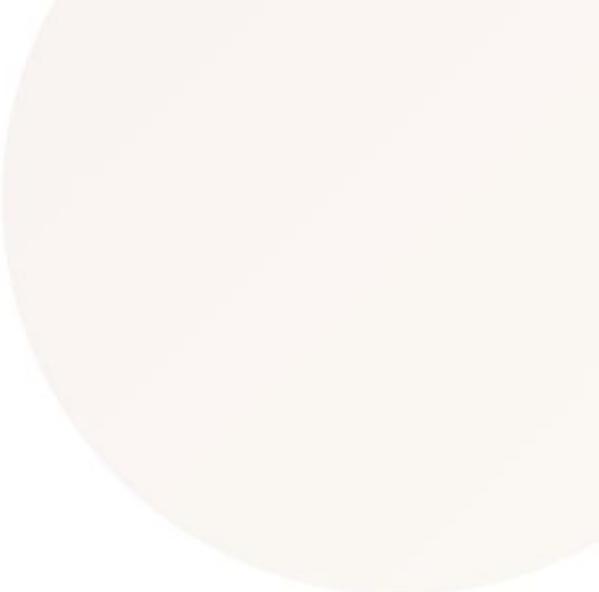


# Research Proposal: Dating Apps and Mental Health

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# Background & Motivation

Unprecedented connection, yet growing emotional  
fatigue.

# THE LANDSCAPE OF MODERN INTIMACY

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Dating apps have shifted from simple matchmaking tools to complex **affective environments**. They mediate the cognitive processes through which we evaluate:

- Attraction & Compatibility
- Self-Worth & Desirability
- Relational Intent

*The medium is now an infrastructure for establishing selfhood.*



# 2 TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT STYLES

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## Active Engagement

Direct communicative actions: messaging, self-disclosure, and initiating outreach.

## Passive Engagement

Observational behaviors: swiping, browsing profiles, and consumption without interaction.

# IDENTIFYING THE CRITICAL GAP

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While frameworks exist for how interactions unfold, little literature explores how **engagement styles (active vs. passive) and feedback** collaboratively produce psychological effects.

**RQ1:** How do different modes of engagement (active messaging vs. passive swiping) and levels of social feedback (high vs. low response) on dating apps influence users' immediate psychological states, including social connection (loneliness), romantic self-worth, and emotional strain (anxiety)?

**RQ2:** How do individuals interpret and emotionally make sense of their experiences of engagement and feedback in a dating app environment?

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# The Proposed Study

A mixed-method study examining the collaborative production of psychological effects.

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# Quantitative Experiment

Phase 1

# KEY RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

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- ✓ **H1:** Active users will report higher self-esteem and lower stress/loneliness than passive users.
- ♥ **H2:** High feedback recipients will report significantly better psychological outcomes than low feedback recipients.
- ⚡ **H3 (Interaction):** The benefits of active engagement are strongest with high feedback.
- ⚠ **H4:** Passive engagement with low feedback will produce the worst psychological outcomes.

# 2X2 BETWEEN-SUBJECTS DESIGN

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Condition	High Feedback	Low Feedback
<b>Active Engagement</b> (Messaging)	Active - High (Best Predicted Outcome)	Active - Low
<b>Passive Engagement</b> (Swiping)	Passive - High	Passive - Low (Worst Predicted Outcome)

# METHODOLOGY & RECRUITMENT

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## Participants

N = 200 adults (18-30) recruited via university networks and social media (Instagram, WeChat, Reddit, MTurk).

## The Mock App

A custom interface with 15 fake profiles (AI-generated) and a message page to simulate a real usage environment without external ethical risks.

# EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

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## Consent

Screening for age and prior app usage.



## Task

“Create” a profile  
Random assignment to  
Active vs. Passive  
engagement.



## Feedback

Mock inbox display: High  
vs. Low response volume.



## Measures

UCLA Loneliness,  
Rosenberg Self-Esteem,  
PSS scales.



## Debrief

Explanation of simulation  
and mental health  
resources.

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# Dating App Simulation



# Active Engagement

Discover

1 / 15



**Alex, 21**

Still figuring out what I want, but I know I like the ocean, quiet mornings, and people who don't take themselves too seriously.

Write a message...

Send message & continue

Please send a message before continuing.

# Passive Engagement

Discover

1 / 15



**Emily, 21**

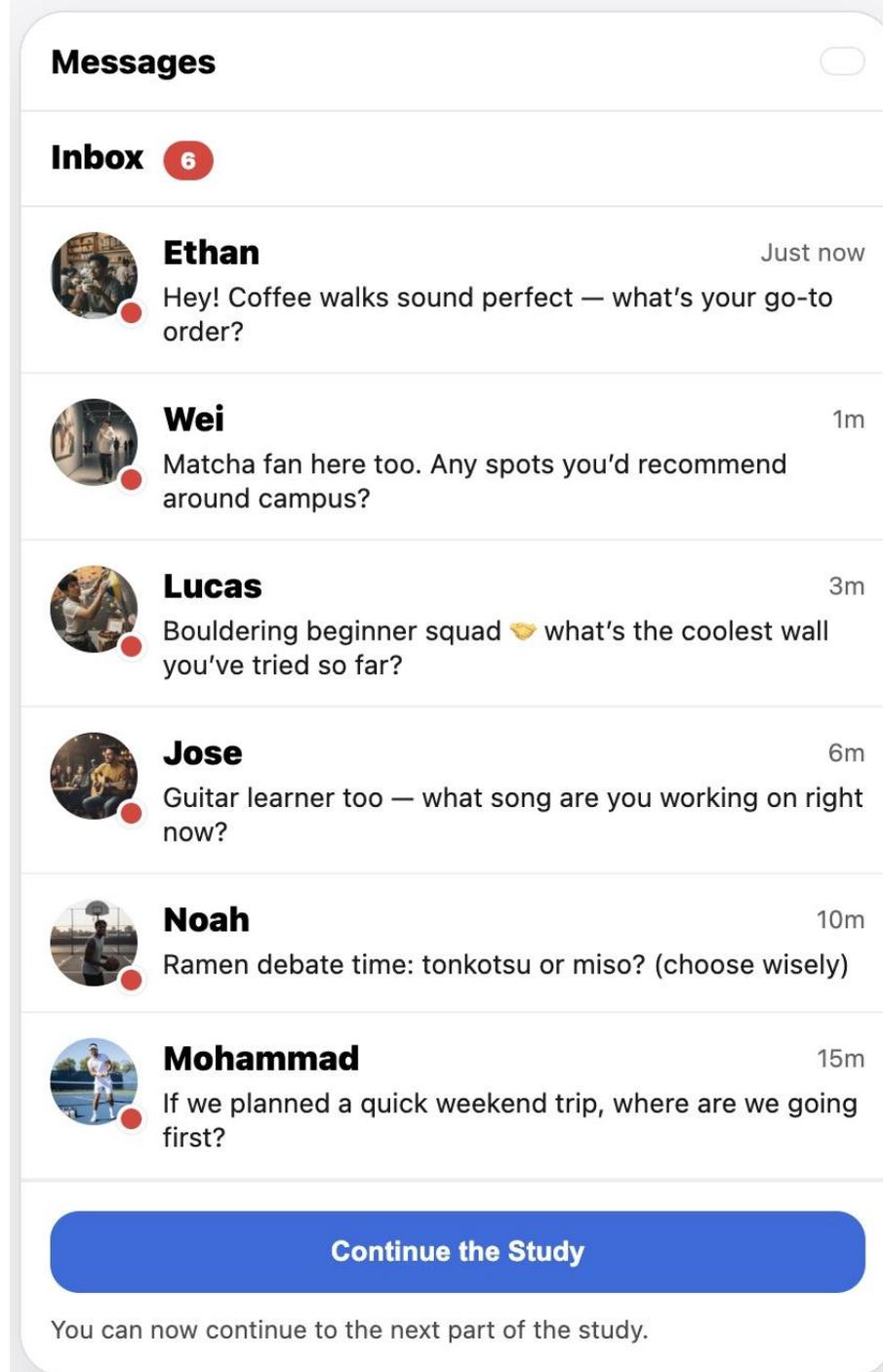
Into long walks with podcasts, trying new cafés, and pretending I don't like reality TV.

Swipe to continue.

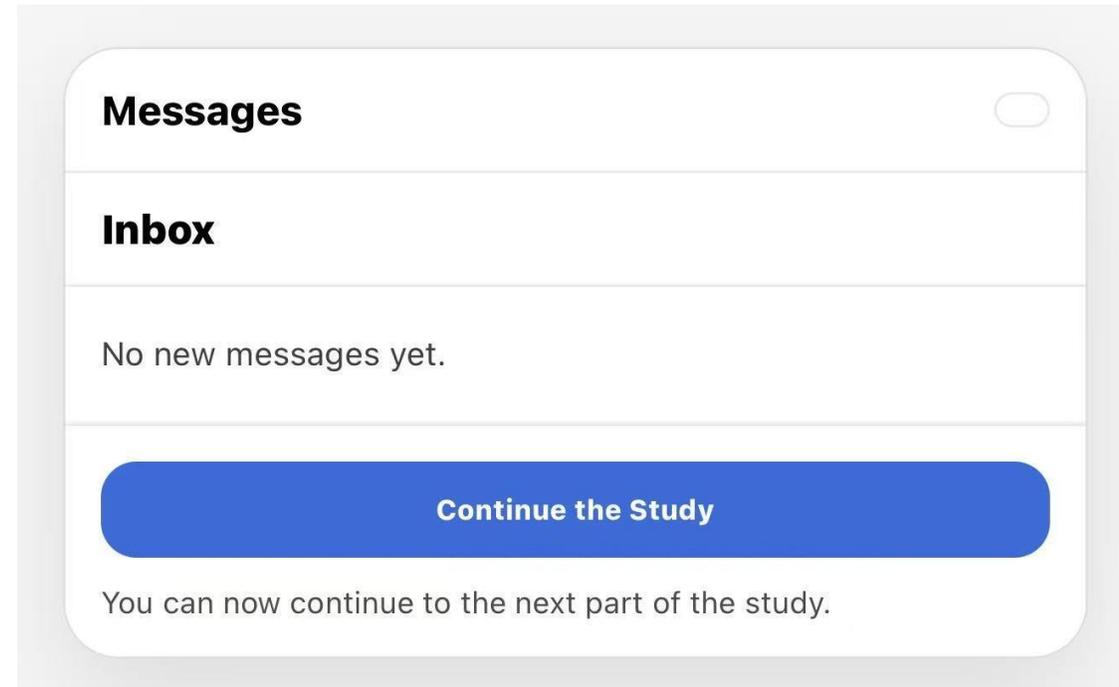
Swipe Left

Swipe Right

# High Response



# Low Response



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# Qualitative Interviews

Phase 2

# METHODOLOGY & RECRUITMENT

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## Participants

N = 10-15 dating app users (18-25) recruited via university networks and social media (Instagram, WeChat, Reddit, MTurk).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews that last about 45 min.

## Focus Areas

1. Reflecting on negative experience
2. Interpreting silence and ghosting
3. Coping mechanisms and internal narratives
4. Mental health outcomes
  - a. self-esteem
  - b. loneliness
  - c. anxiety



# Thank You

Questions & Discussion

Zihao Huang | University of Chicago