



Dating in the Digital Age: A Content Analysis of Dating Websites Designed for Disabled People

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Abstract

In our current collective sexual sphere, a range of digital sexual fields, such as mobile applications and dating websites, provide new opportunities for sexual actors to meet partners, negotiate their self-presentation, and explore niche desires. This exploratory qualitative study examines online dating websites catered to disabled people to understand the language and imagery employed in these niche sexual fields. Drawing on a sexual fields framework (Green, 2014), this article analyzed 26 dating websites through a content analysis. Websites emphasized the narrative of disabled people overcoming isolation and accessibility barriers. Many websites also promoted the idea that their platform eased the uncomfortable task of disclosing one's impairment and would improve their overall quality of life. Digital sexual fields can be vital for these individuals who often face social isolation and inaccessibility. We provide insights into how disability is constructed through language in disability-focused dating websites. These websites (re)produce particular (and sometimes dominant) conceptualizations of disability. This is important as language and images used in digital sexual fields can impact constructions of disabled sexualities.

Keywords Disability · Sexuality · Digital sexual fields · Dating websites · Content analysis

Introduction

In a social world where digital spaces are continually gaining traction, the use of dating websites and phone applications by sexual actors is becoming more normalized [1–3]. Sexual actors navigate these digital spaces to find potential intimate partners and seek pleasure

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while mediating their self-presentation in ways that increase their chances of partnering [1]. Waskul [4] articulates this influential role of technology in our collective sexual lives through the concept of techno-sexuality, which refers to “the increasingly ubiquitous use of technology to gather sexual information, express sexual desires, view or expose sexual bodies, experience sexual pleasure, and explore sexual fantasies” (p. 94). More significantly, digital sexual fields play an important role in catering to niche populations and desires, thus becoming highly specialized sexual spaces [5, 6]. Dating websites, such as Christian Mingle, Farmers Only, and Tattooed Singles, demonstrate the extent to which these highly specialized spaces continue to proliferate.

Disabled people have also been touched by this burgeoning of online dating. Multiple dating websites including, MySpecialMatch, Disabled Passions, and Dating 4 Disabled, claim to serve primarily disabled singles in their search for love and pleasure. Emerging evidence suggests that some disabled people are open to, and sometimes seek out, dating websites and mobile applications specially designed for disabled people [6, 7]. Previous studies have shown that, despite certain barriers, some people with disabilities use digital spaces in their pursuit of love, romance, and pleasure [6, 8–10]. Digital sexual fields can be especially relevant to disabled people who commonly experience loneliness, social isolation, and accessibility barriers [10]. Some disabled people choose to participate in specialized sexual fields in order to avoid ableist interactions and increase their chances of partnering [6]. Yet, dating websites catering to disabled people remain an unexplored niche digital sexual field in the existing literature. To address this gap, we conducted a content analysis of dating websites dedicated to disabled people to better understand how they represent a disability and disabled people, both via text and image, as well as how they construct understandings of disabled sexualities. By examining these unique sexual spaces, we can understand whether these spaces provide a haven for disabled sexualities to flourish and be celebrated, and if so, how.

Digital Sexual Fields and Disability

Building on Bourdieu’s [11] field theory, the sexual fields approach provides a helpful theoretical approach for understanding digital sexual fields as stratified and stratifying spaces [5, 6]. Sexual fields, as Green [12] explains, are “simultaneously arenas of sexual exploration and systematic stratification” that are “constituted by eroticized schemas related to race, class, gender, age, and nationality, among others” (p. 25). This also includes disability. Through images, texts, and other signs, sexual fields articulate their internal hierarchies of desirability, which privilege particular sexual actors [5]. Digital sexual fields can perpetuate normative understandings of disability, sexuality, and disabled sexualities [6]. The sexual fields framework allows us to understand the structural forces that shape one’s chance of partnering and reproduce forms of inequality among sexual actors [13].

Remarkably, digital sexual fields, in particular, allow sexual actors to manage self-presentation and disclosure [14] in ways that allow them to highlight their qualities while concealing less desirable ones [15–17]. Similarly, disabled people face a decision, if possible, of whether to conceal or reveal their impairments [6, 18–19]. This opportunity to withhold information about one’s impairment, which is often not the case with physical sexual fields, allows sexual actors to potentially avoid immediate disqualification [19, 20]. Some disabled

people choose not to disclose their disability to avoid potential rejection and ableist attitudes from prospective intimate partners [6, 17]. Some disabled people feel that their impairment is a part of who they are, just as any other physical feature is; therefore, there is no need to disclose this information in a sexual space [19]. In contrast, others feel their impairment is an element they wish to separate from their personality [19]. Nevertheless, there are also examples of disabled people who actively choose to disclose their impairment because it was important for them to find a partner who is understanding and accepting of their impairment [21; 6]. Disclosure, however, is typically accompanied by the need to educate intimate partners about disability and impairment, creating an additional form of labor for disabled people [22, 23].

To date, little is known about how disabled people participate in digital sexual fields in their pursuit of romance, partnership, and intimacy [6, 9, 24]. Even less is known about the internal logic of disability-centered digital sexual fields. On the one hand, one could say that disability-centered digital sexual fields provide a much-needed space that centers on disability and potentially increases disabled people's chances of partnering. At the same time, these niche spaces can reproduce particular representations of disabled sexualities that exclude certain bodies/minds and sexualities.

Research Method

Selection of Dating Websites

In this exploratory study, we analyzed 26 dating websites catered to people with disabilities to understand the language and imagery employed in these niche sexual fields. We defined disability-centered dating websites as websites that clearly articulated in their homepage and/or mission statement that disabled people were their target audience. In our search, we used keywords, such as disability and disabled, dating websites, and dating services, in different search engines (i.e., Google, Yahoo!, and Bing). Three research team members conducted the searches separately and we also relied on online rankings and resource lists of dating websites for people with disabilities to confirm that we had located relevant websites that fit our criteria. Websites were visited between September and October 2021. In our search, we did not include mobile phone dating applications, instead, we focused on websites. We chose to focus on websites rather than mobile phone applications for this particular study because they tend to have a broader reach, do not require users to have a smart phone, and can be more easily found and accessed. However, future studies will also benefit from examining niche dating mobile applications that target primarily disabled people.

We only included websites available in English. We did not exclude websites based on their country of origin if the website was in English. Most websites in the sample had web addresses based in the United States, Canada, and the UK. Many websites provided a basic membership plan that was free with an option for an upgrade with additional functionality. Websites were not very transparent about pricing to upgrade. Most websites did not openly provide pricing and upgrading information, though they did note that this option was available. Often, they included information in the “frequently asked question” section of the site explaining the need to log into one's account to review the premium benefits with an additional charge.

Data Analysis

We preserved copies of the websites by turning each webpage into PDF documents, which were then uploaded into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. In addition to examining the images on these websites, we conducted a textual analysis to understand the language used by these unique digital spaces. The data were thematically coded by three independent reviewers, including the first author and two undergraduate student researchers, using NVivo. Students were provided training prior to the coding process. The students reviewed an initial set of websites and developed a coding book, which was reviewed and refined iteratively by the first author to ensure consistent codes were applied to the data.

Results

In our analysis, we identified five primary themes: accessible niche markets, disability language, privileged bodies and sexuality, and disclosure. Within these themes, we analyze how people with disabilities are perceived within the online dating community through various visuals and terminology. The theme of niche markets delves into the specific spaces and communities these sites select to target. The language theme revises how people with disabilities are discussed on the websites. Language and discussion alter how this marginalized group is perceived through these digital spaces and within real-world scenarios. Additionally, the inspirational language theme outlines how people with disabilities are often discussed in a manner that attempts to consider the impairment positively. The privileged-bodied and sexuality theme addresses demographics within the websites through race, sexuality, forms of impairment, and the gender binaries which the websites uphold. The final theme addresses disclosure and how disability dating websites have created a notion about adversity in revealing your disability.

Accessible Niche Sexual Markets

All the websites analyzed in this study explicitly noted their intention to cater to a niche sexual market. In this market, most members were understood to be either disabled people themselves or non-disabled who were open to and interested in potentially dating disabled people. Disability, then, was a central marker in these sexual fields. One website, for example, stated: “We believe the future of online dating lies in sites being tailored to particular interests, hobbies, or clearly specified member needs.” Another described itself as a website that was “designed to set itself apart from mainstream dating websites and social networks that cannot meet the needs of this particular community.” Finally, one website mentioned, “Millions of singles turn to the internet every day in their search for love, many find niche services such as ours of great benefit as there is already a common bond between two prospective partners.”

Moreover, websites highlighted that they provided a more accessible venue for disabled people to locate intimate partners by breaking down physical barriers and allowing for socialization and relationship building. For example, as one website articulated, “Dating has its challenges, particularly when a person is disabled, and may not be able to get around town as easily as other people. An online dating site for the disabled will help people

to find friends and date.” Similarly, another website noted, “Now you can connect with people from all over Canada right from the comfort of your home or flat. All you need is an Internet connection and you’re off.” As a final example, one website stated, “Online dating removes physical barriers, and we provide a place to meet where the social barriers also melt.” Accessibility was commonly articulated in terms of physical environmental barriers.

Disability Language

In our analysis, we found that most websites relied on disability language that was meant to treat disability in a more “positive light.” This included terms, such as “differently-abled,” “handicapped,” “people with special needs,” and “adults with unique abilities.” Though perhaps well-intentioned, many of these websites seemed to purposely avoid using the term “disabled” or at least “minimize” the word. This was seen, for example, in the following statement: “whatever your ‘disability’, [website’s name] is a disabled dating service that provides an environment where we guarantee you will feel welcome and completely at home or your money is back.” Strikingly, the word disability is presented here within quotation marks, seemingly trying to question the potentially negative tone of the word. Similarly, other websites also articulated, “you’re not disabled when it comes to searching for love – you’re very much enabled and ‘handicapable’” and “we have been helping thousands of disabled or differently-abled (as we prefer) singles find love online.” This particular use of language certainly raises an interesting question in terms of who creates these websites. In our sample, websites rarely disclosed information about their creators. In rare cases, a few websites shared that family members of disabled people, especially parents and siblings, had taken on that role.

On some of these websites, disabled people were framed as being “different” but, nonetheless, still good potential intimate partners. For example, one website stated, “Our members are different from the average person looking for love. We think that’s great. We think average is boring.” There was a sense that disabled people’s lives were somewhat incomplete without the presence of intimate relationships. One website, for instance, expressed: “If you’ve been jealous of other’s people lives as you struggle with your disability, you shouldn’t let that hold you back from achieving your dreams.” Likewise, another website declared, “we have the best facilities to help you succeed... and find your perfect date online so you can eliminate loneliness from your life, succeed and find happiness.” As the last example, one website said, “we can help you find someone who genuinely likes you for who you are and can see past your imperfections [sic].”

Leveling the Playfield

These websites framed themselves as spaces that created equal opportunities for disabled people. On one of the websites, for example, they write, “technology helps to even the playing field, allowing users to feel less self-conscious about their ability levels.” Within the same passage, they also outline, “users can take as long as they need to respond to these messages, knowing that the person receiving those messages understands how difficult communication can be.”

A few websites insisted that disabled people should not allow their disability to “slow [them] down” or “hold [them] back” from their pursuit of love and connection. As an exam-

ple, one website stated, “don’t let your disability slow down your quest for finding love, romance, or companionship.” Similarly, other websites made claims, such as, “don’t let your disability get in the way of finding love,” and “Disabled, yes. Unable? Definitely, not.” One website went as far as to suggest that “self-pity” is one of the reasons keeping disabled people from intimate relationships: “Sometimes disabled people may have feelings of hesitation. Reasons for not dating can be numerous. Most of it is just self-pity, and these negative thoughts will hold you back.”

Encouraging Disability Disclosure

Some websites allowed, and sometimes even encouraged users to voluntarily add information about their disability or impairment labels to their dating profiles. Typically, users could select from dropdown menus and/or write down more details about their disability. On two of the websites, for example, registration forms included a field named, “health condition.” The rationale behind this option was to help users spend less time disclosing and explaining their impairment to potential intimate partners. As one website explained, “the [website] allows you to fill out a detailed profile, with a full explanation of your disabilities [...] you get to skip that whole, ‘by the way, I need to mention I’m disabled.’” This type of disclosure, one website suggested, allows users to “get on with actually getting to know each other, instead of trying to find ways to explain your disability.”

These websites commonly articulated that as a niche sexual field, where most – if not all – members have a disability, potential intimate partners (both disabled and non-disabled) are likely to be more understanding toward experiences of impairment and disability. Not only that, but there was also an understanding that disability and impairment would not need to be hidden from partners. For instance, in reference to people with mental health diagnoses who use prescribed medication, one website noted, “No need to hide those pill bottles.” In addition, these websites articulated that they allowed users to spend less time educating non-disabled people about their impairment. As a website stated, “We offer to our members the chance to meet other singles and new dates without having to worry about explaining that they suffer [sic] from different conditions of disabilities.”

It is worth noting that a few websites highlighted that current members also included non-disabled people. For instance, one website stated, “That’s not to say that all of our members are disabled; we have plenty of non-disabled women and men who are eager to meet someone like you too.” They noted that non-disabled people who choose to join these specific digital sexual fields were individuals who would not discriminate against disabled people as potential intimate partners. A few websites seem to glorify non-disabled users who were “eager” to date disabled people. Interestingly, for example, one website articulated, “maybe you don’t have a handicap yourself but you want to help [sic] someone and possibly find love because you know that a disability doesn’t define a person.”

Privileged Bodies and Sexualities

Our findings suggest that, even in these niche digital sexual fields, particular understandings and representations of disability and impairment are privileged. Typical of sexual fields, the websites in our sample used both text and images to articulate their internal logic and hierarchies of desirability [1]. Most often, websites relied on images of couples staring at

and lovingly holding each other. Images had minimum background, placing the focus on the people in the photo with their happy facial expressions. There were clear patterns among these images. First of all, despite framing themselves as being open to people of all kinds of impairments, websites still relied on imagery of wheelchairs and wheelchair users to represent disability, with fewer representations of other forms of impairment. Most images seemed to originate from stock photo databases. The wheelchairs in the photos were non-motorized ones. Images commonly showed non-disabled partners pushing disabled people's wheelchairs. Some websites went as far as to include imagery alluding to wheelchairs in their own logos. In our sample, only four images included people with visible intellectual impairments while one image included a man displaying a cochlear implant.

Images also overwhelmingly privileged representations of white people and men's bodies along with heterosexuality. Disabled men ($n=18$) were visually represented more often than disabled women ($n=9$). Reinforcing gender and sex binaries, in the drop-down menus for member registration, users were often offered only two options (male/female or man/woman). In terms of racial representation, we captured 54 images of white disabled people compared to only 7 images of disabled people of other races. All of the websites relied on representations of couples that could be read as heterosexual. This extended to photos and even some of the logos used in these websites. In one logo, for example, we see the image representing two wheelchair users staring at each other with a big heart in between them, one person is colored in blue and another in pink. Another website relied on stick figures that alluded to a man and a woman.

Discussion and Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first article to conduct a content analysis of dating websites designed specifically for disabled people. The results of this exploratory study add further insight to a larger body of literature focused on the recent emergence of a variety of niche digital sexual fields. We found that even though these websites provide a niche dating market, one that indeed centers on disability, they also reproduce particular constructions of disability and disabled sexualities. Of significance, it was evident in our sample that image representations focused primarily on wheelchair users, white people, and heterosexual couples. These limited representations can unintentionally reinforce gender and sex binaries and heteronormativity, which makes invisible the rich array of sexualities and gender identities among disabled people [21, 25]. In addition, the reliance on the image of the wheelchair fails to represent the diversity that exists within disabled communities [26]. Finally, the over-representation of white bodies can perpetuate the invisibility of disabled people of color [27]. As it can be seen, digital sexual fields are embedded in larger systems of social inequality, which concretize in the form of text and images that make visible hierarchies of desirability and representation.

It is also noteworthy that websites encouraged users to disclose their disability, sometimes in great detail, at the same time that they framed themselves as sexual fields that centered on positive understandings of disability and provided a more level playing field for disabled people. To represent disability in a positive light, websites frequently avoided using the term "disabled" and, instead, focused on using other terms. Although there are debates about language, for example around person-first language versus identity-first lan-

guage [28, 29], some have articulated a concern that by dodging the term disabled, there is a risk of reinforcing a negative understanding of disability. There is a growing movement, especially online, called #SayTheWord, inviting people not to refrain from using the word disability [30]. The websites in our sample frequently communicated to users that they should not allow disability and self-pity to get in the way of their desired intimate life. Undoubtedly, self-esteem and internalized ableism can have an impact on the sexualities of disabled people [31], especially in a social world where disabled people face a culture of undesirability [32].

This study is not without limitations. While this is the first paper to analyze dating websites specialized for disabled people, this is an exploratory study and generalized conclusions cannot be drawn. We were unable to include websites written in languages other than English. Also, despite our attempt to conduct our search in systematic ways, there is a chance that we may have missed some dating websites. It is important to acknowledge that many people with disabilities have limited access to the Internet and forms of technology, including computers and mobile phones, which are necessary to participate in digital sexual fields [6, 33]. One could say that there is still a “digital divide” that keeps disabled people from participating in virtual spaces [34, 35]. Nevertheless, the topic of online dating and disability is a burgeoning area of research. Not only that but service providers are also seeking ways to better support disabled people interested in participating in digital sexual fields. There is recognition that some disabled people are already participating in these spaces and that it is crucial that disabled people can safely do so. As some disabled people are even encouraged by family members and support workers to enter specialized digital sexual fields, it is important to understand these unique spaces.

This paper provides some initial insights into disability-centered dating websites as digital sexual fields that (re)produce certain understandings of disability and sexuality. Websites often highlighted that they provide a more welcoming and accessible venue for disabled people to locate potential intimate partners, as well as a space where members are less likely to experience ableism and have to educate partners about their impairment. Without a doubt, digital sexual fields can play an important role, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further isolated disabled people. While these spaces can provide a safer haven for exploration and romantic pursuits, they should also be theorized as sexual fields that privilege particular forms of embodiment and representation. This article provides some initial understanding of the ways in which disability is constructed through language in disability-focused dating websites. There is a need for a more critical approach to these websites, which (re)produce particular (and sometimes dominant) understandings of disability. This is important because the language and images used in digital sexual fields can have an impact on how people with disabilities view themselves and are considered and accepted into the online dating world.

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Declarations

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