that represent a type of online safety behavior were identified. These sub-themes are “Choosing an App and Utilizing In-App Settings,” “Screening and Selecting Potential Matches,” “Verifying and Assessing Potential Matches”, and “Maintaining Privacy.”

#### **3.2.1 Choosing an App and Utilizing In-App Settings**

The reasons for beginning to use online dating apps were mainly positioned as out of a need due to life situations or as encouragement from friend circles. Friends also influenced the app of choice by making recommendations for a particular one. In this study, the most used dating apps were Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid. Some of the participants were early users of Tinder and reported that the app was one of the few options available to them. In later experiences, most of the participants gave specific reasons why they deliberately chose using their app of choice.

*“Tinder was the most common one and the first one. It was the only option in 2014 in Turkey, so I downloaded it, but a few years later there were a lot of cops and soldiers on Tinder. And I don’t like either. Both really like to post pictures in uniform. Anyways, a friend of mine told me that there was an app called OkCupid, and said it was more like, that it had not been discovered yet and because of that there were more decent people. That way I downloaded it. Then everyone on Tinder*

*signed on to OkCupid. Then, someone else told me that there was Bumble, and as a dedicated person I downloaded that, too.” (P7)*

Seven participants used more than one dating application. Even though some had been active on more than one simultaneously, most had an app they predominantly preferred. Participants’ choices were influenced by how they perceived the general user profile in the apps -in terms of their motivations and personal qualities- and the features apps provided like chatting, question answering, profile details, and app design. Some participants found that the increased level of detail provided on a profile was important to them. One participant said that increased details felt more trustworthy.

*“I signed on to Tinder in September or October of 2020... I had only heard Bumble by name, but I didn’t know if people used it. My roommate had used Bumble. I sound like I look down on Tinder when I compare it to Bumble [...], but I had met the person I dated for a few months from Tinder. After using Tinder for a couple months, I switched to Bumble. She (roommate) told me that women were first to message, you could provide more details on your profile, and she told me that it could be better for me, because the people on Bumble showed more of their personality and were decent and more trustworthy. Then I looked and saw many people were using it. Afterwards, I began to use Bumble and my Tinder use fell sharply. Sometimes I did not sign on to Tinder for days. I only signed in partly out of boredom and partly when I wanted to talk to people there.” (P11)*

Each dating app was positioned slightly differently by the participants in terms of their user profile, user motivations, and types of experiences they provide. By selecting an app that is appropriate to their motivations, the women in the study increased the chances of having similar motivations with the men they meet. Women felt it was in their best interest to meet with men with matching motivations to their own motivations, they felt that disagreement and risk could be higher if they met a person with a different motivation. For example, the women did not consider meeting a man motivated for one-night stands, if they were looking for a romantic partner, since meeting this person could indicate sexual interest when in fact they did not have it. Tinder was thought of as a hook-up-oriented platform with lower

quality of users who the participants found less attractive for their motivations. The participants who were not motivated for short term experiences like one-night stands were not satisfied with Tinder and ultimately preferred alternative apps.

*“Tinder is an application on which people are mostly looking for one-night stands, at least in my experience. Yes, more people are looking for one-night stands. I have said I had met one person from Tinder, but it was two. I had intuitively decided at the last minute not to meet him. Therefore, I have only met one person. In short, app’s motivation is mostly one-night stands, for a couple meetings, really short-lived sexual experiences. Because of this, I deleted Tinder.” (P10)*

How the general user behavior and motivation were perceived was significant in the decision-making process of selecting an app. The participants explained that Bumble, too, had many users who were mainly motivated by hook-ups, but also other users who were motivated to make a romantic match. One participant said that her romantic match motivation led her to use Bumble, even though she later got bored with being on the search.

*“I never used it for sexting because in my opinion, it is indeed very easy to find someone to have sex with, as a woman. It is often asked if there’s anyone who’s looking for a relationship there - well I looked for a relationship. I’m certain that just like me, there are plenty of men and women who are looking for a real relationship on Bumble. But then you get bored. It’s similar to when you get a new toy and get bored with it.” (P9)*

Importantly, the participants found Bumble users possessed more of the qualities they preferred in a partner. Namely, these qualities were having received university education, being respectful to women, and having a good job. The preference for and against certain characteristics are later discussed under the sub-theme of “Screening and Selecting Potential Matches.” Bumble’s inner design that only allowed women to initiate the conversation in heterosexual matches was another reason for preference. Only women initiating the conversation was a reason for preferring Bumble, as the women felt this protected them from receiving an unwanted level of messages and put them into the position of control.

*“I had used Inner Circle previously, but now most features are paid, so I did not download that. Then, I downloaded Bumble. I used Bumble in the earlier days of my online dating. The good thing about Bumble is women writing first. I wrote if I wanted to or did not if I wanted to. I think it is better than Tinder, I never used Tinder, but that’s what I heard from people. When I am picking an app, I look at what it gives me about its users, if it says something about their professional lives, if it has free features that would allow me to talk to people without asking me for money. Like I said, having features like having the woman write first to protect the women users.”(P8)*

OkCupid, like Bumble, was positioned as an app that had increased chances for meeting someone who is romantically motivated. OkCupid’s use of algorithms based on information provided on questions and other qualities of users provided a similarity score and had a more limited number of matches possible each day to increase the quality of matches. On OkCupid, users found that there were many users with ranging motivations which corresponded to the participants’ expectations.

*“I began using OkCupid on friends’ advice. It is different from the others, I mean, yes, there are looking for one-night stands, but there are also people looking for friendships. Or, I don’t know, there are people looking for a partner for a long-term relationship or looking for marriage. Of course, numbers are probably different for each motivation, but OkCupid felt like a space I could find anything, that’s why I began to use OkCupid.” (P5)*

Another reason for switching apps was for the sake of exclusivity of the applications. Exclusivity included engaging with people who they considered were more privileged and in the know as they were early users of a new app, and therefore perceived to possess more desirable qualities. By switching apps or signing on to apps that promoted exclusivity like Inner Circle, the participants wanted to interact with what they perceived as a more exclusive and higher quality profile with more of the qualities they desired in a partner. The potential partners with more desired qualities like a good education and having similar worldviews were also viewed as safer than other users who may not possess these qualities. These men were viewed

as more likely to be respectful of boundaries, and non-judgmental towards their lifestyles. By choosing the more exclusive app, the app choice itself would eliminate less wanted potential partners. For one participant, Tinder feeling too inclusive was a reason for switching apps.

*“There are weird people but at some point, you can get to know a more qualified group of people, a better people profile, so I view OkCupid in a different light than Tinder. Tinder is like a more run down, common app, like the physical appearance is front and center, and everyone is already on Tinder. Tinder feels to me like it’s only used to search for pure sex, and because its userbase is so large, there remains the possibility to encounter anyone. We once swiped left on each other with my brother, something ridiculous like that happened once.” (P4)*

The participants reported using in-app settings to fulfill their need to take safety precautions and mitigate anticipated risks while they were using these apps. Most commonly used in-app settings were about privacy and controlling who their profiles were visible to, and filters. The features regarding privacy are further discussed under the sub-theme of “Maintaining Privacy.” Because dating applications are for profit, many dating applications and websites have different ways to monetize. One of these ways is by offering some in-app features at a cost. Each dating app discussed above only offers some of their more sought-after features at a cost. While some participants were staunchly opposed to paying for in-app purchases, other participants reported paying for some in-app features that were only available by fee. Most commonly paid for features had to do with controlling of the participants’ own profiles’ visibility and seeing the people that swiped right on one’s profile even if there had not been a match yet.

*“I used to use this feature for which you had to purchase a membership, it allowed only the people that I liked to be able to see my profile. You could only use that when you buy this package and I purchased this package, because I did not want to be seen by irrelevant people, or somebody I knew, I did not like that idea. I like someone on the app and only the people that I swipe right on can see me afterwards.” (P3)*

*“You could purchase a private account on Bumble. Only the people that you have swiped right on can see you. I think this is a good thing, because using Bumble is shameful to people.” (P9)*

Another commonly used in app features was filters. Filters were dominantly used for reducing the number of users they would have to swipe on by eliminating some users who did not fulfill some criteria they had of any potential matches. How filters are used by women is discussed in the next sub-theme under “Screening and Selecting Potential Matches.”

### **3.2.2 Screening and Selecting Potential Matches**

The participants reported having observed that it was relatively easier for them to be matched with men than it was for men on dating apps. They felt that they had many available options to choose from. The participants found that it could be quite hard to pick potential dates correctly because of the sheer number of men available. Many participants reported that as women they received much interest from the men on the online dating platforms, and therefore, they reported having to pick through the many who were interested in them as it would be impossible to chat or meet. Women reported receiving a lot of interest on dating apps and it was disproportionate to the ratio of men they were interested into men they were disinterested in.

*“This is probably less likely for male users, but women on the app receive attention at a higher rate. When I logged onto OkCupid, I used to pay for the feature that enabled me to see who swiped right on me. I saw that there were 2500 men who liked me. The ratio is high, and because such a high number of people want to contact me, I had to make some eliminations. This was hard, because when I was a paid member, I could see all that were interested, and it was impossible to swipe to the bottom of the list. Simply, there were too many likes.” (P10)*

Women found that men were less selective than women because they thought men had a higher rejection rate. Women were more often positioned as the

one that determined whether a match would occur or not, because more of their right swipes led to matches.

*“I think, for men, the percentage of swiping right is much higher. Unlike me, they don’t care about a ton of criteria, most of them at least. Or they keep their options wide and then select during the conversation phase. Women care about a lot more things.” (P8)*

Filters allowed users to eliminate some users with qualities they did not wish in a match. The most common filters had to do with age, gender, and motivation of the users. All participants had a specific age preference, identifying as a heterosexual, a gender preference, and most importantly preferred to only meet with men who had the same motivations for use as themselves. The three main motivations were friendship seeking, casual dating or hookups, and more serious romantic relationships. Women preferred truthfulness and clarity on men’s intentions and motivations, as it also made it easier for them to choose those who had similar motivations as they had. If women found that that the men, they met misrepresented their motivations to become more intimate, this caused feelings of being manipulated for gain such as sexual intercourse. Open expression of romantic and sexual interest on online dating platforms also made using them more attractive. Only engaging with those that met the women’s own expectations, the chances of mismatch and disagreement were lowered, which made it less likely for women to find themselves in situations where they were uncomfortable.

*“There, everyone is honest with their intentions, they can say what they really want with complete honesty, but it doesn’t really work like that when meeting someone new in person. It is up to you to read that intention. Time is needed to understand if they’re really telling the truth or not. And honestly, this can be a bit tiring. Both emotionally and mentally. It can be a difficult process. But there, yeah, they directly state if they want a one-night stand. They directly state if they’re looking for something long term. Like, what kind of relationship are they looking for, they’re answering questions there. And through these questions, you can see their expectations in terms of personality. That state of being clear and honest is much better.” (P5)*

Another reason why selecting who to swipe right was hard was because, at times, women felt this could be risky. Part of this risky feeling was attributed to the nature of online dating platforms which allow all people to sign on without any information about them, other than some verification that they in fact are a real person. One participant recounted that after matching with a person based on his appearance, she may come across some unwanted qualities.

*“Actually, on these online dating apps they throw everybody on you. And anything could come out of these people. I think it is a big gamble, you swipe right on a person just because you like their appearance, and he turns out to be a racist, misogynistic person, and you can’t figure that out.” (P7)*

In response to risks and hardship of choosing between many available options, nearly all participants reported having developed some criteria for choosing more suitable potential dates for themselves out of the many available users on the apps. All participants reported certain characteristics in men that they had preferences for and against. In total 35 preferences for and 27 preferences against certain characteristics have been reported. The most stated preference was having an amiable chat or conversation with him after having matched, and it was reiterated by 10 out of 11 participants. Not hitting it off in the conversation would mean women would not consider them a good fit for themselves.

*“I mean, that probably has to do with the current moods as well, like whether the conversation is going smoothly, whether you can connect on some level. After once you’ve swiped right and matched, unless they use cheesy pick-up lines like ‘I want to figure out the meaning of life in the world’s most exotic lands with you’ or something, there are situations where the conversation runs smoothly from the initial greeting. (...) It depends on the current mood, you want to talk about something and if it so happens that both sides have matching energies, the conversation runs smoothly. If some commonalities are found, it runs well, but sometimes the conversation can also come to a halt.” (P4)*

They reported distinct preferences for and against certain characteristics, and some characteristics were reported as “red flags” or qualities that would categorically eliminate a person’s chances as a potential match. By unmatching at

red flags, women also expressed preserving their energy by not engaging with people who they found are unlikely to be suitable.

*“I sometimes give up too easily and if I see a red flag on the third or fourth message, I directly unmatched because I don’t have any effort to waste anymore. Because I’ve seen that sometimes you can talk with someone for an hour, 2 hours, 3 hours, and nothing sticks out, I’ve also seen that happen. That’s why if I see something amiss, I directly unmatched after the second or third message, deciding that it’s not worth dealing with this guy. Then, I look for someone new.” (P3)*

The participants also reported that they began noticing certain lifestyle indications from pictures. These symbols, nuances or details in men’s profiles communicated to them about many aspects of these men including their smoking, drinking habits, political views, education level, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, and lifestyle choices. Some of these details signaled more risk to women, especially if these symbols or messages indicated that they would not be respectful to women or be misogynistic in some way. One woman listed the qualities in pictures that made her uncomfortable about matching with a person.

*I personally think that we make some interpretations based on the photos. But if you ask me, what can you say concretely, that I can’t tell. Perhaps that has to do with how the person carries himself, perhaps we have our own prejudices on this issue, like people who look stern, or appear untrustworthy to me, invoke a sense of nervousness in me, or if they look too macho etc, I can honestly say that that creates a sense of uneasiness in me, like if they post a photo of themselves with a gun in their hand, like some people really actually do that, or post photos with rosary beads or has posted aggressive quotes ‘a real man is a man that..’ etc, like these kinds of men who act too macho create this sense of insecurity for me. They are the type of men who I automatically sort out. (P10)*

While some of the criteria were more categorical and measurable like level of education, political affiliation, or smoking and drinking habits, some were more abstract. These more abstract expectations in a potential date included respectfulness, politeness, interestingness, and sense of humor.

*“Firstly, whether borders are respected or not is important when messaging, like are they only in it for the sex? Secondly, can you chat, does the conversation go along well? Thirdly, do they have hobbies etc? These are the things that define a human. How much does he share, how much does he talk, does he listen to you, how smart is he, like does he get dirty or offensive when he’s joking around? Is he respectful? These are all criteria.” (P4)*

Many reported that their criteria became stricter and more refined with more time using the apps and that their selection processes had become significantly faster as they began to identify symbols or nuances that communicated certain qualities about potential matches. The analysis of profiles that look at certain details was positioned as a precaution to ease anxiety about one’s safety, by eliminating any person that may possess qualities that are perceived unsafe. One woman reported the qualities that she looked for when she was analyzing a user’s profile.

*“First of all, I’m not sure if this is a reaction caused by having born and grown up in Turkey, but first I’m looking if all his pictures are selfies or not, like I’m not sure if this is a safety instinct or anxiety, but if all his photos are selfies, I ask myself, does this person have no one else? Does he have no friends to take pictures? Does he have no family? Is he a loner? Because being a loner is grounds for concern for me. Why does this person have no friends? That’s an important concern to me, so that’s why if there are group photos on his profile that’s a big plus for me. Especially if he has a woman among his pictures, that’s a really big plus for me. That means that a woman has trusted this person to be in the same photo with him. That means that he has some human traits, like especially if they have pets in their photos, women and friends in their photos, that the photos have been taken by someone else, these are things I care about.” (P11)*

Women also reported that dating those men with similar religious beliefs, political views, and education level felt safer to date, suggesting a preference to date within their socioeconomic class. They felt that people from different political or religious views could pose dangers to them and that these differences could make it harder for them to connect. Especially men who held sexist, misogynistic, homophobic or fascist worldviews reportedly felt unsafe to date and women felt

they may not be fully respected by these men. Another concern had to do with feeling judged by people that have staunchly opposing views to theirs, or that would be judgmental towards their ways of life. Some women also stated that men possessing more conservative views could be critical of their online dating app use.

*“There, political leanings can also be selected, and when I see people who chose more conservative choices, I never swipe right. Because that doesn’t align with me at all. Because after all, with that app you meet over something very primal and simple. You meet over an instinct. And when something so fundamental is experienced, I believe that topics like conservativeness and religion would sour the experience. Especially considering how those are significant debate points. That’s why I take it into consideration.” (P11)*

All women in this study were university graduates and all stated that they had a strong preference for any potential matches on the apps as university graduates as well. Having received a good education was a strong preference for eight out of the 11 participants and they agreed that it was important for the men they dated to have received a good education. Following that preference, fewer but still a majority of the participants preferred their dates to be steadily employed at a skilled job. Having received a good university education was also viewed as a sign that a person would believe in gender equality and be more open minded. Moreover, believing in gender equality was viewed as a sign that their date would be respectful of boundaries, have an understanding of consent, and have non-judgmental attitudes towards women who have dating lives.

*“I want to understand his views towards the relationships between men and women from the questions he answers on his profile. For example, does he have sexist attitudes? Does he have a very traditional understanding of men and women’s societal roles? You could more or less make an inference about it. Therefore, when I answered the question ‘Who should send you a message?’ I wrote that someone could message me if he was not sexist, homophobic, or speciesist. Personally, this is important for me. I try to choose accordingly. But does it still carry a risk? Yes.” (P10)*

The participants felt that it was easier to trust a man who received a good education and was employed. A well-liked and well-connected person felt safer to engage with. For one woman, the professional and educational background of a person was one of the largest determinants about matching with a man.

*“Where did he go to school, where is he working, his photos, what kind of comments did his friends post, what kind of people his friends are, what kind of posts he has shared, what is he sharing etc. Those sorts of things. But for me, the most decisive thing was the CV. In general, I’m not like, ‘He should be super-hot and passably smart’, for me he should be more like super smart and average looking. That’s why CV was very important to me and in general I also looked at their LinkedIn. What sorts of positions has he held, and where? That’s an invaluable sign for me. I’m aware that a well-educated man is not automatically a well-behaved man, and Turkey is not a very marginal country in that sense, but I believe that men with better education generally have a better profile. And that’s how I was looking at stuff. What sort of relationship does he have with his friends on social media? Especially on LinkedIn. How does he interact with them, is he an asocial type or a beloved one? That’s also an important criterion for me.” (P8)*

In all, the women had developed many criteria to assess men for suitability and safety from their profiles and online interactions. Well-educated, employed men with modern and open-minded worldviews were preferred as they felt safer to engage with and more accountable. While the women could receive this information and a general sense of who they were interacting with, they chose to verify this information which will be discussed in the next subtheme.

### **3.2.3 Verifying and Assessing Potential Dates**

In the previous main theme, it has been demonstrated that women identified several risks associated with online dating. According to the participants, verifying and assessing behaviors online had three main purposes related to these risks. One was avoiding engaging with a misrepresented profile, the other was assessing how secure a person is for in-person dating, and the last one was assessing suitability.

Once a man sparked interest either before or after having matched, women wished to verify and assess the information the men provided to them to ensure truthfulness, authenticity, and security.

*“When I matched with someone, I didn’t see their last name or anything, but I somehow found their LinkedIn profiles, and Instagram, if possible all other profiles on different platforms. I preferred to meet them only if I could trust them... I do not mean the trust in a relationship, rather like protection from physical harm or some other harm.” (P8)*

Most of the participants reported engaging in checking the men they match with online across different platforms to assess their personality and verify the information men give them. In comparison to meeting through social networks which provide some reference points by having common connections, on online dating platforms the only reference points were the ones men provide. They found that not checking a man could pose dangers later on in the dating process.

*“It’s not a nice thing but they should stalk, and try to find the man online, and learn what kind of human he is and what he does... I mean because... When I think about it, in today’s world it has been quite normalized, but what you do is meet a person you do not know at all... You talk to and meet a man you have nothing in common with, you make plans to see them in-person. And, actually, this is dangerous at the end of the day.” (P11)*

This checking behavior was also influenced by what other women so far have experienced. Even if the participating women themselves did not have such an issue, the stories they heard about deceitfulness encouraged them to verify as much as possible.

*“Because this is a digital platform, no, not because it is digital, this is true in general that you can only know a person to the extent that they introduce themselves. And I heard such stories that they meet and date and everything goes well, yet they learn that the man is married. People should be very careful and not believe anything at the beginning.” (P9)*

Some participants, on the other hand, began engaging in this behavior from their own experiences. One woman recounted an interaction with a man who she

had strong feelings for. Their interactions remained only online when she engaged in online verification behaviors to verify his truthfulness. After not being able to verify, the man ended all communications. Through this experience, this woman decided to integrate checking and verifying behavior into her online dating routine.

*“Actually, it was through experience. I don’t know if this is his true name, but this guy T., the guy who was a lawyer in Ankara, what he told me was up in the air, and he was not sharing any information about himself. I was like ‘Who am I talking to?’ And my friends said ‘Look out, he may not be telling the truth’ then I searched and did not find him on the bar association website. Then I was like maybe I should search for him online. [...] Afterwards, it turned into thinking like this is not limited to T., everyone could do this, I should begin to search for everyone online.” (P5)*

At times, women discovered discrepancies between what was told by the men they matched and what they found out about them online. The woman who was quoted was not alone in finding out through her online assessment a different truth than what she was told. Another woman met with a man who said he had graduated from a university more reputable than his original university.

*“One time, I ran into a fake. He incessantly told me that he had graduated from Yıldız Teknik University. I checked out the profile and there wasn’t the “Y” of Yıldız Teknik. Are you fooling a child? Your name is clear, your last name is clear, your face is clear, where you work is clear. You write his name and his last name and LinkedIn prepares his whole tally for you automatically, this was probably out of my anxiety about safety. I knew he lied before I met him.” (P6)*

Assessing truthfulness and authenticity were not the only aspects of a man, the women assessed. They also reported trying to understand what kind of person they were interacting with by assessing physical qualities, lifestyle choices, demeanor, and attitudes from online interactions like social media profiles and posts. In this manner, women tried to assess suitability. If the women decided that they could pursue anything further based on their assessment for security and suitability, only then they shared their personal information. Sharing their personal information with only the men they trusted was critical, since demographic or

contact information could make them more vulnerable to threat. For these purposes, they used several different sources like social media accounts like Instagram and Facebook, professional networking accounts like LinkedIn, and company websites.

*“When I meet a person online and ask them who they are and what they do, I choose to search the information they gave me online, to see if it is actually true. Because it may not be true. Or if they have shared it, even before swiping on them, if they linked their Instagram, I check it out. If their profile is not private, I see what their posts are like and what kind of person he is. If I cannot reach those, I search online and on LinkedIn. When I am certain that he is in fact who he says he is, and when I feel emotionally certain, even if I am not certain, at least if I feel like I could trust them, then I begin to share my personal information.”(P5)*

Many women specifically reported checking a man’s work life online through professional networking websites like LinkedIn and on company web pages to verify the information men provided about their work situation.

*“This was very important, if I had that person’s last name, I checked them out on LinkedIn. Did he work at some places with other people, or did people interact with him?” (P11)*

Women found that making contact on platforms other than online dating made men more accountable for their behaviors, as these platforms did not offer the same level of anonymity online dating did. By carrying the interactions outside of the online dating platforms and by accessing men’s alternative accounts, women found that men became more accountable for their behavior.

*“And the men are also more cautious there, like they won’t immediately start sending photos on Instagram. If I switch over to Instagram with a guy, he usually refrains from sending photos, because this time I also know who he is. Now, I can share his profile with someone else, I can take screenshots and send them to someone else, saying that he sent this or that. That’s why they act a bit more daring on Tinder and when we switch over to Instagram or WhatsApp, exert a bit more caution.” (P3)*

Despite engaging in these assessment precautions, all women in the study also engaged in several in person precautions as well. This was likely, because the

sense of uneasiness about one's security was not eased by checking a person's online profile and professional credentials. A participant said that while she engaged in checking behavior to account for a man's behavior up to this point, she still feared for the man's behavior in the future.

*"I gazed over their LinkedIn profiles. I learned whether they worked there by looking at the charts of the companies they supposedly worked in. But at the end of the day, this is also not a reliable example, a fallible security, because the fact that he's working there doesn't mean that he can't be a murderer." (P9)*

In short, the women in this study chose to engage with only the men whose identity they could verify to avoid misrepresentation, or fraud. For the assessment of any potential dates' identity and personality, the women developed criteria to compare the men against, and methods for verification through multiple online platforms. Only if their assessment and verification indicated both safety and suitability, only then they proceeded to engage in behaviors that make them more vulnerable such as sharing personal details, and contact information, or considering an in-person date.

### **3.2.4 Maintaining Privacy**

In the interviews, women disclosed having concerns for their privacy while they used online dating platforms and in other areas of their lives that may be exposed to dates they met online. They made deliberate choices regarding which types of information about themselves they would share on online dating platforms, social media, and in-person with their dates. The majority of the participants took measures to ensure their privacy. The most common precaution had to do with selectively sharing personal information, followed by not sharing identifiable demographic information. The other precautions ranged from cautiously sharing on social media, using fake names on dating apps, providing few details and pictures on dating apps and keeping their social media accounts private.

*"I mean in order to use it more safely, I don't share my information, by that I mean my Instagram profile or my cell phone number, at least not initially. [...] I*

*try not to share my personal data early on, for my personal safety concerns. Or when asked where I work. It's in Şişli, but where specifically in Şişli? Questions like that. I try to give generalized answers that don't go into details, like I reply "Kadıköy" when asked where I live. But Kadıköy is a huge area, where specifically in Kadıköy? Or even simpler, I answer with a closer place, not exactly where I am. I try to do that, like not give detailed personal answers. Like without having established trust beforehand." (P5)*

They iterated that it is relatively simple to find a person online. While they used this to their advantage when they wanted to assess a date online, they nevertheless preferred to remain harder to find online. Some users reported not sharing their real names on platforms along with other identifiable information.

*"Let there be as little information as possible, I wouldn't be able to be found with just my photo and my name. I wouldn't give out my school, my age, where I work, I don't give out that stuff. I wouldn't share anything, because in Turkey, people would respond to you even without that information. That's why I would give out as little personal information as possible. At most a photo or two, just my name - I obviously gave out my age but would that even be my correct age?" (P8)*

*"I generally don't write too much about myself, but I'm guessing men don't look into that. Sometimes, in order to protect myself, even though I wrote where I graduated from the first time I logged in, from the second time on I wouldn't write it any longer. Because I don't know if anyone has said this before, but it's incredibly easy to find someone on Google." (P6)*

Sharing social media handles can be a way of assessing suitability outside of dating apps, however, some of the women were concerned with unwanted contact made by men through social media or telephone and preferred using only the chat function of the dating apps which made it easier to end all communications if they chose to do so. Selectively sharing contact information like phone numbers and social media handles were important for women.

*"No, I mean I didn't share my Instagram because there are strangely enough terrible stories about that. The name I displayed there wasn't my real name, but there were my photos, my actual photos there. If there happened to be someone*

*I know there, they would recognize me, but I still didn't use my real name. If the conversation develops and I share my Instagram or my phone number, only then I share my real name. Because if I share these from the get-go, if they find my Instagram, they could reach me anyway or reach someone else.” (P3)*

*“Because if I don't give my phone number they can't reach me, they can't find my Facebook or Instagram, I can hide myself as I please or open myself if I want. I'm not the type of person to share a lot of information about herself, that stuff can come out when I don't want it.” (P2)*

On top of sharing their social media accounts cautiously, some women also chose to limit their online postings to a minimum, in a way that would not reveal too much about them personally. Many also chose more casual as opposed to more sexually charged pictures to share on online dating apps as well and limited the number of pictures they shared.

*“My Instagram profile is somewhat easier to share, after all there's always a chance to block someone, my profile is hidden anyway so they can't immediately see every picture, like I'm not the type to often share myself on Instagram anyway. I don't upload my own photos there. There's only one photo of me on Instagram. Aside from that, since I don't upload personal photos frequently, I feel like it's a bit easier to share with someone.” (P5)*

One woman reported being victim of a crime in which her cellphone number was disseminated on an app under a fake sex-worker profile. She stated she received many unwanted calls and was stressed out by the situation. Although she did not for sure know who disseminated her contact information, she thought it was likely someone she met on a dating app. She coped with this situation by seeking legal counsel and getting support from her family. By following through with one of the men calling her, she managed to get her number deleted.

*“For instance, this is something that happened to me around the time I first started to use Tinder. I have no idea who did it or how it happened, but around the time I began using Tinder, one day I would get calls and messages during the night, and I answered one call and it was a grown, even old man, and I asked him who he was, like who was he calling, why was he calling. Because the calls and the*

*messages simply wouldn't stop. Apparently, someone shared on some app, I don't really remember the name of the app, someone posted a 45 year old woman profile with a headscarf that read "got divorced and wanted to get f\*cked," and gave out my phone number. There's always the risk of that stuff happening." (P4)*

Another concern had to do with potentially running into a person they knew in their lives that could identify them from their pictures. One aspect of this concern was in regard to a coworker or client seeing their profile or wanting to date them and they feared this could affect their credibility at work. Some women countered this concern by paying for features that allowed them to control who had access to their profiles.

*"I use this function and for that I need a membership, like there's this function that allows only the people whom I liked to see me. You can only use this function when you purchase it in a package, and I purchased that package, like I didn't want to be seen by random people. Or on the off chance that someone I knew was on there. Let me just say that I didn't like that idea. I like it when only the people I have liked can see me after I have liked them." (P3)*

A significant information of which remaining private has repercussions for physical safety was a woman's address of residence, or any other locations they may be found like their work address. Several women reported preferring not to specify where they resided, worked, or hung out to avoid unwanted physical contact with men they met.

*"I would never share my address or my phone number, like if someone asked where I lived, I wouldn't say Levent. I would say, for instance, Beşiktaş until the conversation got going." (P9)*

*"I try not to share too many facts about my personal life before meeting in person. I try not to say where I live. I say it only if we are meeting if he's going to come over. Or if I'm going to his house, aside from that I don't give out the names of the people in my family. Like if he asked where I'm going today, I don't really share where I'm going. In terms of the name of the location I mean. Like, I will say I'm going to a cafe to study, but I won't give out the name of the cafe. After all, it's a stranger whom I don't know." (P11)*

One woman had an incident in which she had met a man through Tinder - which presents profiles to one another based on each's location- and had matched with a man who resided very close to her and could identify her building even before being invited. She described how this closeness became an issue, as the man used this knowledge to pressure her to meet, making her feel unsafe. She stated her gratitude that she did not share contact information with this man.

*“I matched with a guy who lived in the same housing compound as me [...] We talked and talked, and he suggested that we move over to Instagram, and we moved over to Instagram. He would constantly message, asking to meet in person. But always at inappropriate times [...] We can never get the timing right, over and over. And as long as we can't get it right, the conversation comes to a halt, and by the way he's living literally in the next street. Like he's the closest person that I've found but we can never find a fitting time because I'm working so hard. And then he replied to a story that I shared on my birthday, [...] and asked to meet up. And I said very well, let's get it over with, let's meet up and let it be done. And in the end we couldn't meet up that day as well. After that failure to meet, his incessant harassments grew to a whole new level, like he knew which apartment I lived in, and would text me to come down at night, that he was waiting in front of the apartment and wouldn't leave unless he saw me. And I was legit scared. He would call me on Instagram, and I unfollowed him. Even though we had followed each other, he would still call on Instagram. In hindsight, I'm so glad I hadn't given out my phone number, so glad we never met in person or experienced something. Because, well it turns out he's crazy. The whole thing got sour.” (P6)*

While maintaining privacy regarding personal information mostly took place in the online spheres such as chats in the applications or other online communication channels, these precautions provided privacy and also physical protection from unwanted contact.

In conclusion, this main theme outlined the precautions that take place in the digital space and offer protection from risks both online and offline. These precautions included choosing the most appropriate app for their motivations with the highest proportion of men they would consider dating and utilizing in app

settings for their benefit and protection. They also included developing a criteria for choosing dates, screening according to these standards, verifying the information they had about the men they meet to avoid falsely presented profiles, maintaining privacy for data protection, and avoiding unwanted contact. In the next main theme, precautions that aim at physical safety building are presented.

### **3.3 Developing Strategies to Move Beyond the Risks**

The third main theme was related to managing the risks reported and outlined in the first main theme of “Anticipating Risks of Online Dating,” and more specifically about risks to physical safety. In this theme, how women developed strategies to ensure their physical safety in their face-to-face interactions while they are on dates is explored. The risks women identified were challenged by several methods and the potential limitations that feeling at risk may have posed were resisted. This theme was named “Developing Strategies to Move Beyond the Risks” to capture the safety work women engaged in out of fear for their physical safety and well-being. The sub-themes that make up the body of this main theme were identified as the following: “Building a Sense of Physical Safety,” “Involvement of Social Networks,” “Assessing Date in Person,” and “Communicating Consent.”

#### **3.3.1 Building a Sense of Physical Safety**

The women who used online dating apps in the present study had very intricate systems in place to feel safer when they were on in-person dates. Twenty-two different types of precautions for physical safety were shared by the participants. Most engaged in two or more safety precautions. These precautions were in response to the risks to their physical safety that were discussed earlier. The most cited element of safety was the location of the date. Women felt safer meeting in-person for the first time in a public location. All participants stated that they preferred public spaces for their first date.

*“I already always meet a person in a public space, I either drink coffee or a beer.” (P10)*

*“It always started by meeting in public places, that’s how I solve issues of safety.” (P1)*

Many other qualities of the date location received attention from the women. Some stated that they preferred to determine the location themselves. The location being well-known, easy to get out of, being crowded, and being in a less conservative part of town were all taken into consideration when choosing a location. Knowing how to comfortably leave the place and return home and being able to get help in case getting out got hard were also taken into consideration in the decision-making process for choosing a place. The participants felt that being in a place with other people could be helpful in case they feel in danger and need to ask for help.

*“Like I said, he could harm me, or harass me, or do anything else... That’s why I always pay attention to choose places that are a little bit more crowded, central, well-known by me, and easy to leave if anything makes me uncomfortable. I never go to places that are unknown to me. I always try to not go to places that I don’t know how to get to or get back from. I try to remain in the areas that are well-known to me. And I find it important that it is crowded, that way people could hear me and come to my aid if I scream.” (P5)*

*“For instance, I prefer to meet at a location in Kadıköy where you can sit outside, in a crowded place if possible and to not get into his car. [...] In short, a place where I could have some help by screaming. If I get up and leave the table, he can’t follow me or grab me or something... A place that I could easily leave, if he is making me uncomfortable... I would prefer, if possible, a public, crowded place like Kadıköy or Beşiktaş with people more like me, with people who I expect are more open-minded.” (P8)*

Meeting in a public place was positioned in opposition to meeting directly at one’s home for the date. Many women stated that they did not find it safe to directly go to a man's home or invite a man to their home without meeting and

assessing them in person. If there were no external circumstances that made meeting in public not possible, then most first dates took place outside the home.

*“I find it important to have first dates outside, in places where I feel safe. This is one of the most important things, yes, I have foolishly gone to their homes to meet them, but my first choice is out in a cafe. This is my thing in my own way.”* (P6)

*“I want and prefer to meet for the first time outside, and I have never gone to the other side’s home directly.”* (P1)

The exception to this preference were in the cases of women meeting men for purely sexual encounters. Some women stated that if they had pressing sexual needs, they may directly go to a man’s home on the first date.

*“But usually, I prefer to meet outside if I am not in a period where my libido is really high, then I prefer to meet outside and get coffee, it is also for my safety, there are people there, and if I am uncomfortable, I can leave. If nothing goes wrong you could go home, or you could go home on the second date.”* (P3)

There were many other precautions that were outlined by women, yet none was as universal as meeting in a location that felt secure. Some of these other precautions included preferring lidded beverages on dates to avoid being drugged, not getting into a man’s car prior to establishing trust, going to the man’s home together to avoid setting up of a camera that would in a nonconsensual way film them, using a location tag on their body, and preferring one’s own home over the man’s home.

*“That’s why I always have a takeaway coffee date. Coffee is so convenient to hold in your hands, I sit with that coffee in my hand and have a conversation like that. If I must use the bathroom, I throw it away and purchase a new one if necessary. But I never have drinks in open containers that could enable a person to drug me.”* (P9)

*“Getting into a person’s car that I do not know and going somewhere in that car is not trustworthy, that’s why I think I should not choose to do that. I have done that, but like I said that was at the end of the date, which means I trusted this person, he made me feel safe, so I got in his car. But when I meet them first, for*

*example if he says he could pick me up, then I tell them I will come myself and meet him there.” (P8)*

A note regarding the pandemic should be made regarding the participants' experience of dating during those difficult times. In some participants' experience of using online dating during the pandemic, they added challenges and concerns for their physical safety and health. Because some pandemic precautions imposed curfews and/or shutting of public meeting spaces like cafes and restaurants, it was hard to arrange first dates in public.

*“No bars, no cafes, there was nothing open, only the markets, and the weather was really cold and it was not possible to meet outside. Then, we met at home out of necessity.” (P11)*

*“After talking with a guy for two weeks, I invited him home, there was the lockdown then. He was going to come to my home, oh sorry, we were going to meet outside and then go to my home, and if I wanted him to leave, he would not have been able to get out. Or if he left, he would have to remain outside, that was also a risk for him. Was I nervous? I was nervous. But I really wanted to see him, so I invited him, but there had been no problems.” (P3)*

Another issue that was introduced during the pandemic was heightened sense of threats to one's health. As the disease could be passed from person to person, in-person dating inherently had some degree of risk for contracting disease. The participants who used online dating during the pandemic responded to this risk. Some women in the study arranged their dates according to social distancing measures or kept track of whether the people they met followed the Covid-19 precautions or got vaccinated.

*“I would also like to include the health and Covid situation into the issue of safety because of the pandemic. Because of Covid, health should be included. I pay attention to whether the person in front of me pays attention to measures, takes precautions, and is vaccinated or not, because I am going to meet that person, sit together with him and have a conversation, and there is the risk of contracting the disease or I could spread the disease as well. I also indicate that I have been vaccinated, this means I am also concerned for Covid and act accordingly. When I*

*see the same thing from the other side as well, then I can say that this person also cares about it, then I can agree to meet.” (P5)*

Another significant aspect of building a sense of physical security was through the involvement of one’s social networks. Many behaviors that involve social connections to protect physical safety like sharing their location or asking to be available in case of reaching out for help were identified in the participants’ accounts. This will be discussed under the next sub-theme.

### **3.3.2 Involvement of Social Networks**

The women in the present study usually experienced some involvement of people from their social networks in their dating experiences. This involvement at times was only about socializing and having fun like sharing people they matched with and at times about their security. All but one woman in the study integrated their social networks to their safety net. The woman who couldn’t do so addressed this situation by stating that she felt judged for online dating and chose not to share her experiences with her friend group. The involvement of social networks was quite varied. Chronologically throughout the online dating process, social networks were influential in beginning to use online dating applications, teaching and guiding through effective and safe ways to use, offering advice on dating, sharing of location and identity of the date, and remaining active throughout the dates.

One way social networks are involved was at the very beginning of using online dating apps. It was often reported that friends were influential and encouraging for beginning to use online dating. Some friends also guided women through going on in-person dates. One participant reported that she was anxious at the earlier days of her use and her friends calmed her down by offering useful advice. This advice also included tips for safety.

*“When I first downloaded Tinder [...] but I was really nervous, I was saying how will I ever meet a man... Then, my friend told me to send my location to him, that way he would know where I was. Then he also told me that he would call me 45 minutes in and that way he would tell how things were from the tone of my voice*

*when we were chatting. That way, he began to check on me, how the date was going, if it was going well and the like. Then gradually I became able to handle it on my own, but at first, I needed this support network, but this was his idea, I would not have thought of it myself.” (P2)*

Navigating how to use online dating platforms safely and effectively could be hard. In these instances, help and guidance from friends with prior experience could be crucial. Friends were influential on many steps of navigating online dating. The women in the present study reported they received advice on which app to use, what kinds of in-app settings to utilize and how to make swiping decisions. At times, friends guided women through the online matching processes. One participant told how her friends showed her how to analyze an online dating profile.

*“I used to swipe right on everyone whose appearance I liked, and then I engaged in stupid conversations. Then my friends who were more successful users of these apps showed me how to analyze the user profiles, so I began swiping more carefully. [...] Look at their schools, pay attention to what he writes, look at how he answers the questions, do not swipe after only seeing their pictures. Look at their profile pictures carefully, if there is anything weird in them, and he chose to include that picture, just say he is a weird person and move on.” (P7)*

Friends and family were an integral part of women building safety for themselves. Social networks at times offered advice for safety. Many women reported adopting a safety precaution after having heard it from a friend or family member. Sometimes, even if something was not directly advised, the women may still pick up on a behavior their friend engages in and adopt it for themselves. The precautions that were passed socially included location sharing on dates, preferring lidded drinks on first dates, updating friends throughout the date, and going home together to avoid setting up a recording device.

*“I would not have thought of this otherwise... We have a Whatsapp group with four people. They told me to send them my location, at least one person would see in the group. This actually happened with their initiative and request. Otherwise, it was not something that came to my mind.” (P5)*

*“I have a friend called D. Back then I was using Tinder and did not experience that incident yet. Every time I would tell D. “Do you know who I have met? Look D. I did this or that...” Then, she told me “You, idiot! Do not tell me things after you have done them, tell them before you do them. Who knew where you were yesterday? No one. If something happened to you, who would we hold accountable? We do not know.” Then she pleaded with me to share my location with her before I met someone, and at least tell her the name of the guy I was seeing. That made a lot of sense to me. She kindly asked me, I used to make fun of it, but when she put it this way, I began to share my location.” (P9)*

Giving advice was not the only way social networks are involved, women’s social networks remained active in the duration of the date. Women may choose outfits for dates together with friends, prefer date locations closer to their friends and establishments where they have acquaintances, share the identity of their dates with friends or family, share their live location, ask friends to be on alert in case they may call, and update their friends throughout the dates.

*“I would have already shared with my friends who this person was, his age, and his school if he was still a student and we would have analyzed him together. They knew who this guy was approximately. Let’s say his name was Oğuz, they would know I was meeting Oğuz, in Salpa. Salpa is the name of the bar that I regularly go to and I know the bar’s owner. What time are you meeting? Eight. Then, picking out the outfit. I would talk to my friends. Then, when I go to the bathroom, I message them and update them on the situation, whether we were going home together at the end of the date.” (P7)*

*“I don’t know, I was living with roommates when I was on OkCupid, and I would have already let them know if I was meeting someone. I would have written it to our roommates group chat, and then I preferred places that were close to friends I could easily reach.” (P4)*

In the previous theme, online assessment of dates was discussed. Having done this assessment and verification, women also found that their dates become more accountable. Some women also take the next step following this online assessment. Women at times shared their date’s identity and place of work they

verified online with family and friends to make their dates more accountable, in case they were in some way victimized or unable to be reached.

*“In the end, you are meeting a person you don’t know. People should know who I am with. I don’t know, there are movies in which people go somewhere without letting anyone know, something happens to them, and no one could figure it out. When I am going somewhere, I always let people know. Even if I don’t let my family know, then I let my friends know.” (P11)*

*“I once went to a man’s home on the first date. In case of something happening to me, I had shared with my friends everything that he had shared with me: his address, phone number, everything.” (P3)*

One way social networks, especially those of friends, were active throughout the date was by tracking the live location of the woman going on a date. Even if the live location was not shared, the name of the bar or cafe the date would take place in was still shared. The majority of women shared their location with family and friends. This behavior, too, was considered as a way of making men more accountable and getting help easier, in case anything goes awry. Location sharing with friends and family was another of the most commonplace safety precautions that women took while going on in-person dates from online dating apps.

*“If I am going somewhere to meet someone for the first time, I send my location to my friends. I am here, you should know. They already tell me to send my location, and keep my phone on... They are on alert in case of something happening.” (P5)*

*“When I go on a date, will you look at my madness? First of all, my location is always on my mother’s phone, there is a program, not Apple’s, you can see my movement for the entire day. Where you were, where you went, how much time you spent there, how much battery I have left on my phone, you can see it all... I have a friend named D. I always share my live location with her. If the guy has a LinkedIn profile, I share that as well, because that is where the risk of being fake is lowest. I don’t have an Instagram account, but I also show the Instagram account of the guy. This is Instagram, this is LinkedIn. On my cousin’s phone, I forgot the name,*

*AirTag, I think it is Apple's. [...] It is paired with my cousin's phone, if I am going somewhere on a date, I put it either in my bra or my underwear, because he could take away my phone, he could take away my bag. He could do anything, but I kept it on my body, so that they could track me. I take these insane level safety precautions, because this is no joke, in a country with this many femicides, why wouldn't my family end up next on Müge Anlı? Why wouldn't I be one of the murder victims?" (P9)*

If women lived with roommates, they provided an added security. If the date was taking place at home or if the woman was coming back home with a man, then the women may inform their roommates about this situation and ask them to look out for signs of distress. One woman also reported alerting her neighbor and her mother if there was a date coming to her home. By letting them know, women felt safer about inviting a man home as they had higher chances of getting help if they needed.

*"I always let my roommate know and preferred times at which my roommate was home, if I was coming back home with someone, or if someone was coming over. I let her know and told her to keep an eye on me, and to look over if something's wrong. Because she did not hear things usually, the walls were thick between our rooms, so I warned her to check her phone regularly." (P11)*

*"When S. comes over, I let my mom and my neighbor know of it. S. is here, in case they call and I don't pick up, or ring the bell and I don't answer. Then, they should know he is here, I don't feel comfortable otherwise." (P9)*

The many ways that women are supported by their social networks in their dating lives has been outlined above. For many of the participants, taking measures for safety came naturally, and so did the involvement of social networks. With the exception of two participants who also involved male friends or family members in their safety networks, all social support in relation to women's dating life came from mostly other women. Oftentimes, this was viewed as an act of solidarity between women.

*"I think this is something everyone, or I should say every woman, has learned socially. I, for example, began doing this when I was in college and had*

*first downloaded the apps -I didn't meet people back then, but my friends did. When they met guys, I asked them to tell me where they were going, to send me their location, who this guy was, where he was from, his school, things like that. I wanted information from them so that we could intervene if anything went wrong and know where they are. Then I began going on dates myself, and began letting them know, I mean this is women's solidarity." (P7)*

In short, women asked their social network for support and assistance in their dating lives which also included online dating. At other times, social networks offered advice or provided an example for best practices in dating. They were involved in both emotional support and physical safety building. The involvement with the networks was sometimes characterized as an act of solidarity or resistance in the face of risk of gender-based violence women face.

### **3.3.3 Assessing Date in Person**

Just like women assessed a date's safety online through online checking and assessing profiles, they also did it in person. On the first date, women assessed their dates to check safety, suitability, authenticity, and attractiveness for further dates, sexual encounters and potentially for a relationship. They identified many criteria for this assessment.

The in-person date allowed the women to decide how they feel about how to proceed with the man they met. They could either choose to meet them further or they end up rejecting any more contact after the first date. Because there was the chance of rejecting the man, they preferred to leave room for this rejection by setting it up in a public space that is easy to leave, if they are not interested in pursuing anything further. One woman reported her preferred date sequence that allowed her to assess her date at various points of intimacy and contact.

*"What else did I look at? I checked out how he behaved in the flow of the night, let's say we met for a coffee around five o'clock, then it's seven o'clock and he asks me if I'm hungry and invites me to dinner. We could have said let's grab a beer when we were having dinner. How is he behaving then? I usually preferred*

*not to meet him late in the evening. I always preferred to meet around five or six o'clock, so that by eight o'clock, three hours is long enough, and then the night is young, it hasn't even started yet. If we end the date, we could do that or if it is going well, then we could become more intimate. So, if it's eight or nine o'clock and I decided not to leave that guy at that point, the conversation probably has already grown deeper, he has grabbed my attention, if these things happened, that means I have trusted him. That was my cautiousness, meeting them early and considering that process as a test." (P2)*

The women in the study also thought that in-person dates allowed them to get a feel for whether they found the men sexually or romantically attractive. They said that while they may be interested in the men from their online interactions, by meeting in person they could assess if they are also physically attracted or not. In-person assessment of their dates gave both parties the chance to understand whether they wanted to carry things further.

*"In reality, my first choice is to meet somewhere outside where there are other people. Because like I said I could have met them with sexual desire, like let's have sex or just to have a date, to grab a beer or wine, but either way, I want to see this person in a place with other people, because I could change my mind when I meet him. He could also change his mind. That's normal. Like I said, I want to meet in a public, civilized place and see if things would work out with this person or if I would still desire this person after meeting them." (P11)*

Just like having red flags and preferences for and against certain qualities in a man's online dating profile, women also had criteria and standards to assess the men in person as well. The women in the present study talked about making observations of the men during their dates. These observations informed their decisions as to whether they would like to move their dating a step forward or not. A man's attitudes, vibes, the way they spoke and carried themselves were checked out on dates.

*"How he carries himself, the vibe he gives, how he talks to the waiters, I mean these red flags... Whether his speech is consistent with himself or not, and*

*what he talks about, whether we have things in common when we talk... But this is a risk we take every time.” (P2)*

For this in-person assessment, the first date was the most important. The women stated that if they found something odd or off-putting on the first date, they did not see the men again and rejected their offers for next dates. First dates carried a lot of weight. If the first date went well, then the odds of the subsequent dates going well increased.

*“Sometimes, you already know that things are not going to work out, you know neither of you is going to text the other.”(P6)*

*“I wouldn’t accept if he wanted to come over to my home, I wouldn’t let anyone in my home initially. I would like to get to know them somewhere outside. For example, there was this crazy guy who I met for a coffee or tea, and I gave him his grade right away.”(P1)*

If the first date did not go well and the women decided to not to pursue this any further, this also saved them energy and time by not focusing on this man anymore. They preferred to only set up a second date if there was the chance of establishing something longer term.

*“With men I meet on Bumble, I either see them once or I keep on seeing them like it was the case with S. I never had only two dates. I either had one date with a guy or had 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8 dates. If I do not get that energy on the first date, I do not bother with the second date.” (P9)*

While some women in the study preferred to chat online with a potential date for several days or weeks before agreeing to meet them in person, others had a strong preference for meeting and getting to know each other in person. The reason behind this preference was that women believed the information they received in person and the observations they made would be more accurate and telling than the information they received on chats. In person dates allowed for a fuller assessment than online communications.

*“I think it makes sense to keep the conversation in the chat to a minimum to just get information about the other person and then move onto the meeting stage and get to know them in person. Because they could write anything in the chat, it*

*doesn't mean much. After learning the fundamentals that convince me to meet for a date, like learning what they are up to in life generally, I prefer to continue by meeting them.” (P8)*

In person dates allowed women to observe how they felt with a man and what they sensed in their presence. Many women used these sensations to determine if they felt safe and trusting in the men's presence to determine how to proceed. One woman who also preferred in-person meetings as she thought they offered a better assessment opportunity, described how she made decisions intuitively from what she sensed and observed in person.

*“That's what I mean by intuition because I do not know who the person in front of me is, and he is in front of me physically more than anything else. The way he stands, his approach towards me, and his body language. I also had body language training, maybe that's why I approach it intuitively. Well, from the way he stands, his behaviors, his speech, his sentences, the words he chooses to use with and, of course, from his attitude towards me I intuitively have foresight about him, that's what I meant actually.” (P10)*

The women also assessed the risks these men could pose to them while they were on in-person dates. They looked out for signs that they felt that their physical safety would not be threatened by this man they were dating. If they felt safe in the presence of these men, only then would they agree to move to a more private space like the men's cars or their homes, which would make them more vulnerable to threat. Were the woman to feel safe and trusting with these men as a result of their both cognitive and intuitive assessments, then they would consider a more increased level of intimacy.

*“I wouldn't get into his car right away, more accurately, I preferred to meet them at the date location. Not him picking me up and us driving somewhere. After having met him, if I trusted him and he has a car and wants to drop me off at home, then I would let him do that. But if I do not trust them, I would tell them I am going myself, because in the end it's you who is doing the test of security.”(P2)*

*“I think perhaps men, too, prefer to meet outside for the first time. They do not make that offer at first. I think people, both men and women, look at whether*

*we can have good communication. Will I feel good with them? For example, I find feeling good very important in terms of safety as well. If I feel good when we meet and have a conversation and do not feel anxiety in their presence and not have any questions or doubts in my mind, then these are all signs of safety for me. Then, that informs how I want to proceed.” (P10)*

Another aspect of this assessment had to do with sexual attraction and safety. They wanted to know if they were attracted to the men they met in person. Just like they did for physical safety, the women also assessed men for sexual safety. They considered if the men they are with was worthy of trusting in sexual encounters. Many women in the study wanted to make sure that they felt comfortable about advancing their intimacy to sexual contact. This was especially true for participants whose main motivation was romantic relationship seeking rather than one-night stands.

*“This doesn’t happen every time, it only happened a couple of times, but I can say that there was sensation within me, telling me that I could trust this person to have sex with them. I could tell it apart; I never like it if the guy insists and pressures me to do so.” (P1)*

*“For example, I did not have sex with someone easily. I had to be sure. I wanted to see them at least two or three times.” (P9)*

Overall, after women conducted an assessment online about the men they are communicating with and determined to be safe enough to meet in person, then they proceeded to assess these men further in terms of attraction, physical and sexual health and safety. For these assessments, the first dates were critical for their decision making. In person interactions allowed women to look for characterological traits, communication, attraction, and trust they had with their dates.

### **3.3.4 Communicating Consent**

For the women in the study, all activities around dating being consensual and only engaging in behaviors they chose to do were very important.

Unfortunately, the majority of the participants reported incidents in which their boundaries were not respected by the men they were in contact with or dating. The level of threat these boundary violations posed affected the level of distress women felt. To combat this, communicating consent effectively was critical, and this communication took many forms, most of which were mostly indirect and/or nonverbal. Nevertheless, some women feared that some men do not understand the concept of consent, and do not read signals of rejection or choose to insist and harass despite rejection.

*“There was a guy who insisted on meeting, he pressured a lot, so I said let’s do it... The previous night he texted, and I didn’t answer, but he was saying he was waiting for me repeatedly. My girlfriends were also home, and I felt like I had to meet him because he said he wanted to meet up. So, I agreed, he had brought wine and asked me if I wanted to drink, I said I didn’t. I felt like I had to have sex with him because he came over, but I didn’t want to. I told him, no, I don’t want it, but I wasn’t forceful or anything. But he was pressuring. I had said it verbally, what am I supposed to do, push him off physically or use force? I simply said I did not want to. He forced me and tried to have sex with me a few times. Then I told him it was best if he left, so he left, and we did not speak again.” (P4)*

For many participants, interactions that took place within online dating apps felt safer as they did not threaten physical health and safety. In- person dates were considered at a higher risk for getting harmed. Because online dating apps offered an easy and convenient way to reject a man and end communications if anyone chooses to do so, they felt safe from non-consensual activity. Furthermore, dating apps no longer having features that allowed picture sending was found to provide protection from receiving unsolicited sexual imagery.

*“You don’t really find yourself in nonconsensual situations on OkCupid, OkCupid offers you a comfortable space in that sense. [...] Even if the person in front of me tries to do so, I have the option to reject or to block him and to end communication. There is not really the risk of someone forcing me to do something I do not have consent for because they are not with me physically. Other than that, they don’t really have any information on me, so they can’t force me. OkCupid*

*doesn't have the option to send pictures in the chat and this is a good thing because I am not exposed to unwanted pictures, because there is the risk of that happening and that can be very disturbing. So, if there is a situation that I do not consent to, OkCupid offers me to just press the "X" and delete him, so he is gone, if I don't want something." (P5)*

The women picked up on signs that suggested the men they were interacting with may not respect boundaries. Impatience in the chat, insistence on moving to a more intimate level of contact, and not receiving and respecting signals of unavailability and rejection were all considered negatively by the women. They mostly preferred not to continue their interactions with these men.

*"There was this guy on Twitter that I did not respond to for like 30 minutes, and he was tweeting constantly things like "Oh my, it is not working out again... Nobody cares about me, I can't believe it..." Are you crazy? It has been 30 minutes; I was grabbing a meal... I got really mad at him. Like this, this is when they openly show a red flag." (P7)*

For many women, their rejection or lack of consent not being respected by their date was a significant concern. For this reason, some participants reported using language that was vague and formulated their rejection in the most non-offensive way possible. Some chose to engage their social networks when they wanted to end their dates. This way, as they voiced rejection, they felt safer from male violence.

*"When you want to end the date, it can be panic inducing to try to end it. Because a man who has been rejected does not really have well-adjustment. That's what I am afraid of. Why do I have to hesitate like this? Okay, we have met and spoke with each other, but I wasn't drawn to you, or you do something that I don't care for, then I find it hard to express that and end the date. I don't know, I try to make up an excuse or there were 1 or 2 times I have had my friends call me, no joke, and ask me to come over urgently. There were times where I was about to get on the bus or a cab to go home and there was this guy who was trying to come with me or trying to get in the cab. I had to shut the door, tell him I was going home*

*alone, and asked the driver to drive away. I was not physically restrained or anything, but it was very hard for me psychologically.” (P7)*

*“If the guy is incessantly texting me, even when I do not like them, then I say I was busy or I didn’t have time to respond back, so that he understands it... Not to be too offensive, I would say like I am working too much these days, I do not have enough time, I can’t pick up the phone, I’m sorry about it... As much as possible I give the message that the issue is with me and not with him, I try to escape like that. Because these are people I do not know well, I can’t know who could harm me.” (P6)*

One participant, on the other hand, preferred the opposite approach. She found that if her rejection was not clear-cut, the men were more likely to try to find ways to contact and ask on more dates. This way, she thought her intentions were precisely communicated to her dates.

*“Honestly, I do not say things too indirectly, I straight away say that “Maybe, I will not like you and go home” or “Maybe, I won’t like you and stay with you or end the date early” I do not pose this like me being busy or having something else to do, I directly say that there is the chance that I do not like them. Because if I say it indirectly, then they could think that she liked me, we were going to have sex but then she had something to do, she had to leave or something... Then they may not understand that I didn’t like them. They could ask me to meet again thinking I was busy the last time, when in fact I had simply left because I did not like them but lied about it. He would have thought I wanted to stay but had to leave.” (P3)*

Almost all participants reported that consent for sexual interactions was made in indirect ways and mostly by nonverbal communications that took place throughout the date. Many ways that consent could be communicated were identified. Some were communicated through the body, one party by making closer contact and the other either accepting or rejecting that contact.

*“This is not always openly discussed. Let’s say, he liked me and picked up from my attitude that I liked him back, like maybe I was acting intimate, then he would ask me to grab a drink at his house, or if we had been talking about movies, he would ask me over to watch a movie, or some question like that... If I’m like*

*“Sure, why not?” then there is this possibility. And naturally, when you meet at home you become intimate, and things occur with consent of both sides... I don’t know how else to describe it. Both sides get this from the attraction.” (P10)*

*“Our legs touch under the table, like the knees, or you hold his hand on the table when he is saying something, and say things like “Oh, is that so darling?” Flirting behaviors, physically... One side takes a step, then the other takes a step, then another step then another... This is how you get close.” (P7)*

Most women stated that they wanted men to not have any assumptions about romantic or sexual interest based on matching, meeting in person, or going to a person’s place of residence. Some stated that they intentionally made a point to leave room for rejecting a man, by making statements about potentially leaving early or the possibility of not being interested in their date.

*“Things go like this, if I told him we will meet, grab a coffee and we can go home after that, then if I were to change my mind like I did not like him after we have met and told him to go home, then he could be like but I thought I was coming over [...] So, I tell them from the beginning that we will be separating after the date, if we don’t like one another. I think this is necessary because men, generally and weirdly, think that when I agree to a coffee date, they will be having sex. Therefore, I tell them that there is a chance that I could change my mind, that things could change. Rarely, there are men that are aware of this, but most men need to hear that I could change my mind, that I could decide not to go through with it. I need to remind them over and over that I could leave or change my mind, I think it helps.” (P3)*

The women identified stages of consent communication throughout the dating process. Agreeing to match, chat, meet in-person, going home, and having sexual interactions had been identified as sequential stages of consent. Throughout these stages, non-direct communications of signals of acceptance and rejection took place. For many participants, inviting a man to a private space or accepting a man’s invite often implied sexual consent. Even though the participants stated that they could still change their minds after going home, they nevertheless preferred to only

accept such an invitation if they desired sexual interactions with the man they have gone on a date with.

*“You can figure it out on the date, if he is trying to get up and leave early or is not warming up to the idea of an invitation home, then he is not interested. But, if we are still together and he accepts my invitation home or invites me home, that means I am consenting for now, it could change later once we are home. So first when we agree to go home, second is deciding at home. These are the two steps.” (P3)*

In all, communication of consent was an integral element of emotional, physical, and sexual safety for the women in this study. Consent was communicated mainly non-verbally and indirectly. All interactions occurring consensually were non-negotiable and signs that a man may not respect boundaries was considered as a sign for not pursuing anything further. Women felt at heightened risk for violence when they rejected men, and took some precautions at that point.

### **3.4 Reaping Benefits Despite Challenges**

The fourth and last main theme was in relation to the gains and benefits women described regarding their experiences from online dating platforms. Despite challenges that have been outlined in previous themes, many participants reported having gained meaningful connections, enjoyable interactions, and insight about themselves and relationships. Even though there were downsides to their experiences, the gains that will be explored under this theme show the reasons for choosing online dating. Accordingly, this last theme has been named “Reaping Benefits Despite Challenges.” Three areas of gains have been identified and formed into sub-themes. They are “Forming Meaningful Connections,” “Building a Sense of Self-Confidence,” and “Gaining Experience in Dating and Relationships”.

### 3.4.1 Forming Meaningful Connections

Despite having to manage the risks that have been outlined earlier, many women found some benefits and fulfillment through the encounters they had with people they met online. In the earlier themes, women's motivations have been discussed, and they included romantic relationship, sexual partner, and friendship seeking. All these motivations explicitly point to connectedness as the participants' main reason for online dating. Some participants reported finding relief from feelings of loneliness by meeting men through online dating apps.

*"Is it really worth all of what you're doing for a date? But, of course, loneliness is more difficult." (P7)*

*"I'm lonely. I can't meet with anyone, there's no one to date. I've never matched with anyone on OkCupid, but have there ever been cases where I met with someone just because I wanted a change? Sure. But only once or twice." (P5)*

All women who used online dating were motivated to make some sort of connections. Seven participants who were romantically motivated reported that at least one of their romantic relationships began online through dating apps. These romantic partnerships lasted anywhere from a few months to several years. Some participants were currently in relationships they have formed through online dating and stated they would consider online dating if they were to be single again.

*"Somehow, we let things develop with S. and we started meeting in real life. From a certain viewpoint, I actually have a real relationship now. Thankfully he's trying to spend most of his time here. He's very sharing. Very good. And I think he's very handsome too. I literally have a relationship right now. Is my relationship from Bumble? Yes, it is." (P9)*

All participants in the study reported dating, having a romantic or sexual relationship with a man they have met online. While they found the odds of building a meaningful relationship were somewhat slim, nevertheless most found varying levels of fulfillment sexually or romantically through the online dating apps. Some women in the study also stated that they had enjoyable sexual encounters through

apps, sexual fulfillment when they felt the desire or the need and got to gain sexual experience.

*“There’s also this fact, as a heterosexual woman, every experience with a man opens you a door to explore your own body, like what you like and what you don’t like, of course you can discover these on your own, but it’s also possible to discover these with a partner. Even for a sexual behavior which I never thought I’d enjoy, and I had approached with prejudice. When I explore it with someone else, I can experience a different feeling when it’s with somebody else.” (P1)*

Meeting and dating a man, even when it did not lead to a romantic or sexual relationship, provided some meaningful encounters to many participants. Some interactions with men led to non-romantic friendships, bonding over some common interests or hobbies. While some encounters had been disappointing, most participants found that the connections were worthy of using online dating. The majority of the women in the study were glad to have met a variety of people.

*“I found a relationship, met with many people who I had relationships with, and our paths crossed with people who would’ve never otherwise passed. In some ways, it’s actually a good thing because I’m still keeping up with some of them. For instance, there’s this motorsport that I’m following and when there’s a development about that motorsport, he can text me with enthusiasm, some of them are like that.” (P6)*

Some participants built friendships with men they have met through online dating apps, and some found their interactions intellectually or emotionally enriching. Women found common interests in arts as well. Several reported going to concerts or events and talking over movies and music with the men they met online. These were mainly characterized as intellectually enriching experiences between them and the men they have met online.

*“But on the other hand, the aspect of being able to meet with so many people from other professions and areas of interests and being able to learn something from them, to go to various events with them, that aspect is wonderful. For example, from my point of view, there have been people whom I’d only met, and then decided to go to an event at some place, and then after having spent a good day, continued*

*to chat and then continued meeting in a friendly way. So, there are positive aspects as well.” (P10)*

The women in the study reported that sharing some similarities with the men they meet is important for establishing a connection. It was notable that when women voiced their preferences in men, they highlighted the importance of being similar in their defining demographic qualities. When making a decision, it was very important for women that the men they would be dating had similarities and things in common with them. Having social connections outside of the dating apps and being of similar social circles was important to many women. Moreover, having common hobbies or similar music or film tastes were indicators for women that they would enjoy their time together with a man. One participant recounted how her relationship that began online was enjoyable to her because of their similarities.

*“My last relationship had good aspects, but it also had really difficult aspects too. Among the good parts, we could spend great time together, we had a lot of common interests, regarding business life, like we could both speak about work but also carry out many activities outside of work. We would go to the gym together, like when we went to summer holidays, rather than laying around at the hotel, we would do spontaneous things like signing up for courses. Our tastes in music were very similar too.” (P8)*

At times, apps also generated data for potential date selection in terms of similarity. OkCupid, for example, provides a rate as a percentage of similarity between two users, and some participants found this to be very helpful as they tried to choose between the options available to them. One woman recounted how she has set herself a criterion of 90 % or higher similarity score on OkCupid, which made decision making more convenient for her.

*“As I said, the similarity percentage is important to me, because, well, I never had any disappointments with people who I viewed as 90 % or more similar to me. Because our similarity percentage is based on the questions that we answer. And if our intent is to meet new people, it’s very difficult to build a relationship with someone who has completely opposite views compared to me, so if our similarity percentage is high, that means that our world views are also somewhat parallel,*

*and thus the probability that we will get along is higher. That's why similarity is important.” (P10)*

While having some similarities was valued, the women also reported that differences also provided enrichment. One such difference was the nationality of their dates, which gave the opportunity to engage with people from diverse cultures. Accordingly, using online dating platforms also facilitated cultural exchange between people from other countries. The participants reported that there were many expats using the apps in Turkey, and that some of the apps allowed them to match with people from all over the world without any location specifications. The women in the study gained intercultural experience and learned about new cultures from the men they have met online. The women who sought romantic or non-romantic relationships talked about making and enjoying cross-cultural connections. One woman reported that chatting on online dating apps in English with expats helped her keep her foreign language skills fresh.

*“After all, I've met new people, seen new cultures. One of them, for example, was an American, from a totally different culture. I think the best thing about it is that you get to know a different person, and in my situation, I would get to know people from completely different cultures and in those cultures, the respect and positivity shown towards the people made me really happy.” (P11)*

*“One good aspect is this: expats, you know the people who are foreigners and work here, frequently use Bumble. For instance, I made two friendships like that on Bumble. We converse daily like nothing is up, I keep my English fresh and they ask questions about Turkey or Istanbul. That's why I think Bumble is a more fun platform.” (P9)*

The women in the study also explained that meeting with people helped them gain good memories and experiences by getting to know people from all kinds of walks of life. They found these encounters meaningful, fulfilling, and enriching in varied ways. The women said that outside of dating apps they are limited to meeting people from their social networks, work or school. Yet, this may limit the types of men they can meet. With dating apps, the women got to meet men from different lines of work and life experiences, with different interests.

*“So that one time, essentially, I had good memories. I had a good time, got to know different people. I saw many different types of people. Even if I hadn’t met them, because I talked to a lot of people over a long time, I experienced many different cultures, many different lives. Like I said, I think this was the biggest advantage.” (P11)*

*“Over a compact period of 2-3 months, I witnessed so many life experiences, even family relations, like I said the people who are looking for relationships really enjoy talking and sharing. Those who aren’t that introverted. There is great wisdom I learned from those people. For example, the history facts I learned from R., there was D. and he was a sailor. the nautical facts I learned from D, facts about seamanship. There was this guy I spoke with named B., he imported these big healthcare machines, like ultrasound machines, facts about those... So many interesting factoids. So many different experiences, and sometimes, on like the first or second date, you can see people open up to you without knowing you that well, tell you about their pains. I built great relationships in the end. I had great sex as well. I ate great food too and had great dialogues. In Bumble, I had no experience that I regretted.” (P9)*

According to the participants’ accounts, the Covid-19 pandemic also affected the way of life and dating. As social contact decreased, feelings of loneliness and isolation increased. Many participants also stated that during the pandemic, using online dating was the main source through which they could meet people given that other social channels had been eliminated for the sake of pandemic precautions.

*“After the pandemic, it seemed as if my need for intimacy grew stronger, like we were isolated at home and be they man or woman, I witnessed people use Tinder to find some connection. Like really, not just to send someone their location and have sex, but actually to drink some beer or coffee. Just to build some communication, because I was so bored, and I feel that the pandemic had this effect on Tinder.” (P2)*

They also reported observing that the use of online dating had somewhat been normalized because of the pandemic and increase in online socializing. During

these hard times, the participants reported finding new ways to connect to people and date. Online dating apps provided ample options, and some platforms also took measures like providing vaccination status on user profiles and promoting online dates over in-person ones. By using online dating apps, they alleviated the feelings of isolation and loneliness, and fulfilled socializing needs.

*“I want to get to know someone and spend some time together, at least to chat. I especially felt this need during the pandemic. Because my friends were afraid, they wouldn’t meet me outside. I felt that I needed more during that time.” (P10)*

*“I think especially during the time of coronavirus, people turned toward that (Tinder). Because they experienced a lot of social problems. They had problems socializing. In that way, I think it had a lot of positive effects. At the end of the day, I never had any regrets about people I met in that way, I had always had a good time.” (P11)*

The women reported having made meaningful and in various ways fulfilling connections with some of the men they have met on online dating platforms. These fulfilling experiences had various facets. Many women reported these interactions offered them romantic or sexual encounters and many participants built long term romantic relationships with men they met online. Other reported aspects of these connections had to do with cultural exchange and intellectual enrichment of artistic interests and getting to know a diverse group of people that would have been inaccessible through regular social networks. Some participants also highlighted that during the Covid-19 pandemic, their needs for these connections were heightened and online dating provided relief that was otherwise hard to get.

### **3.4.2 Building a Sense of Self-Confidence**

What the women found fulfilling about online dating apps had a wide range. For some of the women, feeling validated and liked by other users on the platforms provided benefits. Some participants reported that using online dating apps had been helpful for them to gain self-confidence about their desirability and re-affirm

their self-worth by being validated by the attention they received. These women felt that the interest in them on platforms boosted their confidence and uplifted them.

*“By the way, I really liked the app. No matter who you liked, they would respond. It was an app that greatly elevated one’s ego. This is probably very normal, but for instance in Turkey, eight out of ten people who you liked liked you back, it’s a real ego booster app. I enjoyed that.” (P8)*

Some women’s experiences on online dating platforms were integrated into their journey of self-love and confidence. These women found that by receiving attention despite what they found faulty or lacking in themselves aided them in perceiving themselves in a different light. One participant recounted that she felt insecure about herself and her attractiveness and using online dating apps and receiving attention aided her journey to feel more secure in herself.

*“Aside from that, I’m not the type of woman who really likes her body, is self-confident etc. I mean I actively go to therapy; I’m currently trying to get over it with therapy but as you might guess, it doesn’t happen all of a sudden. But it was helpful in that way. Of course, there were people who didn’t like me, didn’t match with me or unmatched me, but there were people who really liked me as well. And it’s very joyful to see that. Especially the first time I began using the app I wore a headscarf, I had photos of me in a hijab and it was very moving to see that they liked me even as a hijabi woman. Like the fact that they liked me, it was like a “wow” moment for me. It had this effect, even if temporary, on my self-confidence as well. If you talk about my current self as a non-hijabi woman, the issue of self-confidence is still a bit touchy.” (P5)*

Even the women who did not have particular struggles with self-confidence or self-love found that using online dating apps like Tinder or Bumble gave them a boost in self-confidence. Furthermore, they enjoyed this feeling of being well-received on the apps. They liked getting attention and receiving compliments on the apps and on dates.

*“It was easy for me as well; I was matching with everyone I liked. It’s a great thing, it strokes your ego to see that you’re desired.” (P7)*

*“If you can make someone you like fall for you, it will be a very pleasing moment for you. And I used Tinder just for that purpose. Like I would dress up, apply make up, and back then I had a car as well, and I’m not going to be modest, I would really stand out compared to other Tinder profiles. And everyone would say that they had met someone that looked better than their photos for the first time. For me, Tinder was my avenue to please myself. It was my avenue to receive compliments from people and reject messages asking for second dates.” (P9)*

In their daily lives, the women found it harder to receive messages or signals of being liked or attracted to. However, on online dating apps they thought that the messages of being liked or perceived as attractive or beautiful are much clearer. One woman recounted that she felt upset at not getting interest in her daily life, yet this was somewhat remedied by her online encounters. She suggested that online dating helped reduce the negative self-talk.

*“Aside from that, I learned that there were people who could like me and I enjoyed that. It’s a great thing to be liked. And sometimes you can’t really read or get the subtextual messages that you are liked within your inner circle. So to not be able to see that, to not be able to see that liking is sad as well, but to see that liking on OkCupid is, for my self-confidence, really important, and it can at least somewhat silence this voice in me that says that I’m an ugly woman, that I’m not pretty or nobody likes me.” (P5)*

Some women also felt confident in the fact that they would be the ultimate deciders of how far things would go with a man, as they felt that the men would be interested in them sexually or romantically if the women decided to pursue that road. Being able to see the interest of the men clearly made them feel more confident in themselves.

*“I think women have that confidence because the other side tries to lead the conversation in that direction, they try to lead on by inviting us to a coffee, to drink beer or to go over to his place. Women have this confidence and authority, because if I want it, I know it will happen because the other side is already willing, they let that desire and enthusiasm show.” (P3)*

Sometimes, the women chose to turn to online dating apps when they felt that they needed to get attention from others. When they couldn't fulfill this need in their daily social lives, they found that online dating apps provided a good alternative for what they were seeking. They enjoyed online dating offering them the attention, romantic or sexual contact they could not find in their daily lives, and this made them feel good.

*“When I like someone from my social life, but cannot have that communication, or if it happens in places that are not suitable like at work, then I turn to apps to get some attention, meet someone, and feel good.” (P4)*

In all, the participants in this study found some fulfillment of their wish to be liked and desired by the attention they received on online dating apps, and this in turn gave them a boost in their confidence and helped them feel validated. This attention they received was considered by some women integral to their journey of reducing negative self-talk in the areas they struggled to feel confident in.

### **3.4.3 Gaining Experience in Dating and Relationships**

Having used online dating helped the participants gain experiences, insight, and perspective on flirting, and romantic or sexual relationships. Many of the participants reported being relatively younger and less experienced when they first began to use online dating apps, and through these apps they got to gain experience in chatting, flirting, and dating men. They reported that using online dating helped them become more knowledgeable about and adapt to flirting, dating, romantic relationships, and sexuality. In addition, these experiences helped women gain insight about themselves and how they are in romantic or sexual attachments and reflect on their love lives. One other area of insight was challenging the negative stereotypes and prejudices they held against the types of interactions on online dating sites. For these gains, they felt grateful for having used online dating. Framing their gains helped them reconcile the negative experiences they may have had along the road.

*“I find it precious that in terms of my inner conflicts and their resolutions, despite everything that has happened to me I don’t regret it and would even define my experiences as positive, as they helped me to develop and mature emotionally, they allowed me to look at things from different perspectives. I consider them as positive experiences that I can tell myself or to others.” (P1)*

Learning the art of flirting was framed as one of the primary gains of online dating experiences by many participants. On these platforms, women had access to a lot more men with fewer real-life consequences as these online interactions could be ended easily. The women got to reach a lot more men and try to flirt with them. On these apps, women found that they could be more flirtatious and playful as they are more certain of the subtext of flirting and dating compared to daily life.

*“I learned to flirt because whereas I could otherwise only flirt with three people at the same time, I could now flirt with ten people because of availability. So I learned to flirt, I learned the game because as I said, they’re not people who have real connections to you like in the real world, because they’re people who you can stop seeing at any time, you can flirt more, you can be more flirtatious.” (P2)*

Learning to flirt also involved gaining skills of self-expression. While communicating with men, the women reported that they learnt how to keep up a conversation and express themselves fully. They found that online dating allowed them to exercise these skills repeatedly with a variety of people.

*“Aside from those two, as another positive I learned to flirt better. And for me it was a positive effect because flirting is actually somewhat difficult. It’s not a very easy thing to maintain, to keep up the communication is also hard, it’s difficult to express yourself, to turn it into a conversation. In that way, I was able to get a lot of exercise about those skills, it also had that positive effect.” (P5)*

On top of flirting and communication skills, many women reported being more knowledgeable about dating and relationships after having used online dating apps. They reported through their experiences they learned about the inner workings of dating, romantic, and sexual relationships. They felt that online dating provided an expedited process as they got to meet with a higher number of men that is otherwise harder to reach.

*“I managed to learn a lot of things about relationships. I think that’s the most important part. Because in my 26 years of life, I experienced more intrigue in those 6 months than I had over the other 25.5 years combined. I guess it’s one of the most obvious things that I learned. I think that’s the positive part. I even learned how to communicate better.” (P6)*

For some of the participants, online dating was an avenue for gaining insight and self-observation. By reflecting on the experiences they had with men they met online, the participants reported achieving some self-discovery and adjustment in their outlook to dating and relationships. In regard to these gains, the expedited nature of experiences in online dating was highlighted.

*“I mean I’m not regretful, it offered me an amazing opportunity to discover some parts of myself, since I would experience the same scenario with different, various people in an accelerated manner, I found a way to test and confront some things I would otherwise not have to deal with until I got to be 35 or 40.” (P1)*

*“In the relationships that I had up until now, those relationships lasted for two or two and a half years partly because I used to live in that fantasy world in my head. At least in hindsight. The state of being lovers with characters I made up in my head and then trying to find these characters inside the person I was in a relationship with doesn't sound healthy to me nowadays. To have confronted that, that’s a positive aspect for me. To have returned to the real world.” (P5)*

By gaining experience in online dating, many women reported that their attitudes toward online dating platforms, their users, and types of experiences through these platforms changed. Many participants in the research stated that they were prejudiced against online dating platforms pre-use. The initial attitudes women had usually included the impossibility of finding a meaningful romantic connection through online dating apps, and other negative impressions of online dating users in general.

*“I discovered that basically everyone was there, I used to think that the type of person who would be suitable for a relationship or a good person wouldn’t come out of this app, that everyone was here for sex. And after my boyfriend, I discovered that those types of people can also come out of here. That was good for me, to be*

*honest, I learned that those type of people were there as well. That broke my prejudice somewhat, to be honest.” (P3)*

*“I had mentioned that I had two boyfriends, and I met my second boyfriend on the app. So I think like this: I used to be among those who were skeptical, like how seriously could you take someone you met from there? I would even advise people who met someone there that they could very well hook up with them and spend some time together but should think hard over experiencing something serious with them, like I had prejudices against experiencing something similar with someone I met from the app, I had reservations. I think that after having delved into this world, my prejudices are no more.” (P10)*

Altogether, the women gained experiences in dating, flirting, and relationships through their experiences with men they have met online. At times, some found that flirting and keeping up a conversation could be hard, yet online dating apps offered avenues for honing these skills. The women in the study thought that these experiences allowed them to gain experience at a much higher rate than their daily lives would allow. They found that these experiences helped them gain insight on themselves personally and how they are in romantic or sexual attachments.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

The current study explored how women experienced safety and agency in their experiences on and through online dating apps such as Bumble, Tinder, and OkCupid. Based on the analysis of the information provided by eleven women in semi-structured interviews, four main themes were generated. These themes were: 1) Anticipating Risks of Online Dating, 2) Developing Online Strategies for Safety, 3) Developing Strategies to Move beyond the Risks, and 4) Reaping Benefits despite Challenges. These four main themes captured the experience of women on dating apps regarding their safety, how they identified, analyzed, and responded to associated potential risks both online and in person, and what benefits motivated them to use online dating apps despite the challenges to their emotional, sexual, and physical safety and the stigma they may face about their online dating use.

The first main theme “Anticipating Risks of Online Dating” was focused on the threats and risks women have identified and calculated in their experiences and decision-making processes throughout different stages of online dating. There were three sub-themes that captured a different risk and threat women felt they faced in their experiences. These sub-themes were “Threats to Safety,” “Pressures of the Stigma around Online Dating”, and “Threats to Integrity and Trust”. The issues discussed in this theme focused on women’s struggles to anticipate and calculate the risks and threats they may face when they are active on online dating platforms. These threats included both in person risks that may threaten them physically like harassment, rape, or violence and digital threats like scams, catfishing, and dishonesty. Another ordeal that women faced was about the stigmatized nature of online dating in the context of Turkey and how they managed associated feelings.

The second main theme was “Developing Online Strategies for Safety”. This theme focused on the ways in which women tried to safely use online dating platforms while they were searching for suitable dates at the same time. There were four sub-themes falling under this theme that describe the nature of the precautions that are taken in the digital space. They were “Choosing an App and Utilizing in App Settings”, “Screening and Selecting Potential Matches”, “Verifying and

Assessing Potential Dates”, and “Maintaining Privacy”. These precautions responded to online threats as well as preparing a safe ground for in-person dating. The contents of this theme focused on various areas of online dating women have to manage to use in order to meet their wants and wishes. This process began with the choosing of the correct app as each was positioned differently, adjusting in app settings according to their needs, using filters and profile analysis criteria to choose from many potential users, checking the other available online profiles of potential dates, and efforts to maintain privacy to protect identity, personal information, and contact information to protect themselves from unwanted contact and harassment.

The third main theme was “Developing Strategies to Move beyond the Risks”. This theme discussed the ways in which women acted and responded to risks they associated with in-person dating with men they have met online and how they continued the assessment process they began online. The four sub-themes included in this theme were “Building a Sense of Physical Safety”, “Involvement of Social Networks”, “Assessing Date in Person”, and “Communicating Consent”. These sub-themes explored how women built a sense of physical safety in the face of potential adversity. Safety precautions while going on dates that aim to control the location, and the conditions related to length and time of date, consumption of food and beverages, and other aspects of the date were discussed. How women involved their social networks to feel safe throughout all stages of dating was examined. The assessment of their dates in terms of safety, attraction and general suitability continued and if they passed these assessments, only then women considered furthering their involvement. Lastly under this theme, how women define, and approach consent and the concept’s key characteristics were discussed.

In the last main theme “Reaping Benefits despite Challenges”, what motivations women had and benefits they derived from using online dating were discussed in depth. The sub-themes that captured these benefits have been identified as “Forming Meaningful Connections”, “Building a Sense of Self-Confidence”, and “Gaining Experience in Dating and Relationships”. These sub-themes captured what made women enjoy their experiences from online dating platforms, what they think they have gained from their interactions, and how they find meaning from

these lived experiences. Women reported finding meaning, connection and joy in the interactions and relationships they have had through online dating apps. They have also found that having used these apps and seeing h interest in them was enjoyable and boosted their confidence and self-image. In the discussion section of this thesis, these four main themes will be discussed in relation to the available literature. Then, both research and clinical implications of the results of the study will be explored by looking in depth at how the experiences of the participants and the available literature approach the subject of women's safety and agency experiences on and through online dating platforms. Lastly, the strengths and limitations of the current research, and the recommendations for further research will be presented.

## **4.1 DISCUSSION OF THE THEMES**

### **4.1.1 Anticipating Risks of Online Dating**

The first main theme explored the risks and threats women thought were present as they navigated the potentially perilous waters of online dating platforms. This theme explained that women were aware of potential risks, they anticipated and calculated these risks into their decision-making processes and took measures in response as will be discussed under the next two main themes. While there is plenty of research focusing on digital forms of violence that women may be vulnerable to (Anderson et al., 2020; Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Henry et al., 2020), the potential risks in this area were not as significant for the participants in this study. Rather, for the participants, the overwhelmingly threatening aspects were in relation to in-person aspects of online dating, as these interactions could lead to more permanent, physical, and severe forms of harmful consequences.

Both in the media and the academic literature, the potential threats associated with online dating use receive attention and criticism (Anderson et al., 2020; Gillett, 2018; McCormick & Jones, 2021). Many risks to physical safety have been identified during in-person interactions with men women have met on the apps

(Lundquist & Curington, 2019; McCormick & Jones, 2021). Parallel to this unfortunate reality, the women in the study were concerned with both online and offline threats, the risk of harm to their physical safety were more pertinent, led to more anxiety, and consequently more precautions. The finding that risks to physical safety was more salient for the participants is perhaps to be expected, since physical forms of gender-based abuse are much more easily identified compared to digital forms (Harris et al., 2015), and these two types of abuse often co-occur (Paat & Markham, 2020). Similarly, Rethi (2021) found out that the level of awareness towards digital abuse among college students was not high. Moreover, the measurement and conceptualization of digital dating abuse is inconsistent across different studies ranging from 22 to 55 %, which makes it harder to study and combat cyber-abuse (Paat & Markham, 2020).

Significantly, risks to physical safety, especially that of murder, rape, assault, and harassment were anticipated and feared against the backdrop of the high rates of violence against women and femicides in Turkey. The current context of Turkey affected the participants' experiences as they feared they could be the next victim just like the women media reported on. Unfortunately, the recent withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention which offered legal protections from gender-based violence, and the high rates of femicides that are being publicized to raise awareness on the issue left many women rightfully fearful of experiencing any form of gender-based violence (Akbal, 2021), just like the current participants reported. Considering the very complex factors such as gender roles, patriarchy, the regulatory body of Turkey, and the broader political context that cause the heightened risk women must face (Akbal, 2021), the safety risks that women in this study have identified require response and change from a myriad of aspects like legislation, education, and culture. Researchers suggest that just like gender can be learned socially, so violent behaviors can be learned from experiences within life (Muniz-Rivas et al., 2019). In line with this, many women in this study attributed the risk of violence to socialization of men in Turkish culture, as the participants felt that Turkish men were likely to not have a grasp on consent and boundaries, and likely to disrespect the boundaries women wanted to set. They also feared they

may not be supported by institutions if they were to report male violence against them, and this increased the level of anticipated threat. Similarly, qualitative research from Turkey also suggests that many women experience a lack of access to institutional support and resources, and report that even when they make that contact, the actions may be ineffective and inadequate (Yalçınöz-Uçan, 2021). Many women in Turkey seek help from male-violence through non-institutional resources (Ergöçmen et al., 2013).

State institutions were not viewed as the only ones responsible for the safety of users. A small minority in the study also added that they wished the online dating platforms themselves could have more avenues for increased safety. Similarly, in many countries, app developers are criticized for having limited response to violence on and through dating apps (McCormick & Jones, 2021). Potential improvements could include background checks of users in directly related crimes like sex offences or fraud (Stoicescu & Rughiniş, 2021).

The men the participants have met through online dating apps were positioned as strangers whom they had little knowledge about and found harder to verify compared to getting to know people from social networks. These findings are supported by experimental evidence, in which women rated their likelihood of engaging in self-protective behaviors as being significantly higher when they were on dates with men, they met only online compared to on dates with men they shared a brief in-person interaction with (Cali et al., 2013). These men being relatively unknown to women increased the sense of risk associated with them, as they were considered less accountable and less predictable. Many participants in the study reported instances of engaging with fake or misrepresented profiles and/or dating men who have lied about their lives, and this is parallel to the experiences of many online dating users who report having engaged with such profiles (Simmons & Lee, 2020). Consistent with current findings, the literature on the risks of scammers finds that on online dating platforms ill-intentioned profiles may aim to obtain sexual images, financial gain, or physically harm their victims by luring them into dangerous situations (Paat & Markham, 2020).

Another risk women in the study identified involved engaging with misrepresented profiles or users who seek manipulative gain, or catfishing behaviors. Potential scams have been identified as one important area of risk in online dating (Obada-Obieh et al., 2017; Whitty & Buchanan, 2012), yet the women in this study did not identify scams as a serious issue. There is evidence in the literature that while online daters can identify the characteristics of scammers, they nevertheless do not have the necessary methodological mechanisms to protect their privacy and security (Obada-Obieh et al., 2017). The risk of misrepresentation and threats to integrity and trust were considered significant because most women in the study recognized how relatively easy it is for someone to misrepresent themselves online. Research suggests that this is generally true for online interactions, as people do not face immediate consequences for the things they write, and for this reason are less restricted (Melander, 2010). The women feared they may date or have feelings for men who have lied about significant aspects of their lives such as their marital status, and this was considered a risk for developing emotional distress.

For the women in the study, facing the stigma around online dating use and women's freedom to date and have sexual relationships also affected their experiences against the backdrop of the cultural context and norms of Turkey and of micro-cultures the women in the study are surrounded by. In fact, the participants in the study observing the presence of stigma around their dating habits is not surprising, since there have been many studies in recent years documenting the various ways Turkey's discourse on women and women's rights shifted to more traditional and conservative lines (Arat, 2021; Cindoğlu & Unal, 2017). There is also evidence from Turkey that women's experiences were unequally affected by such stigma in the community in comparison to men on dating apps, suggesting a gendered pattern of stigma's effects (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). Because of this stigma, women users from Turkey reported only using online dating apps in situations that afford a great deal of privacy such as staying away from their regular neighborhoods (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021).

However, one significant finding of the current study was that women who used online dating themselves had initially stigmatized opinions about the online

dating platforms. There were several veins of stigma discussed by the participants. These veins included perception of online dating users having deficiencies in one way or another like their desirability or social abilities, apps being considered only for those seeking out short-lived sexual relationships, and women who use being perceived as morally lacking. The evidence from previous studies in Turkey have also revealed that users of Tinder think that a significant majority of non-users perceive the app as a platform for engaging in casual sex (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). Jozkowski and colleagues (2017) revealed that women were viewed less favorably if they had sex with multiple men, which is parallel to the reports of the participants of the current study that stated feeling stigma and negative attitudes toward women with multiple partners, and online dating use being perceived as a sign for having a high number of partners. Research from Turkey also found that many women users thought non-users perceived the apps purely for sexual encounters (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). The participants in the study also believed -especially pre-use- the two stereotypes and prejudices that online dating users may have deficits that did not allow them to find relationships organically in-person and that only short-lived sexual experiences would be possible through the apps. However, none of the participants agreed with the stigma that women who use dating apps may be morally lacking, despite having observed this belief in people in their community.

Because of the associated stigma, some women had concerns about running into people from their daily lives on the apps and some chose to keep their online dating use discrete and private from certain people in their lives. This finding was also found by Deniz (2020) who reported that women preferred to keep their use private. Deniz (2020) also found that women chose locations outside of their regular living areas to avoid running into people they know. Yet, none of the participants in the study reported such a measure, instead many found that proximity was an advantage to being able to meet up with and date men.

In sum, the first main theme discussed what women in this study anticipated as potential threats as they used online dating platforms. Consistent with the research on both accounts, the women in this study reported that there were risks to their physical safety (Lundquist & Curington, 2019; McCormick & Jones, 2021;

Paat & Markham, 2020), and their online safety (Anderson et al., 2020; Paat & Markham, 2020; Stoicescu & Rughiniş, 2021). For the current participants, threats to their physical safety were more salient in support of the previous research which suggests awareness of digital forms of abuse and violence are lower than awareness of physical abuse (Harris et al., 2015; Rethi, 2021). The women in this study also situated these threats within the context of Turkey with high rates of violence against women, and lack of support from institutions adding to their perception of threat, and both factors were supported by the evidence from Turkey (Ergöçmen et al., 2013; Kahya, 2021; Yalçınöz-Uçan, 2021).

#### **4.1.2 Developing Online Strategies for Safety**

The second main theme mapped out the precautions that take place in the online sphere. Some of these strategies aim at preserving online safety such as privacy of online profiles and averting unwanted digital harassment. On the other hand, some aim at physical safety by eliminating those dates that are considered at higher risk for violating any boundaries, or by not sharing information that makes it easier to determine the participants' location. The decision making and safety behaviors began as early as in the online dating application selection phase. The women in the study positioned each dating app slightly differently in terms of user motivations, quality, and each had various features that were appealing. This is unsurprising, since the app creation and designs often aim to target a previously non-targeted group of users and offers to fulfill a previously unmet need through various features (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Chin et al., 2019). As such, the participants found different aspects of each app appealing and made decisions accordingly. The decision to choose an app was based upon these qualities and what the women had heard about each app from their social circles as these communications set their expectations up. For example, Tinder was viewed as having users mainly motivated by shorter term sexual encounters, whereas OkCupid and Bumble were considered providing a higher chance for establishing romantic relationships. For the participants in the present study, the selection of the

app that was best suited with their motivations and interest was an important decision-making point in their journey. This indicated that they started to exert their agency by having expectations and setting the stage for fulfillment of these expectations by actively choosing the platform that is most likely to align with their expectations even before starting to use dating apps and the negotiation of romantic and sexual relationships (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2012; Meenagh, 2015).

Another commonly used feature were filters which allowed women to eliminate users that did not fit the criteria they set out in the filters such as being of a certain height or age. These filters were crucial, because women felt there were a lot of men who were interested, and the use of filters eased the task of selection. This, too, supports the findings from previous research in that women were more likely to receive what they considered “too many” messages (Anderson et al., 2020). The decision of swiping a man left or right was made carefully by the participants in this study. Many participants reported that, in time, they developed a set of standards against which they measure men and make their decisions. Some studies have found differences between men and women’s criteria in matching and swiping decisions (Abramova et al., 2016; Cöbek & Ergin, 2021). Despite this study not having a comparative nature between men’s and women’s experiences, the participants shared making the observations that women considered they had to be much more discerning in their selection compared to men, and that they spent a lot more effort on the decision-making processes in the selection process. This observation that the participants made is supported by the evidence from other research employing semi-structured interviews, such that the female participants report engaging in more safety strategies as they navigate online dating platforms, and, especially, before agreeing to an in-person meeting (Obada-Obieh et al., 2017).

In this study, not only the criteria but also reasons for having developed the criteria and what having a specific criterion meant to the participants were explored. These decision-making criteria were made not only based on suitability, but also safety - only meeting with men that establish a base level of trustworthiness. In a similar vein, Couch and Liamputtong (2008) have also found that screening measures taken up by online dating users are a way for managing potential risks.

Several studies found that women in Turkey and around the world have several factors like appearance, socioeconomic status, and cultural fit to take into consideration when they are deciding whether to swipe a man left or right (Castro & Barrada, 2020; Cöbek & Ergin, 2021; Deniz, 2020). These findings were also true in the current study. Additionally, the women in this study had a preference against men who came from more traditional and conservative background, and some stated they did not feel safe in their presence. This, too, is supported by previous research from Turkey. Şimşek and Kavas (2018) have revealed a strong positive correlation between men's adherence to more traditional gender roles and the amount of physical and psychological dating violence they commit. While the women in the study reported feeling safer dating men from similar socioeconomic class and backgrounds, it is known that gender-based violence is a problem that cuts across all classes around the globe, despite low socioeconomic status posing a risk factor (Sheer et al., 2022). Moreover, the Cöbek and Ergin (2020) study also reported preferences based on ethnic and racial backgrounds living within Turkey, yet this preference was not stated by the participants. A minority of the participants in this study, however, reported preferring not to date men from other Middle Eastern countries out of concerns over cultural and religious incompatibility.

While the criteria discussed above are more measurable, the participants in the study also defined intangible criteria they have for determining whether they want to continue with a man or not. Almost all the participants in this study stated that the good flow and the conversation being enjoyable between them online were very important in determining whether they would carry their interactions to in-person interactions. Similarly, Couch and Liamputtong (2008) have found that trustworthiness and quality of rapport were some of the characteristics users looked for in online dating.

In the previous theme, one of the main areas of concern for women was identified as engaging with misrepresented profiles. This concern among women users of online dating platforms has been previously found, and it showed that women associated physical harm risks with misrepresenting or catfishing profiles (Berkowitz et al., 2021). Potential risks included interacting with men who were

not truthful about an aspect of their identity, since if truthful, women would not have considered flirting or dating them like their marital status or a catfish profile. Another risk was loss of trust in the men they were engaging with, or trust in using dating apps in general, and, lastly, being used for some sort of manipulative gain, or more severe harm endured in an in-person meeting those women have agreed to under false claims from the men. None of the women in this study reported concern about financial scams through online dating apps. However, financial scams have attracted their attention related to online dating as there have been cases of scammers pretending to have romantic interests asking and scamming money by faking an emergency and appealing to users' emotions (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012). Because of this concern, women chose to verify any information that men have provided to them online through social media like Instagram and Facebook or networking websites like LinkedIn and company webpages. By this way, the women wanted to have truthfulness, authenticity, and security in their interactions.

This finding is like a previous study that found online verification was an avenue for safety building for women users of online dating apps (Obada-Obieh et al., 2015). Another study defined online searching of potential dates as an uncertainty reduction strategy (Gibbs et al., 2011). They felt that the lack of social networks through which they could verify and have references for the men they met online was in some ways disadvantageous. Verification was not the only motivation for checking potential dates online. By searching online and observing their online interactions and profiles, the women also aimed to assess whether they were suitable with these men in terms of their attitudes, worldviews, and personality qualities. This is in line with the current trend of behaviors observed in other studies that suggest with the emergence of social media, many young people engage in social media research to get to know the person they are interested in by looking at the types of posts they make and their engagement with users (Meenagh, 2015).

Cobb and Kohno (2017) highlight that to assess suitability, online dating users need to share at times very sensitive information like their political and religious beliefs on relatively public profiles that are visible to other users, and this may in turn make them more vulnerable to breaches against their privacy and

security. The details on profiles could also make women more vulnerable to users with predatory intent, since these profiles are visible even before there is a match (Choi et al., 2018). Thus, like previous findings, maintaining privacy was an important avenue for building safety (Obada-Obieh et al., 2015). This was considered as a precaution that takes place in the digital space yet provided safety in both the online and offline spaces. For this reason, the women using online dating preferred to not share identifiable information as well as contact information and their addresses.

On the flip side, they wanted to know as much as possible about the men they could possibly meet and date. The participants reported engaging in online researching behaviors with safety and self-protection motivations, while they were trying to protect their privacy. However, some researchers suggest online researching behaviors could lead to cyber stalking and violations of privacy as new technologies offer channels for mediated surveillance such as the constant monitoring of one's life on social media (Cobb & Kohno, 2017; Meenagh, 2015). Yet, none of the women in this study reported online researching of potential dates for purposes other than getting a sense of suitability, safety, building accountability, and verification of the information provided. This suggests there may be a gendered pattern of motivations for online researching of potential partners, since women report beginning researching and verification for safety building purposes, and previous research that looked at both men and women's experiences of safety on online dating platforms has found that none of the men interviewed in the study engaged in searching on social media while a significant portion of women did out of safety concerns (Obada-Obieh et al., 2017).

Like previous findings, the women had concerns about their privacy on the apps (Obada-Obieh et al., 2015), and some of the most frequently used features aimed at controlling their profiles' visibility by paying for features that allowed women to do so. This is an appropriate concern, since there is evidence that online dating platforms ask for much sensitive information to be shared to complete a profile and this information could range from political and religious beliefs to smoking and drinking habits, and the apps can store or sell these data for

commercial gain (Cobb & Kohno, 2017; Hayes & Snow, 2018). To cope with this, women chose to pay for features that allowed only the profiles they liked to see their own user profiles or chose to sign out when they were not actively using. Notably, the security of their data generated in the online dating platforms did not emerge as a concern for any participants, but one. However, this is an important issue in the literature and in the tech industry, since online dating companies may share or sell their data to third parties (Cobb & Kohno, 2017; Hayes & Snow, 2018). This could be due to a general unawareness on the ways in which information shared online can be used later by subpoenas or during job searches against a person (Norcie et al., 2013). Since online dating companies are for-profit organizations, they collect and store data generated by their users for commercial reasons and sell them to generate income (Hayes & Snow, 2018; Ostheimar & Iqbal, 2019). This finding could suggest there is a need for building awareness around what apps do with the information users provide.

The strategies the women in the present study use to mitigate the risks they anticipate demonstrated different ways through which they exerted their agency in the online dating field. Unfortunately, women having to spend energy and make decisions around concerns for their own safety may limit their ability to act how they wish (Buerkle, 2021). Nevertheless, by taking the precautions they have outlined in this theme, they create a space to exist on these platforms to fulfill whatever need motivated them to begin use. As Pruchniewska (2020) also highlighted, the motivation to use online dating safely can burden women with invisible digital labor, and the current study tried to make some of this invisible labor more visible, as women told the types of assessments and user decisions they constantly have to make in the digital space. Dating apps may limit women's agency by not affording the space to negotiate the tone of the relationship between the two people who met face to face, as many interpret the presence on dating apps to indicate women having sexual or romantic interest, making these platforms sexualized in context (Buerkle, 2021).

### **4.1.3 Developing Strategies to Move Beyond the Risks**

In the first main theme, the risks to physical safety that women anticipated were highlighted. These included many forms of violence like harassment, assault, rape, and murder. To protect themselves from gender-based violence, the women in this study felt the need to engage in measures for risk reduction, and the findings show the ways in which the women are burdened with just to achieve a basic sense of safety while dating. Because of these risks, the women engaged in many behaviors to minimize these risks and build an environment that felt as safe as possible. As Gillett (2018) also highlight the safety work women must engage in when using online dating platforms to avert sexual harassment, violence and other risks, all women in the study engaged in some sort of safety work to protect their physical well-being and reduce risks. Cobb and Kohno (2017) too have found that users have developed a myriad of safety precautions in response to risk on online dating platforms. Some of the online precautions outlined also aimed at physical safety building. These safety building behaviors are very critical, since being a victim of dating violence can have long term consequences and cause serious distress in several areas of life (Hebert et al., 2019). For example, the participants in this study indicated that by not sharing their address, they protected themselves from unwanted contact or harassment, or by verifying a person online and sharing the identity of their date with trusted people, they made the men they were dating more accountable to any potential crimes.

Location of the in-person date emerged as the most important aspect of physical safety. Women preferred to meet outside the home initially, and in crowded areas where they could get help. Being able to get help was important, therefore, knowing a person who works in the location of the date such as a waiter or a bartender, or choosing a location close to friends who could reach them easily were reasons for preference. Some participants stated that they chose locations well-known to them, so that they could get in and get out easily in case they wanted to end the date. Previously, there was also evidence that by determining the location and time of the date, women felt more empowered compared to a bar or party

situation where the conditions are out of their hands, making those interactions feel riskier (Lundquist & Curington, 2019). Another aspect of the locations that was discussed was being in an area with more open-minded people where the women felt their lifestyles would be respected. As it has been discussed earlier, Turkey has been becoming more conservative, and the government has been adopting an agenda that promotes more traditional gender roles (Arat, 2021; Cindoğlu & Unal, 2017). Because of this, the women felt that they would not feel safe and comfortable in more conservative parts of the city and preferred to be in locations that are known for their more liberal worldviews.

Many other precautions were also employed. These precautions included drinking only lidded beverages, not getting into their dates' cars, using location tags, sharing their locations with friends and family, and updating their friends while they are on dates. These last two precautions demonstrate some of the way social networks are involved. This involvement was cited quite frequently in various ways and was identified as a sub-theme. The current study has revealed that social networks were very involved in the formation and maintenance of physical security of women. These findings were similar to other research reporting that especially young women engaged in their networks for safety building (Lundquist & Curington, 2019), yet the reported methods of engagement were somewhat different. The other methods that were not included by the participants of the current study included sharing license plates of dates with friends and inviting friends to dine at a separate table in the location of the date, and sharing personal information by tweaking some details (Lundquist & Curington, 2019; Obada-Obieh, 2017). However, location sharing, sharing the identity and pictures of dates with friends, giving a time to expect them back from the date were common across two studies (Lundquist & Curington, 2019).

Prior to the proliferation of online dating options, the intermediation of friends was the most dominant route for romantic relationships, with online dating this function is gradually decreasing (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). Yet, the current study has found that social networks were nevertheless very much involved in dating processes, especially by offering support to build safety. The most frequently

employed strategy was sharing a live location with friends and family and letting them know if they were going on a date. At this point, some participants shared all the information they had about their dates so that these men would be more accountable if anything happened to them. Except for two women who also included some men in their protective social networks for in-person dating, the majority of these protective network members were reportedly women. Some participants even positioned this as women's solidarity.

Social networks had so many functions for women who used online dating in the present study. Social networks encouraged women to use online dating platforms, offered advice for safety, dating, and date selection, and were involved in the process of a date from picking out an outfit to being on alert in case their friends signaled they were distressed in some way while on dates. Social network's involvement in safety building is quite important, as research suggests that social-support figures offer safety signals and help reduce the perception of threat (Hornstein & Eisenberger, 2018). On the other hand, stigma and shame attached to online dating caused some women to forgo the securities involvement of social networks provided, and this caused problems like feeling unsafe on dates, and feeling isolated due to not being able to share experiences. This suggests that reduction of stigma around online dating could also provide benefits to physical safety building and reduce victimization. The involvement of social networks in safety building and various stages of online dating, or potentially hindering online dating experiences by having stigmatizing attitudes show how the experience of agency is not only based on the individual, but rather is set up in the sociocultural context.

Another aspect of safety building was assessment of their dates in person. While the women only agreed to in person dates with men they have checked for suitability and safety in their online interactions and from their online checking behaviors, the assessment did not end there. The assessment dominantly took place on the first date, and the women preferred not to have second dates if they did not feel they were interested in the men they have met. Research also suggests that a perception of the date's dishonesty on the first date will affect the date's success

negatively (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017). The assessment continued in person as the women checked whether they felt connected and safe in the presence of the men they were dating. The women reported looking for many aspects of men's personality from kindness and sense of humor to flow of the conversation.

The women in the study chose locations outside of the home for this assessment as well, since they felt that were they to reject a man or not like him after having met him in person, this rejection could be made more easily and safely in an outside location. Their rejection not being respected or the man becoming angry or violent after being rejected was a significant concern for many participants. This fear is with good reason, as there is evidence that men can become aggressive after being rejected especially if they ranked higher on masculine honor beliefs, which can be triggered even further if the rejection takes place in public (Stratmoen et al., 2018). Concerns and challenges about rejecting men can limit women's agency (Buerkle, 2021), and by setting up the date in a way that gives room for easier rejection, women expand their space for action and exert agency. Significantly, Turkey is considered to have a culture of honor, where men maintain honor through tough, aggressive, and controlling behaviors toward women where honor poses a risk for women experiencing violence (Dikmen & Münevver, 2020; Glick et al., 2016). Because of this, the participants' fear of facing violence and aggression after rejecting a man is unfortunately founded and needs to be combatted. Some of the participants had non-consensual encounters or encounters they did not feel safe with the men they dated. Their experiences shaped how they approached taking precautions and the conversations around consent. Others were influenced by their social circles or by the media reporting on violence against women.

Their concern about their rejection not being respected also extended to sexual encounters as well. The women in the study felt that there were many men who did not understand the concept of consent and, therefore, could pressure them or harm them. This observation about consent that the participants shared is also supported by qualitative research on women and men's conceptualization of consent that revealed sexual double standards as men were likely to view sex as a

conquest and felt that women's initial rejections can be overturned (Jozkowski et al., 2017). Unfortunately, in many settings in Turkey, women's consent may be overlooked, like arranged marriages with only the family's consent (Dikmen & Münevver, 2020). Even in the legal context of Turkey, sexual consent is considered present upon a lack of active rejection or resistance, and not on voluntary choice to partake -which overlooks the power imbalances that may complicate a rejection or resistance (Karacan, 2015). In such a cultural background, the participants felt that many men they date may not be aware of active voluntary consent practices and felt the need to inform them.

Communicating consent was important for the women in the study to protect themselves from unwanted encounters. All activities involved in dating being consensual was very important. The communication of consent involved asking questions and educating men on consent by making remarks about the possibility of things not working out on the date and ending the night with no sexual encounter. However, the women reported that consent was mostly communicated indirectly, such as an invitation home implying sexual interest, or by body language such as physical touching. Importantly, the women felt safer from non-consensual activities online as they felt dating apps offered ways to end communications with a man, in which case his profile became unable to reach that woman again.

The second and third main themes documented the ways in which women developed and engaged in safety building strategies, as it found that women engaged in many strategies to avoid harm to themselves and families. By documenting these strategies, the burden of engaging in safety work in women's daily lives was demonstrated, and hopefully, drawn attention to. Gillett (2021) also showed through in-depth interviews that those women burdened with taking precautions for their own safety may become impeded in their capacity to freely take part in online dating activities. These safety strategies took place both online and off-line. Kelly (2012) argues that the continuum of sexual harassment includes everyday ordinary intrusive behaviors that women respond to on a regular basis. The findings from this study suggests that these intrusions include both the online and the offline spheres. These everyday intrusions are factored into women's daily

decision-making processes, and as a result affect their lives from many aspects such as social, psychological, and physical (Kelly, 2012). By factoring in these intrusions to their decision making, women may face a more limited “space for action” (Kelly, 2006). This space for action, in this study, was limited to the boundaries of what women considered safe in online and ensuing offline dating and excluded any interactions that could compromise safety and heavily interacted with sociocultural variables as evidenced by involvement of networks in safety building, effects of stigmatizing attitudes, and the women’s preference for going on dates in more liberal neighborhoods.

In line with Kelly’s (2012) argument that women often factor in potential intrusions into their regular decision-making processes, the second and third main themes illustrated how women factored in potential risks to their decision-making processes when they used online dating and went on in-person dates. These decision-making processes have also led women to engage in behaviors that constitute safety work on online dating platforms as well, because of the gender-based violence and harassment taking place online (Gillett, 2018). Some of these precautions were learned socially, and some came intuitively to women as they could not imagine an alternative where they did not engage in these behaviors.

#### **4.1.4 Reaping Benefits despite Challenges**

The participants in the study who used online dating platforms with more realistic as opposed to more idealistic expectations and motivations -such as finding the love of their lives or “the one”- reported more fulfillment and fewer disappointments and derived more benefits. Forming and seeking sexual, non-sexual, or romantic connections are among the main motivations users have for online dating (Castro & Barrada, 2020). The participants in this study as well were motivated for making connections and cited meaningful interactions and moments of connectedness among their greatest gains from having used online dating. All participants had dated, had sex with, or had a romantic relationship with men they have met online. Many women in the study had long-term relationships from online

dating platforms and were somewhat surprised by this outcome. Yet, despite not having enough data about this from Turkey, in the United States, research has found that a significant number of romantic partnerships and marriages occur through online dating platforms (Anderson et al., 2020).

Research around the world and in Turkey has found gender differences in motivations for using online dating such that women were more likely than men to be looking for romantic connections (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Cöbek & Ergin, 2021; Pozsar et al., 2018; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter & Vandebosch, 2019). Most of the participants in this study were motivated by non-sexual relationship seeking such as friendships and romantic partnerships, and the participants' perception of men's motivations corroborated the findings from the research: the participants thought that a majority of men on the apps were motivated by short term sexual partner search in comparison to women users. Therefore, the participants that are motivated for romantic relationship seeking reported having to spend extra effort identifying the intentions of men they interact with.

With in-depth interviews, Kallis (2020) had identified two main motivations for use: connections and entertainment. While connection has been identified as a motivation and gain by the participants in this study, entertainment motivations were also somewhat present as some participants stated they had an enjoyable time due to the playful nature of the app designs. Research has also found that excitement was a main motivator for users (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Castro & Barrada, 2020; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter & Vandebosch, 2019; Ward, 2017). Accordingly, the excitement of especially earlier stages of use, as well as the novelty of meeting, dating, and flirting with someone new were also reported as one of the more enjoyable aspects of online dating by the participants.

Research on motivations for online dating use have identified self-worth validation as a significant factor (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter & Vandebosch, 2019). The participants in this current study have also stated that one of the gains they had from having used online dating was feeling validated about how they are perceived by seeing the interest of men. Getting attention, interest, and compliments from men they meet, and date reportedly boosted their self-confidence and "stroke

their ego”. Similarly, Holthausen and colleagues (2020) had found that 40% of users reported a positive impact on their self-esteem, however, a significant minority of 28.7% suggested their self-esteem was affected negatively. While none of the participants directly suggested a negative impact of online dating use on their self-esteem, some reported that being cut out of communication abruptly by men they were dating impacted their well-being. While there is evidence among Tinder users that face and body dissatisfaction is higher than that of non-users (Strubel & Petrie, 2017), none in this study made such a suggestion. In fact, online dating users in this study stated that using online dating allowed them to consider themselves in higher regard and reduced negative self-talk about their lovability and appearance.

One last area of benefits women reported deriving from using online dating was gaining experience in flirting, dating, and relationships. This benefit is very significant, because in young adulthood formation of romantic relationships has an important role that could affect the trajectory of their lives in the long run, and the ways through which these relationships are established are diverse and have been changing (Tillman et al., 2019). The women in this study found that using online dating platforms allowed them to meet a range of men that were otherwise inaccessible and interact with them at a higher rate than what traditional dating could offer. Previous research suggests that young people often find it easier to communicate in a flirtatious manner online than offline (Meenagh, 2015). This way, they reported gaining experience in dating and relationships fast, in a relatively short amount of time.

The participants also reported that by flirting with men, they practiced their interpersonal communication skills and learnt keeping up conversations. This is also important, since flirting is rather elusive as there are non-verbal signals that are communicated vaguely to avoid shame and awkwardness if the other party rejects advances, and therefore can be hard to master (Punyanunt-Carter & Wagner, 2018). Flirting also provides several benefits such as pleasure, affection, inclusion, and escape for many young adults that engage in it (Punyanunt-Carter & Wagner, 2018). Lastly, these interactions also provided an opportunity for gaining insight as to how they are in relationships and romantic attachments. Another area of gain was seen

as the tackling of their own prejudices against online dating platforms. Many participants had altered their views on online dating after having participated in it. These prejudices included viewing these platforms with only sexually motivated users, believing users to be not up to their standards, and thinking romantic relationship chance low.

In all, online dating platforms change and offer new avenues for dating practices for many people. Gaining these benefits despite all the challenges by developing strategies to move beyond the risks above show that women exert their agency in their own best interests to access the types of opportunities online dating offers. Despite facing gender-based risks and carrying the additional labor of safety work, the women in this study demonstrated how they created themselves an enjoyable and explorative space.

#### **4.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY**

The current study's results revealed important issues related to how women experience agency and safety in their heterosexual online dating experiences in Turkey. The participants' narratives offered an understanding of the risks women associate with online dating, how they factor these risks into their decision making, and the ways in which they respond by building safety online and offline, and navigate the struggles against stigmatized attitudes, and risk of gender-based violence within the patriarchal socio-cultural backdrop. Moreover, it has shown the various ways in which women are implicitly tasked and burdened with safety work in online and offline spaces, because of facing and anticipating gender-based threats. Although online dating for women posed various risks and challenges, most women in this study found ways to resist these complications to gain relationship and dating experience and had meaningful connections with men they have met online to fulfill various needs and motivations they outlined and made decisions in their best interests by applying their agency. This research aims to contribute to the literature and practices about how online dating and ensuing in-person dating can become safer and free of violence.

Firstly, the findings draw attention to the safety work women are burdened with in their daily lives as they are making decisions and navigating the world of dating. On a more practical level, it provides a rich resource for potential ways to increase safety for women using online dating. These practices were employed and found to be effective by the women in the study and can provide insight for safety building ideas for women. This is important, because reviews of existing bodies of literature find that women are more likely to be victimized by more severe forms of dating violence (Brown & Hegarty, 2018). In the interviews, many participants reported beginning to use these platforms early around the time they began university education, and reflecting on their early days of use, some participants highlighted those younger women may especially be vulnerable to threats. The types of precautions reported by the women in this study could be used in educational materials for safety building in online dating and any subsequent in person encounters.

Women will be burdened with the safety work in online dating, at times at the cost of experiencing a reduced space to act in their best interest or according to their desires until there is a cultural shift, and to change these gendered cultural norms that men are socialized in must change (Buerkle, 2021). Schools and universities can offer great opportunities for changing social norms by educating students on consent through seminars and workshops. To support young women's safety in online dating, university counseling centers, sexual assault prevention initiatives can offer both long- or short-term seminars and workshops to online dating users regardless of gender. Because there is a very high prevalence of use among young adults, it can be assumed that these workshops and seminars will reach a wide audience. The programs offered can be designed from an empowerment perspective. Moreover, the participants in this study were concerned with men's lack of awareness on consent. To combat this, consent education and training could be offered, and awareness raising campaigns could be launched. Inclusion of topics around consent is crucial in relation to online dating to define and educate on what digital boundaries and online communication of consent are like in this relatively new online space.

The social network involvement being an important physical and emotional protective factor can be introduced into potential interventions and empowerment programs. A study conducted with women who experienced digital dating violence in Turkey found that most women had to cope alone with the violence they experienced (Yıldız & Özarslan, 2022). Social networks could be included in safety plans through community-level organizations and projects to promote safe dating practices, and these plans could also reduce the burden of safety women individually carry by distributing to community members and organizations. Furthermore, the information participants provided on coping can provide a basis for future interventions in this area. These interventions can be especially beneficial to more vulnerable populations, as there is evidence suggesting that those with a history of maltreatment history are more likely to be more severely victimized online and offline (Fereidooni et al., 2021).

Moreover, while the participants in this study were concerned regarding their privacy, their concerns mostly focused on what other users or people they already knew that could be on dating apps could see in their profiles. However, only one participant raised her concern on how the applications could use the data she generated. The lack of focus of the participants on data privacy may inform us that users can be educated on what happens to the data they generate by using online dating platforms, and make more informed decisions based on this information. While the treatment of the data generated is under the responsibility of app developers, education on personal data safety can be included in the seminars and workshops proposed earlier.

### **4.3 STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The present research is the first to qualitatively explore safety and agency experiences of women using online dating apps in Turkey from a feminist perspective. Young women's experiences with safety in online dating was studied in depth in this study. By the nature of qualitative research methodologies, this study posed exploratory questions to get a comprehensive picture of women's

experiences as they navigated interpersonal and cultural spheres to achieve connectedness through online dating platforms despite several challenges and threats. The participants' narratives also provided insight into how dating and freedom to explore dating and sexuality was experienced by women in a country that has been promoting increasingly more traditional gendered scripts. By exploring both the threats and the ways of dealing with these threats by developing safety mechanisms, this study contributed to the understanding of women's agency as it laid out how women made decisions and took action to move through the difficulties of dating in a patriarchal sociocultural context and experienced dating, sexuality, and relationships online and offline against the limitations the risks posed. Furthermore, this study explored not only the motivations women reportedly had for online dating, but also the gains and benefits they derived from online dating on personal and interpersonal levels.

Some characteristics of the participants may also limit diversity of the voices represented in the study. Although this study had participants from several different cities in Turkey, the majority was in Istanbul at the time of the interviews, and all were in urban, metropolitan cities. In addition, all participants were at least university graduates and had mid to upper levels of socioeconomic status. Another limitation was that the sample was selected to include only heterosexual women since the study specifically explored heterosexual women's experiences with on and through online dating platforms as they navigated safety and protection from risks posed by men. Future research could focus on LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences of safety and agency on dating apps. In addition, similar research could be performed with an older sample of women to document their perspectives.

Moreover, simply choosing to participate in a study on online dating practices and willingness to express themselves could indicate certain personality characteristics such as expressiveness, openness, and assertiveness. Considering all these qualities that were in common between all participants, it could be argued that different results could have been revealed should this study have participants from more diverse backgrounds. The experiences of women from more diverse backgrounds could be significantly different, because these experiences are

influenced by social, cultural, and political values, and personal history. Thus, to explore this diversity, future research can investigate women's experiences among different subgroups such as older users, women from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and non-heterosexual women. Furthermore, the women who partook in this study are presumably well-adjusted enough to tell their narratives of online dating use, however, there may also be others who were unable to share their stories due to being victims of violence facilitated by online dating platforms and experiencing severe consequences.

The present study showed that young women may have different vulnerabilities and need different types of support when navigating online dating through apps. Although these differences could not be explored thoroughly in the present study, the results pointed out that stigma around online dating in one's social network may decrease the support and programs combating stigma could increase the support social networks provide. To be able to better situate interventions to offer to most relevant populations, risk factors for vulnerability to these risks need to be understood. How these risks and coping mechanisms are experienced potentially depend on the background of the user like the current research found those experiencing more stigma from their social circles had a harder time including their networks for safety building. Thus, how risk anticipation and coping interact with social and cultural norms, stigma, and family backgrounds deserve more attention. Given that those with a history of abuse being at higher risk for experiencing online dating violence (Fereidooni et al., 2021), and the high rate of violence against women in Turkey (Dikmen & Münevver, 2020; Kahya, 2021), it would be crucial to look more closely to the relation of women's past experiences and current online dating use.

Furthermore, the results of the current study could inform potential new topics for research. As such, the themes revealed in this study can become sole topics for research, for example, the derived benefits from online dating deserve more attention as it shows what kinds of gains maintain motivation for online dating use. Most studies on online dating focus on the potential dangers and threats, and thwarting of these risks, yet what benefits users derive, what needs these benefits

respond to, and how these benefits can be gained in a safer and more enjoyable manner deserve attention. By shifting the focus on benefits, the curiosity and desires of women will gain attention over risk avoidance. These findings could offer insight on future work and developments to app developers and practitioners alike.

Lastly, because this study was a qualitative one, it inherently had some degree of researcher subjectivity, and the research process was guided by the researcher's own perspective, values, and take on the subject at hand. Due to researcher subjectivity, it could be said that a different researcher could have interpreted the collected data in a different manner. Thus, the researcher characteristics and perspective outlined in the reflexivity section should be taken into consideration when reading and interpreting the findings of this study.

## CONCLUSION

The present study used a feminist approach to demonstrate young women's experiences of safety and agency in online and in-person dating settings in Turkey, how they moved through challenges to reap a variety of benefits and fulfill the needs that motivated them to use. The findings of this study are expected to add to the field by cataloging the risks that are anticipated and documenting very rich and varied coping mechanisms in response. These findings can inform the development of future interventions to educate users on safe and humane ways of online dating, identify and reduce risk factors, and enrich coping skills.

This study also revealed how women were carrying out -often- invisible digital and physical labor of keeping themselves safe during the varying stages of online dating, and how their decision making was informed by the risks they outlined. It laid out how culture, stigma, gender norms, and the media shape women's perception of risks and safety, as the participants navigated through online dating practices in Turkey's patriarchal attitudes toward women's romantic and sexual freedom. Despite the challenges, the women learned or developed a myriad of ways to keep themselves safe, to meet potential partners, and derive benefits ranging from connectedness to learning about dating and relationships. In fact, all the women reflected on the ways they changed and gained insight for the better, as they were recounting their narratives for this study. However, all the women came from similar backgrounds which limit the diversity of the experiences represented in the results, making the investigation with a more diverse sample necessary. These could guide the development of prevention and intervention policies, and support women in Turkey where negative attitudes toward online dating remain.

To conclude, the participating women and the researcher in this study commonly aimed to contribute to the understanding of understudied online dating experiences. During the interviews, the participants shared an excitement for getting a chance to contribute to science and practice of online dating, and an appreciation for having a space to talk about an often-stigmatized topic and reflect on their experiences and how these experiences contributed to their lives. The

participants' recognition of this study as being a long needed one and the shared experiences of identifying and navigating risks indicate the need to increase discourse on the topic and for further research.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A. The Informed Consent Form

#### Bilgilendirilmiş Onam Formu

<b>Araştırmayı Destekleyen Kurum:</b>	İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi
<b>Araştırmanın Adı:</b>	Çevrimiçi Tanışma Uygulamaları Kullanan Kadınların Kişisel Eylemlilik ve Güvenlik Deneyimleri
<b>Araştırmacının Adı:</b>	Cansu Yavaşcağlu
<b>Araştırmacının E-mail Adresi ve Telefonu:</b>	_____
<b>Araştırmanın Danışmanı:</b>	Anıl Özge Üstünel Balcı
<b>Danışmanın E-mail Adresi ve Telefonu:</b>	_____

Bu araştırma, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Klinik Psikoloji Yüksek Lisans Programı öğrencisi Cansu Yavaşcağlu tarafından Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Anıl Özge Üstünel Balcı danışmanlığında yürütülmektedir. Bu araştırmanın amacı, kadınların çevrimiçi tanışma platformlarındaki kişisel eylemlilik deneyimlerini ve olası güvenlik riskleri ile baş etme stratejilerini derinlikli bir biçimde incelemektir. Araştırmanın günümüzde kullanımı oldukça yaygınlaşmış olan çevrimiçi tanışma uygulamalarındaki güvenli flört deneyimlerini inceleyerek ve bu uygulamalardaki olası risklerle baş etmek için geliştirilen stratejileri belgeleyerek alandaki literatüre katkı sağlaması beklenmektedir. Bulguların, güvenli flört ilişkilerini desteklemeye yönelik yapılacak önleme çalışmalarına da katkı sunacağı düşünülmektedir.

Bu arařtırmaya katılmayı kabul ettiđiniz takdirde, yaklaşık 60-90 dakika süreceđ bir görüřmeye katılmanız beklenecektir. Bu görüřmede, çevrimiçi tanışma ve flört uygulamaları kullanımınız konusundaki düşüncelerinizi ve gözlemlerinizi öğrenmek için sizden bazı sorulara yanıt vermeniz istenecektir. Yanıtlarınız, sonraki analizlerde kullanılmak üzere ses kaydına alınacaktır.

Bu arařtırma bilimsel bir amaçla yapılmakta ve katılımcıların kişisel bilgilerinin gizliliđi esas alınmaktadır. Ses kayıtları arařtırma süresince yalnızca arařtırmacının ve danışmanın erişimi olan bir harici bellekte muhafaza edilecek, arařtırma sona erdiđinde silinecektir. Arařtırma bulgularının sunumu ve raporlamasında kişi isimleri kullanılmayacak, bulgular görüřmelerde ifade edilen ortak konuları özetleyecektir. Görüřmede paylařtıđınız görüř ve deneyimlerinize iliřkin örnek cümlelere bulguların raporlanmasında yer verilecek, bu cümleler isminizle iliřkilendirilmeden anonim řekilde bilimsel yayınlarda kullanılacaktır.

Bu arařtırmaya katılmak tamamen isteđe bađlıdır. Görüřmeye katılmanın üzerinizde herhangi bir olumsuz etki yaratması beklenmemektedir. Ancak görüřme sırasında yanıt vermek istemediđiniz, size kendinizi rahatsız hissettiren sorular olursa bu soruları yanıtlamadan geçebilirsiniz. Görüřme sırasında dilediđiniz zaman kaydın durdurulmasını isteyebilirsiniz. Görüřme bařlamadan önce, görüřme sırasında veya sonrasında dilediđiniz zaman soru sorabilirsiniz. Katılmayı kabul ettiđiniz takdirde çalıřmanın herhangi bir ařamasında herhangi bir sebep göstermeden arařtırmadan çekilme hakkına sahiptir. Arařtırmadan çekildiđiniz durumda verdiđiniz bilgiler deđerlendirmeye alınmayacaktır.

Görüřmenizin sonuçları, arařtırma sonlandırılmadan önce gözden geçirmeniz için sizinle mail yoluyla paylařılacak ve geri bildiriminiz dođerultusunda gerekli deđeriklikler yapılacaktır. Burada amaç, sizin görüřlerinizin ve deneyimlerinizin en dođeru řekilde anlaşılmasını sađlamaktır.

Arařtırmayla ilgili bilgi almak, soru sormak veya yorumlarınızı paylařmak isterseniz, arařtırmacı Cansu Yavařcaođlu ile adresinden iletiřime geebilirsiniz.

Eđer arařtırmaya katılmaya onay veriyorsanız, ařađıdaki metni mail yoluyla arařtırmacıya iletebilirsiniz.

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Bu alıřmaya tamamen gönüllü olarak katılıyorum. Bana anlatıları ve yukarıdaki aıklamaları anladım. alıřmaya katılmayı ve verdiđim bilgilerin bilimsel amalı yayınlarda kullanılmasını kabul ediyorum.

## Appendix B. The Demographic Information Form

### Demografik Bilgi Formu

1. Cinsiyetiniz:
2. Yaşınız:
3. Eğitim Durumunuz: (Lütfen son mezun olduğunuz okulu seçiniz.)
  - a. İlkokul
  - b. Ortaokul
  - c. Lise
  - d. Üniversite
  - e. Yüksek Lisans
  - f. Doktora
4. Cinsel yöneliminiz:
5. Çalışma durumunuz:
  - a. Çalışmıyor
  - b. Yarı zamanlı çalışıyor
  - c. Tam zamanlı çalışıyor
6. İlişki Durumunuz:
7. Halen çevrimiçi flört ve tanışma uygulamaları kullanıyor musunuz?
  - a. Evet
  - b. Hayır
8. Ne kadar süre çevrimiçi flört ve tanışma uygulamalarını kullandınız?  
(Lütfen yıl/ay olarak belirtiniz.) \_\_\_\_\_
9. Bu uygulamalardan hangilerini kullandınız?
  - a. Tinder
  - b. Bumble
  - c. Happn
  - d. OKCupid
  - e. Instagram
  - f. Whatsapp
  - g. Diğer \_\_\_\_\_

10. Bu uygulamaları kullanırken aşağıdaki motivasyonlardan hangileri sizi tanımlar:
- Yeni insanlarla tanışma
  - Romantik bir ilişki arayışı
  - Cinsel partner arayışı
  - Diğer \_\_\_\_\_
11. Bu uygulamalardan tanıştığınız kişilerle yüz yüze hiç buluştunuz mu?
- Evet
  - Hayır
12. Bu uygulamalar aracılığıyla yaklaşık kaç kişi ile tanıştınız? \_\_\_\_\_
13. Güncel olarak yoğun psikolojik stres veya travma sonrası stres semptomları yaşıyor musunuz?
- Evet
  - Hayır

## Appendix C. The Interview Questions

### Görüşme soruları

#### A. Giriş

1. Kendinizi biraz tanıtır mısınız?
  - a. Nerede yaşıyorsunuz? Ne kadar zamandır?
  - b. Mesleğiniz nedir? İş yaşamınız nasıldır?
  - c. Günlük yaşamınız nasıldır? Nasıl tarif edersiniz?
2. İlişki durumunuz ve ilişki geçmişiniz hakkında biraz bilgi verir misiniz?
  - a. Şu anda bir ilişkiniz var mı?
  - b. İlişkinizi nasıl tanımlarsınız?
  - c. Geçmişte ilişkiniz/ilişkileriniz oldu mu?
  - d. Geçmişteki ilişkinizi/ilişkilerinizi nasıl tanımlarsınız?

#### B. Çevrimiçi Flört ve Tanışma Uygulamaları

3. Çevrimiçi flört deyince aklınıza neler geliyor? Nasıl deneyimleriniz var?
  - a. Çevrimiçi flörte nasıl, ne zaman başladınız?
4. Çevrimiçi tanışma uygulamalarını kullanırken deneyimlerinizden biraz bahsedebilir misiniz?
  - a. Kullanmaya nasıl başladınız?
  - b. Ne şekilde kullanıyorsunuz? Bu şekilde kullanmaya nasıl başladınız?
  - c. Hangi sıklıkta kullanıyorsunuz?
  - d. Bu uygulamaları kullanmanın hoşunuza giden yanları neler?
  - e. Bu uygulamaları kullanırken çekinceleriniz, soru işaretleriniz oluyor mu? Nasıl?
5. Çevrimiçi uygulamalar aracılığıyla tanıştığınız erkeklerle nasıl deneyimleriniz oldu?
  - a. Olumlu deneyimleriniz oldu mu? Nasıl?
  - b. Olumsuz deneyimleriniz oldu mu? Nasıl?

- c. Uygulamada tanıştığınız bir erkekle iletişiminizi sürdürmeye nasıl karar veriyorsunuz? Bunu nasıl öğrendiniz?
  - d. Uygulamada tanıştığınız bir erkekle yüz yüze görüşmeye nasıl karar veriyorsunuz? Bunu nasıl öğrendiniz?
  - e. Uygulamada tanıştığınız bir erkekle iletişiminizi sonlandırmaya nasıl karar veriyorsunuz? Bunu nasıl öğrendiniz?
6. Çevrimiçi tanışma uygulamalarını kullanımınızda zaman içinde bir değişim oldu mu? Nasıl?

### C. Çevrimiçi Flört ve Güvenlik

7. Çevrimiçi flörtte güvenlik deyince aklınıza neler geliyor?
8. Çevrimiçi uygulamalarda güvenliği nasıl tanımlarsınız?
- a. Çevrimiçi tanışma uygulamalarını kullanırken güvenliğe dair nasıl deneyimleriniz var?
  - b. Çevrimiçi tanışma uygulamalarını güvenli bir şekilde kullanmak için neler yaparsınız?
    - Nasıl öğrendiniz? (her bir davranış için sorulur)
9. Uygulamalar aracılığıyla tanıştığınız kişilerle yüz yüze buluşuyorsanız, bu görüşmelerde güvenliğe dair deneyimleriniz nasıl?
- a. Uygulamada tanıştığınız bir erkekle buluşmanın güvenli olup olmadığını nasıl değerlendiriyorsunuz?
10. Çevrimiçi tanışma uygulamalarını kullanırken güvende hissetmediğiniz bir an/durum hatırlıyor musunuz? Nasıl?
- a. Bu durumda nasıl baş ettiniz?
11. Çevrimiçi tanışma uygulamalarında rızayı nasıl tanımlarsınız?
- Bu uygulamalarda rıza alıp verme nasıl gerçekleşiyor?
  - Sizin rıza vermediğiniz etkileşimler yaşadınız mı? Nasıl tepki verdiniz?

#### D. Kapanış

12. Çevrimiçi flört uygulamalarını kullanmaya devam etmeyi düşünüyor musunuz?
13. Çevrimiçi flört uygulamalarını kullanan kadınlara nasıl önerileriniz olur?
14. Genel olarak düşündüğünüzde, çevrimiçi flört uygulamalarındaki deneyimlerinizden neler öğrendiniz, size nasıl bir katkısı oldu?
15. Bu konu hakkında konuşmak size nasıl geldi?
16. Sizin eklemek istediğiniz bir şey var mı?
17. Bana sormak istediğiniz herhangi bir şey var mı?

## Appendix D. Member Checking Text Content

Merhabalar,

Sizlere öncelikle 18-35 yaş arası kadınların çevrimiçi flört uygulamaları kullanımı sırasında güvenlik ve eylemlilik deneyimlerini araştırdığım tez çalışmamda katkıda bulunduğunuz için çok teşekkür ederim.

11 katılımcı ile yaptığım görüşmeler sonucu, kadınların çevrimiçi flört ve peşi sıra gelen yüz yüze görüşmelerde yaşadığı deneyimleri derinlikli ve detaylı olarak anlamaya ve anlatmaya çalışırken ulaştığım bulguları iletmek isterim. Bu bulguları sizinle paylaşırken, sizden geri gelen bildirimler ile bu bulguların sizlerin deneyimlerinizi yansıtıp yansıtmadığını anlamak isterim. Kullandığım araştırma yöntemi ile sizlerin anlattıklarınızda ortaklaşan deneyimler üzerinden bu deneyimi yansıttığını düşündüğüm dört tema belirledim. Analizim sonucunda aşağıda yazdığım dört ana tema ve o temaların alt temalarına ulaştım.

### 1. Tema: Çevrimiçi Flörtün Risklerini Tahmin Etmek ve Hesaplamak

Bu tema katılımcıların çevrimiçi flört uygulamaları ve sonrasındaki buluşmalara dair öngördükleri ve öngörülerini ışığında karar verme mekanizmalarına dahil ettiği dijital ve fiziksel alandaki risk ve tehditleri anlatmaktadır. Bu risklerle baş etmek için geliştirilen yöntemler takip eden iki tema altında değerlendirilmiştir. Taciz, tecavüz, ısrarcı takip, cinayet gibi riskleri gibi fiziksel güvenliğe dair tehditler, çevrimiçi flört uygulamaları etrafında oluşmuş önyargılarla baş etmek, ve uygulama içi ve dışında kendini yanlış tanıtan veya manipülatif amaçları olan erkeklerle etkileşime girme riski en sık tanımlanan üç ana zorluğu özetlemiştir. Buna paralel olarak alt temalar *Güvenliği Tehdit Eden Unsurlar*, *Stigmanın Oluşturduğu Baskılar*, ve *Dürüstlük ve Güvene Karşı Tehditler* olarak belirlenmiştir.

## 2.Tema: Dijital Alanda Güvenlik Stratejileri Geliştirmek

Bu tema çevrimiçi flört uygulamaları kullanırken kadınların hem kendileri için uygun olabilecek potansiyel romantik veya cinsel partnerleri değerlendirirken, hem de güvenliklerini göz etmek için geliştirdiği stratejileri ele almıştır. Bu temada gözlenen stratejilerin bir kısmı dijital alanda güvenlik ve gizliliği hedeflerken, bir kısmı da fiziksel buluşmalardaki güvenlikten emin olmak adına geliştirilmiştir. Katılımcılar bazı önlemlerin öğrenilmiş olduğunu ifade ederken, bazılarının doğal akışta, içgüdüsel olarak ortaya çıktığını söylemişlerdir. Bu önlemler alt temaları da oluşturacak dört faktör çevresinde toplanmıştır. Bu dört faktöre işaret eden alt temalar şunlardır: *Uygulamayı seçmek ve uygulama içi ayarları değerlendirmek, Potansiyel eşleşme adaylarını taramak ve seçmek, Potansiyel partner adaylarının sağladıkları bilgileri online olarak doğrulamak ve değerlendirmek, ve Gizliliği korumak.*

## 3.Tema: Fiziksel Risklerin Ötesine Geçebilmek için Stratejiler Geliştirmek

Bu tema kadınların fiziksel buluşmalarda öngördükleri olası tehlikelerle baş etmek için geliştirdiği yöntemleri özetlemiştir. Kadınların dijital alanda aldıkları önlemlerin üzerine fiziksel alanda da önlemler de alınmıştır, ve çok çeşitli önlem ve yöntem dillendirilmiştir. Fiziksel güvenliği sağlamak için yapılan önlemler arasında buluşma mekanının seçiminde çeşitli faktörler ve özellikle kolaya ayrılabilir, halka açık ve kolay yardıma ulaşılabilir olması öne çıkmıştır. Genellikle başka kadınlardan oluşan, dayanışma denilebilecek, sosyal ağlar etkin olarak güvenlik için harekete geçirilmiştir. Katılımcıların sosyal çevrelerinden güvendiği kişiler buluşma sırasında haberdar olmuş, güncelleme almış, tavsiye vermiş ve buluşma sırasında lokasyon paylaşımı ile aktive edilmiştir. Katılımcıların çoğunluğu ilk buluşmayı buluştukları erkeklerle devam edip etmemek, yakınlaşıp yakınlaşmamak için bir

değerlendirme olarak değerlendirmiştir. Bütün katılımcılar bütün bu süreç içinde rıza iletişiminin kurulmasını kritik bulmuştur, ve rıza iletişiminin genelde doğrudan olmayan veya fiziksel mesajlarla kurulduğunu tarif etmişlerdir. Bu anlatılar doğrultusunda alt temalar şu şekilde belirlenmiştir: *Fiziksel Güvenliğin İnşası, Sosyal Ağların Dahil Olması, Buluşma Sırasında Yapılan Değerlendirmeler, ve Rızanın İletişimi.*

#### 4.Tema: Zorluklara Rağmen Elde Edilen Kazanımlar

Son tema, katılımcıların çevrimiçi flört uygulamaları kullanımları üzerinden edindikleri deneyim ve kazanımları incelemiştir. Bu kazanımlar hem bireysel hem bireylerarası alanda olmuştur. Bireysel kazanımlar içinde çevrimiçi flörtlere dair önyargıların değişmesi, özgüvende artış, bireyin kendine dair olumsuz düşüncelerinde azalma, ve ilişki içindeki kendilik hakkında içgörü edinme vardır. Bireyler arası kazanımlar ise anlamlı ilişkiler kurma, iletişim ve flört becerilerinde gelişme, ilişkilerin işleyişi hakkında deneyim ve fikir sahibi olma vardır. Katılımcıların hepsi uygulamalar aracılığıyla cinsel veya romantik partner edinmiş, veya buluşmalara gitmiştir. Katılımcıların önemli bir çoğunluğu uygulama aracılığıyla tanıştığı erkeklerle uzun dönemli romantik ilişkiler kurmuştur. Etkileşime girilen erkeklerin sosyal çevreler aracılığıyla olabilecek tanışmalardan tanışabilecek kişilere kıyasla daha çeşitli ve farklı olduğu dile getirilmiştir. Katılımcılar kendi akademik, profesyonel alanları dışından, farklı millet ve kültürlerden, ve farklı hayat tecrübelerinden kişilerle tanışıp, bilgi ve deneyim edinmişlerdir.

Bu bulgular ışığında alt temalar şu şekilde belirlenmiştir: *Anlamlı Bağlar Kurma, Özgüven İnşası, ve Flört ve İlişkilerde Deneyimlenme.*

Bu araştırmada paylaştıklarınız hem kadınların çevrimiçi flört deneyimlerine dair bilimsel veriyi derinleştirmiş, hem de kullanıcıların daha güvende olabilmesi adına

yapılabilecek pratik ve klinik müdahaleler için yol gösterici olmuştur. Bu sebeple bu bulgulara dair soru ve katkılarınızı duymaktan memnuniyet duyarım.

Sizlere tek tek bu çalışmaya katıldığınız, vaktinizi ve emeğinizi ayırdığınız, ve yaptığınız paylaşımlar için teşekkür ederim.

Sevgiler,

Cansu Yavaşcaoğlu

## **ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL**

Ethics Board Approval is available in the printed version of this dissertation.