



Connecting Through Apps: Online Dating as a Social Occupation among Filipino Users

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Abstract

Social occupation, a key component of occupational engagement, encompasses activities that foster interaction and connection. In the digital age, social participation has extended into virtual spaces, with online dating emerging as a prominent form of it. Platforms such as Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, and OkCupid offer structured avenues for these interactions. However, research exploring online dating as a meaningful occupation remains limited. This study explores how Filipino adults engage with dating apps as a social occupation, focusing on how these platforms support connection, social participation, and personal meaning. A qualitative research design utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to analyze the experiences of Filipino adults in their early 20s living in Batangas. Participants were selected through snowball sampling, and data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Both deductive and inductive reasoning guided the analysis. Findings revealed seven key themes categorized into the definition, forms, functions, and meanings of online dating. These themes include defining online dating, quick relationships, drawbacks, novelty in social interactions, trust and safety, self-discovery and growth, and escape. The study emphasizes online dating as a complex social occupation that fosters participation, emotional regulation, and identity exploration. It deepens understanding of how digital platforms shape human connection, emotional experiences, and occupational meaning in contemporary Filipino society.

Keywords: *online dating, social occupation, early adults, IPA*

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Introduction

Occupations are the daily activities that individuals engage in to bring meaning and purpose to their lives, shaping their identity and well-being. Social occupation, a key component of social participation, involves activities and roles that individuals engage in within their social environments, contributing to their identity and enhancing well-being (Yerxa, 1998; Duncan et al.,

2019; Wilcock, 1998). In this context, social occupation specifically refers to activities that facilitate social interaction and connection, whether through face-to-face encounters or virtual platforms. One prominent example of a social occupation in today's digital era is online dating.

Occupational science provides a way of thinking that enables an understanding of occupation, the occupational nature of humans, the relationship between occupation, health, and

well-being, and the influences that shape occupation (WFOT, 2012b). Yerxa et al. (1989) described occupational science as the study of the human as an occupational being, with the need for, and competence to engage in and coordinate daily occupations in the environment over the lifespan. Online dating fulfills this by promoting interpersonal connections, addressing social participation needs, and impacting emotional well-being and social identity, especially as digital communication increases. Meaning in occupational science reflects the personal significance individuals derive from their occupations (Larson et al., 2003). In online dating, this meaning varies: some see it as self-expression or social exploration, while others see it as a way to seek companionship or validation.

Platforms such as Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, and OkCupid provide structured opportunities for individuals to meet new people, form relationships, and engage in meaningful social interactions, whether for friendship, romance, or companionship. Dating involves performance skills, such as social interaction, and encompasses client factors, including values, beliefs, and spirituality (AOTA, 2014).

Understanding experiences in online dating as a social occupation is essential for several reasons. It reveals how individuals engage in social participation and identity formation within digital contexts, as online dating apps facilitate connections and relationships, reflecting the evolution of social interaction (Brooks & de Vries, 2020). These experiences highlight the emotional and psychological impacts of digital interactions, emphasizing that meaningful connections contribute to emotional well-being and social identity (Smith et al., 2022). The increased use of dating apps in the Philippines since the Covid-19 pandemic underscores broader trends in social engagement and technological adaptation (Adobo Magazine, 2024). This understanding enables occupational therapists to develop targeted interventions that enhance users' social skills and emotional support for users (Murray, 2023). Moreover, exploring user experiences helps identify challenges related to privacy, safety, and relationship dynamics in online dating (Johnson & Lee, 2023).

Adults engage with dating apps for varied motivations, including seeking romantic relationships, casual encounters, friendships, entertainment, and social validation (Reich, 2019; Jarman et al., 2021). Some prefer online interactions due because they reduce the pressure of face-to-face dating (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2021). However, compulsive app use can lead to mixed emotional outcomes, such as happiness,

anxiety, and frustration, revealing the psychological impact of these platforms (Gao et al., 2024). Gender also influences motivation; men often use apps with less defined goals and initiate more interactions, while women are more likely to seek committed relationships (Gossett, 2015; Abramova et al., 2016; James, 2012).

Despite increasing integration of online dating platforms like Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, and OkCupid into the daily lives of Filipino adults (Labor, 2020), research exploring online dating as a meaningful social occupation remains limited. While studies have examined motivations, such as seeking romance, friendship, or entertainment (Reich, 2019; Jarman et al., 2021; Bandinelli & Gandini, 2021), few have analyzed these experiences through an occupational lens. Gender-based patterns also highlight differences in engagement: men browse more frequently and initiate interactions, while women are more likely to seek commitment (Gossett, 2015; Abramova et al., 2016; James, 2012). At the same time, challenges such as deception, identity misinterpretation, and harassment continue to be significant concerns, particularly for women and marginalized groups (Whitty, 2013; Snaychuk & O'Neil, 2020; Filice et al., 2022). Existing literature often treats dating apps as a behavioral or psychological activity, rather than as a form of social participation embedded in meaningful occupation. Research by Brooks and de Vries (2020) and Smith et al. (2022) acknowledges that online dating supports identity formation and emotional well-being, yet stops short of defining these activities as occupations that shape everyday life.

The main objective of this research is to explore how Filipino early adults living in the province of Batangas engage with dating apps as a social occupation, focusing on the form, function, and meaning of their participation. It emphasizes how these platforms facilitate social connections, fulfill emotional and interpersonal needs, and hold personal significance in users' everyday lives.

Methods

Research Design

The study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how early adult users experience, interpret, and assign meaning to the occupation of using dating apps to meet new people. According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA is a qualitative research approach that examines how individuals make sense of significant life experiences (p. 1). Moreover, IPA emphasizes the method's capacity to uncover deep, personal meanings associated with digital

interactions. To recruit participants, the researchers used snowball sampling, which involves beginning with a few initial participants who meet the study's inclusion criteria, collecting data from them, and then asking them to refer to others who also meet the same criteria. Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) support the use of snowball sampling as a valuable method for accessing networks of individuals who share specific characteristics, such as those who use dating apps. According to the Dovetail Editorial Team (2023), this approach is particularly useful when researchers face challenges in locating certain groups. These challenges may arise due to factors such as social stigma or individuals' desire to protect their identity. One example of such stigma can be found in the Philippines, where the use of dating applications is often viewed negatively. Unlike in the West, where such platforms are generally more socially acceptable, dating app usage in the Philippines is sometimes considered almost immoral by traditional thinkers (Tan & Llanes, 2019).

The study was conducted under the supervision of the University of Batangas - Batangas Campus, Philippines, between August 2024 and February 2025, during a period of increased digital engagement among adults. The research was formally approved by the research adviser from the Department of Occupational Therapy, College of Allied Medical Sciences (CAMS), who provided oversight to ensure compliance with institutional and ethical standards. All data collection was conducted entirely via Google Meet to accommodate participants' availability and ensure safety, privacy, accessibility, and convenience. Using a virtual setting allowed participants to engage in the research from their own environments, reducing barriers such as commute and scheduling conflicts. This online data collection not only facilitated participation but also reflected the digital nature of the research topic, as the study explored social interaction and relationship-building on online platforms. The use of an online study setting, therefore, strengthened the research by aligning the data collection process with the lived digital contexts being integrated.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposive snowball sampling, beginning with an individual known to the researchers who fit the criteria. Additional participants were referred by those already involved. This method was appropriate for reaching a specific population and accessing personal experiences that may not be easily disclosed in broader recruitment efforts (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

The sample size was guided by data saturation, which, according to Smith et al. (2009) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), typically occurs with 10-20 participants. However, Malterud et al. (2016) emphasize that smaller sample sizes may still be sufficient when studies have a clear aim, a specific population, and strong dialogue quality, as these factors increase "information power." In this study, saturation was achieved after seven interviews, as no new themes emerged in the final transcripts. This aligns with the British Psychological Society's (n.d.) guidance that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) prioritizes depth over breadth, often requiring fewer participants.

Similar qualitative research in online dating contexts also supports the adequacy of small samples. For example, Orosz et al. (2016) conducted a study on Tinder use with only eight participants, and Holt (2019) explored intimacy and identity in online spaces with seven participants. Likewise, Sumter and Vandenbosch (2019) and Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) demonstrated that small, focused participant groups can yield valuable insights into digital dating behaviors. These precedents confirm that seven participants were sufficient for this study, particularly given the depth of analysis required by IPA.

The participants of the study were Filipinos in their early 20s, categorized as early adults, who resided in Batangas and had used dating apps for at least three months. The study included individuals from various backgrounds, representing both urban and rural areas within the province, and from all genders. The research specifically focused on four major platforms: Grindr, Bumble, Tinder, and OkCupid. These applications were selected for their popularity and distinctive features that cater to a wide range of users with different dating goals and preferences. Only Filipino adults currently living in Batangas province were included; non-Filipinos and Filipinos residing outside the province were excluded to maintain cultural consistency. The sample size was therefore deemed sufficient for the IPA approach, which values depth and richness of individual experience over breadth (Smith et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Malterud et al., 2016).

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Batangas Ethical Committee and endorsed by the research adviser from the Department of Occupational Therapy, College of Allied Medical Sciences. Participants were recruited through purposive

snowball sampling, beginning with an eligible individual known to the researchers and then through referrals. Informed consent was obtained electronically. Participants were given the option to participate in face-to-face or online interviews; all chose online interviews via Google Meet for their flexibility, accessibility, and privacy. During data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted in both English and Tagalog, depending on the participant's preference. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. The interviews were guided by nine open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of dating app use, with emphasis on the occupation's form, function, and meaning. The questions were adapted from researchers of comparable studies, including Absolom and Roberts (2011) and Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017). This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives on using online dating apps to meet new people. The interviews were structured to promote open conversation while concentrating on key themes relevant to the research. The interview questions were designed to obtain information on how Filipino early adults residing in Batangas province perceived their experiences with dating apps for meeting new people. Initial questions were informed by relevant literature and IPA methodology, particularly the need to allow participants to share their lived experiences in their own words. The questions progressed from general definitions of relationships and online dating to specific behaviors, challenges, and personal insights. A total of nine open-ended questions were finalized in consultation with the research adviser to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. The interviewer facilitated open discussions and took field notes to document relevant observations. After data collection, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the steps outlined by Smith et al. (2009).

The respondents in this study shared key similarities: all were Filipino early adults in their 20s residing in Batangas and had experience using dating applications. Their shared cultural, generational, and geographic background provided a coherent basis for comparing experiences, while ensuring that the findings reflected perspectives shaped by similar social contexts. Such homogeneity is consistent with guidance on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes the value of purposive, relatively homogeneous samples to enable meaningful exploration of shared experiences (Rajasinghe et

al., 2024).

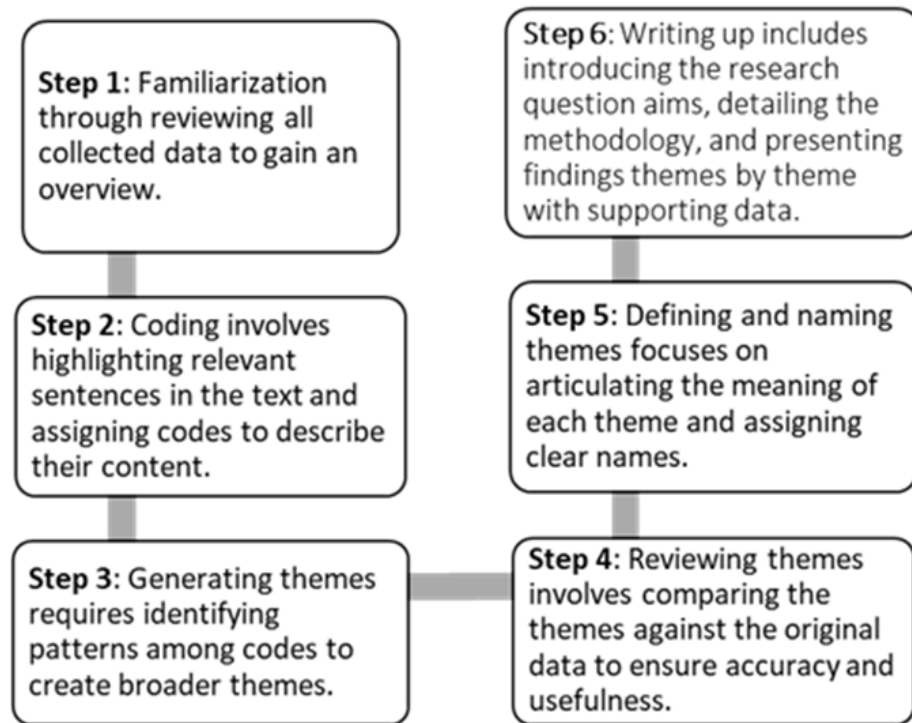
To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, peer debriefing was undertaken with academic advisers and colleagues at multiple stages of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Advisers provided critical feedback on the development of codes and emergent themes, while colleagues reviewed portions of the transcripts and coding framework to ensure transparency.

When disagreements arose in coding or interpretation, they were addressed through reflexive dialogue and negotiated consensus, with final decisions grounded in participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This collaborative process aligns with recommendations that qualitative researchers engage in peer consultation and reflective practice to maintain transparency and rigor (Nowell et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2022).

Data Analysis

The study employed both inductive and deductive reasoning within the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the lived experiences of early adults who use dating applications as a social activity to meet new people. Inductive reasoning guided the initial phase of analysis, in which the researchers manually coded the interview transcripts line by line without using qualitative software. The initial codes were both descriptive, capturing explicit content, and interpretive, reflecting the underlying meanings and emotional nuances of participants' narratives. These codes were then iteratively reviewed and clustered into broader themes based on recurring patterns and shared meanings. In the subsequent phase, deductive reasoning was applied to interpret the emergent themes through established occupational science frameworks. Specifically, the Person–Environment–Occupation (PEO) model and the concept of occupation-as-meaning were used to examine how dating app use reflected aspects of occupational identity, social participation, and the dynamic interaction among personal, environmental, and occupational factors. Predefined theoretical concepts from these frameworks were integrated with inductively generated themes to provide a structured, comprehensive interpretation of the data. This combined analytic approach ensured that the findings were both grounded in participants' lived experiences and informed by relevant theoretical perspectives in occupational science.

According to Caufield (2023), there are six steps in conducting interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA):

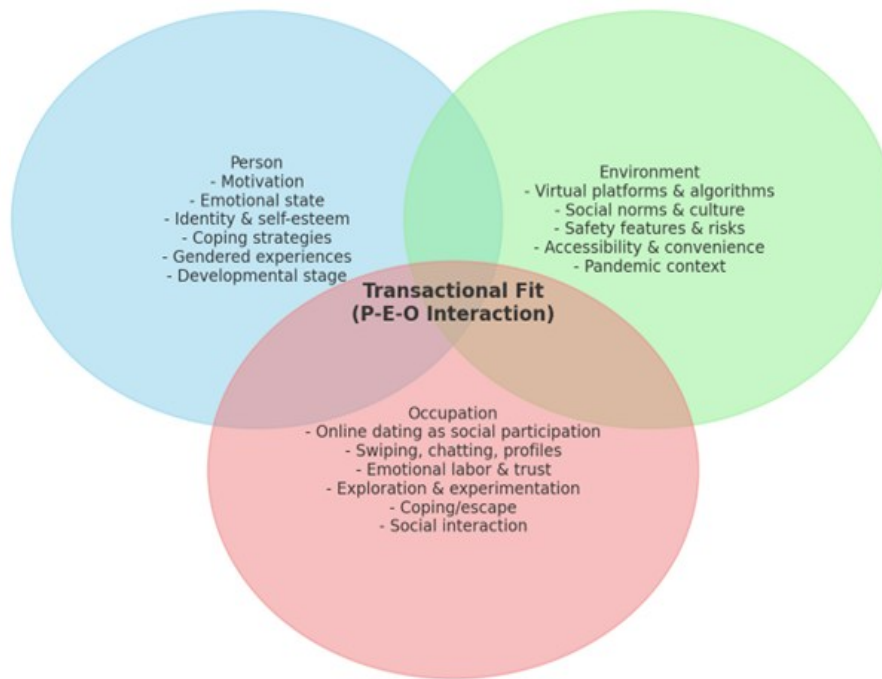
Figure 1*Process of Conducting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).*

Conducting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) involves a series of systematic steps. Step 1: Familiarization entails thoroughly reviewing all collected data to gain an overview before analyzing individual items. This may include transcribing audio, reading texts, taking initial notes, and generally becoming immersed in the data. Step 2: Coding involves highlighting relevant phrases or sentences in the text and assigning shorthand labels or “codes” to describe their content. This step is comprehensive, with researchers collating codes into groups that reveal key points and recurring meanings. Step 3: Generating themes requires identifying patterns among codes to create broader themes, sometimes combining codes or discarding less relevant ones. Themes should align with the research’s aims and provide meaningful insights. Step 4: Reviewing themes involves comparing them against the original data to ensure accuracy and usefulness, and refining them as needed. Step 5: Defining and naming themes focuses on articulating the meaning of each theme and assigning succinct, clear names. Finally, Step 6: Writing up includes introducing the research question and aims, detailing the methodology, presenting findings theme by theme with supporting data examples, and concluding with the study’s main insights and answers to the

research question (Caulfield, 2023).

The researchers recognize that their personal backgrounds, values, and experiences may have influenced the interpretation of data. As Filipino occupational therapy students in early adulthood, we may have shared a cultural context and familiarity with the topic, which may have shaped how we understood participants’ narratives. After collecting and analyzing data to ensure the study’s credibility, the researchers conducted two peer reviews: first for Chapters 1-3 and subsequently for Chapters 4-5. This process enabled constructive feedback and revisions that strengthened the research’s overall quality. The themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews were derived through careful examination of the transcriptions and systematic coding. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the identified themes and subthemes underwent peer review validation. This process involved peers of the researchers critically reviewing and confirming the accuracy and coherence of the themes at a stage when they were fully developed and ready for validation.

The Person–Environment–Occupation (PEO) model was adopted as the guiding framework for this study, as it provides a holistic lens for

Figure 2.*PEO Model of Online Dating as a Social Occupation.*

examining the dynamic interaction between individuals, their contexts, and their chosen activities. In the case of Filipino young adults engaging with dating applications, the person component encompasses their identities, developmental stage, and relational needs; the environment includes both the digital platforms and the broader sociocultural influences shaping dating practices in the Philippines; and the occupation refers to the use of dating apps as purposeful, goal-directed activity. Positioning PEO as the central framework ensured that the research design, analysis, and interpretation remained focused on how these three elements interact to influence participants' experiences, thereby maintaining conceptual coherence across the study (Law et al., 1996).

This study is anchored on the Person–Environment–Occupation (PEO) Model developed by Law et al. (1996). The model serves as a guiding framework that explains how individuals engage in meaningful occupations within their specific contexts. It emphasizes the dynamic interaction among three major components: the person, the environment, and the occupation. These components collectively influence occupational performance and participation. The model suggests that optimal performance and satisfaction occur when there is a strong and balanced fit among these

three components. In the context of the present study, the PEO model is applied to illustrate how the researchers' personal characteristics, the surrounding environment, and the research process itself interact and influence the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

The person component in this study refers to the researchers, who are Filipino occupational therapy students in early adulthood. As individuals in the process of professional formation, their backgrounds, values, and experiences play a crucial role in shaping how they perceive and interpret research data. Their shared Filipino cultural identity, along with values such as *pakikipagkapwa* (shared identity) and *bayanihan* (collaboration), shapes their interactions with participants and peers. Furthermore, the researchers' academic training in occupational therapy provides them with foundational knowledge and research competencies that support the analytical and reflective aspects of the study. Their developing sense of professional identity, coupled with self-awareness and reflexivity, allows them to recognize how personal biases and experiences may have affected data interpretation. These personal factors contribute significantly to the authenticity and ethical conduct of the research.

The environment component encompasses the academic, cultural, and social contexts in which

the research was carried out. The academic environment, including the university's research policies and mentorship from faculty advisers, provided structural guidance and ensured adherence to ethical standards. The social environment, consisting of peer collaboration and support, facilitated teamwork, constructive feedback, and continuous improvement of the study. The broader cultural environment also influenced the research process, as Filipino cultural values, communication styles, and shared worldviews shaped both the researchers' understanding of participants' narratives and the interpretation of findings. In addition, the research environment, which includes available resources, access to participants, and peer validation, supported the systematic implementation of the research process. These environmental factors collectively created a context that promotes credibility, rigor, and professional growth among the researchers.

The occupation component pertains to the research activity itself, which is a meaningful and purposeful engagement for the student researchers. This occupation involves designing the research, collecting and analyzing qualitative data, developing themes and subthemes, and engaging in reflexivity to maintain objectivity. An essential part of this occupation is the conduct of peer review and validation, performed twice during the study: first for Chapters 1-3 and subsequently for Chapters 4-5. This process enabled the researchers to obtain constructive feedback, improve the accuracy of their findings, and enhance the overall quality of the research. Through their participation in this academic occupation, the researchers not only fulfilled academic requirements but also developed essential professional skills, including critical thinking, collaboration, ethical awareness, and evidence-based reasoning, which are fundamental to occupational therapy practice.

The interaction among the person, environment, and occupation represents the fit that determines the overall effectiveness and credibility of the research process. In this study, the researchers' self-awareness and cultural sensitivity as persons were shaped by the supportive academic and social environment as they engaged in systematic qualitative inquiry as their occupation. This interaction facilitated the development of credible, trustworthy, and culturally grounded research outcomes. The application of the PEO Model, therefore, provides a holistic perspective on how the researchers' personal factors, the contextual environment, and academic engagement collectively influence the conduct and quality of the study. A balanced fit among these three elements enhances rigor,

integrity, and authenticity in the research process.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the University of Batangas's ethical committee guidelines and was approved by the research adviser from the Department of Occupational Therapy, College of Allied Medical Sciences. All researchers involved have obtained a Good Clinical Practice Certificate in accordance with ICF GCH Guidelines and the Code of Federal Regulations. Participants provided informed consent, ensuring their voluntary participation. All personal information was kept confidential and anonymized during analysis. Participants were informed that they could pause, stop, or withdraw from the interview at any time without consequences if they experienced any discomfort or distress. The researchers confirm that this study is original and has not been submitted for publication or presented elsewhere.

Results and Discussions

During the initial three steps, the researchers read and re-read the transcriptions, initial codes, and themes. Subsequently, refinements were made to the final themes, resulting in the final output. Seven themes emerged from the guide questions, which can be categorized into the definition, forms, functions, and meanings of online dating. Each theme is subdivided into subthemes.

Defining Online Dating

The participants in this study provided varied definitions and perspectives on online dating, reflecting the diversity of their personal experiences, motivations, and emotional responses. Their narratives captured both the functional and psychosocial dimensions of dating app use, thereby illustrating the complexity of online dating as a meaningful occupation in early adulthood.

Participant N described online dating as:

“A people's way of coping and finding someone to talk to.”

This definition emphasized the emotional and social functions of online dating, framing it as a coping mechanism and a platform for connection during periods of isolation or emotional need. This definition highlights how personal emotional needs (coping with loneliness) are met through the environmental affordances of digital platforms (access to readily available others) via the occupation of online conversation. In line with the Person–Environment–Occupation (PEO) model (Law et al., 1996), this narrative reflects a dynamic transaction in which the individual's search for regulation and comfort is actively shaped by the

Table 3.*Definition, Forms, Functions, and Meanings of Online Dating.*

Themes	Subthemes
1. Defining online dating	
2. Quick relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility and convenience of forming connections • Superficial and transient interactions
3. Drawbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of meaningful connections • Emotional fatigue from repeated failed interactions
4. Novelty in social interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity for exploration and experimentation
5. Trust and safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of safety due to virtual engagement • Risks and challenges of trusting strangers
6. Self-discovery and growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing self-awareness through feedback and interactions • Changing perspectives on relationships
7. Escape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coping with loneliness or boredom • Seeking validation and boosting self-esteem

environment's capacity to provide constant, immediate connectivity. The occupation of online dating, in turn, becomes both a coping mechanism and a form of social participation, reinforcing the person-environment-occupation cycle.

Similarly, Participant L stated:

"Online dating para sakin is an avenue to meet new people and connect with them." [*Online dating, for me, is an avenue to meet new people and connect with them.*]

This perspective underscores the inherently relational nature of online dating, positioning it within occupational science as a form of participation that supports identity, belonging, and meaning through active interaction with others and the environment (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). The act of "connecting" through dating platforms thus extends beyond romantic pursuits to address broader psychosocial needs such as intimacy, validation, and companionship. Within the Person–Environment–Occupation (PEO) framework, these personal drives for closeness and belonging are enacted through the affordances of the digital environment, which expands opportunities for social engagement. The resulting occupation, building connections with new people, is not merely a discrete activity but a dynamic expression of the interplay between individual motivations, environmental possibilities, and the relational meaning that emerges from participation.

Participant C echoed this sentiment and emphasized accessibility, stating:

"Online dating is a convenient place

na pwede gamitin para makapag meet ng people" [*Online dating is a convenient place that can be used to meet people.*]

The notion of convenience illustrates how the environmental design of dating apps, asynchronous communication, accessibility, and low barriers to entry reshape the way individuals engage in social occupations. This ease of use intersects with personal circumstances such as limited time, mobility constraints, or social shyness, enabling participation in ways that might not be possible in face-to-face contexts. In this transactional process, the occupation of meeting and connecting with others is transformed: what might otherwise require significant effort, planning, or confidence in physical spaces becomes more readily achievable in digital ones. Rather than serving as a passive backdrop, the online environment actively mediates participation by aligning with personal needs and reshaping the form and meaning of occupational engagement. Gupta (2021) similarly noted that early adults increasingly turn to dating apps for their accessibility and user-friendly design, underscoring how technological environments and individual intentions co-construct social participation in contemporary contexts.

In contrast, Participant V shared a more critical perspective, revealing personal vulnerabilities and emotional implications tied to their online dating experiences. They stated:

"Online dating for me is para makakuha ng instant gratification,

instant validation from a stranger. Kasi iniisip ko noon na walang nanliligaw sakin kasi pangit ako.” [*Online dating, for me, is to get instant gratification, instant validation from a stranger. Because I used to think that no one was courting me because I was ugly.*]

This statement illustrates that personal insecurities about self-image are not experienced in isolation but are actively shaped by the design of dating apps, which offer rapid mechanisms for affirmation through likes, swipes, and matches. Within this context, the occupation of seeking validation online becomes a dynamic process: it temporarily satisfies emotional needs while simultaneously reinforcing the very self-perceptions that drive such engagement. The transactional perspective of the PEO model highlights how vulnerability is co-constructed, as personal doubts are both amplified and soothed by environmental features and the ways individuals choose to participate in them. In this sense, online dating functions as a compensatory occupation, offering momentary relief from perceived deficits in self-worth or social desirability. Yet, this same process embeds psychological risk, as reliance on external validation may deepen insecurities over time. Ranzini and Lutz (2017) similarly observed that dating app users often navigate a tension between self-presentation and authenticity, seeking affirmation in digital spaces to manage underlying vulnerabilities. Thus, online dating emerges here not merely as a leisure activity but as an occupation imbued with profound psychological significance, situated at the intersection of person, environment, and engagement.

Participant J expressed skepticism, sharing: “For me, online dating is for a fling.”

This response illustrates how personal intentions and values, along with a desire for short-term or low-commitment encounters, interact with the environmental design of dating apps, which are structured to facilitate both casual and long-term connections. In this interplay, the occupation of casual interaction becomes meaningful because it aligns with the individual’s goals and is enabled by the affordances of the digital context, such as immediacy, anonymity, and flexible boundaries. Rather than being superficial, this reflects a valid occupational choice in which the transactional balance of person, environment, and occupation supports participation consistent with the user’s current life stage and priorities (Christiansen & Townsend, 2010). The PEO framework thus reveals how casual online dating is not merely a recreational pastime but an occupation

shaped by, and shaping, the alignment between personal values, technological opportunities, and the form of engagement enacted.

Lastly, Participant E described the limitations of virtual communication, stating:

“Kapag kasi online, hindi ko malalaman yung tone nung kausap ko.” [*When it is online, I cannot tell the tone of the person I am talking to.*]

This perspective highlights how the environmental constraints of online platforms—particularly the absence of nonverbal and paralinguistic cues—interact with the personal need for clarity and emotional resonance in communication, thereby reshaping the occupation of conversation. Without the richness of face-to-face exchanges, individuals may experience misunderstandings, detachment, or reduced emotional depth, which in turn influences how meaningful and satisfying the activity becomes (Ward, 2016). The PEO framework underscores that such outcomes are not solely determined by individual communication skills but emerge from the transactional relationship between person and environment: the digital context limits expressive nuance, while the individual’s interpretive efforts mediate how much meaning is retained. In this way, online dating conversations illustrate how the quality of occupational engagement is co-constructed, with the environment and personal capacities jointly shaping the possibilities for connection.

Forms of Online Dating

Quick Relationships

Online dating often manifests in transient, exploratory relationships driven by accessibility and novelty. These relationships are typically characterized by convenience and surface-level interactions, offering users a quick, easy way to connect without the commitment of deeper emotional ties. This aligns with Chan’s (2017) findings, which observed that online dating platforms often promote short-term or casual engagements, particularly in cultures increasingly shaped by digital immediacy and reduced social risk. These brief interactions are not necessarily superficial. Instead, they can fulfill specific occupational needs such as validation, exploration, or emotional relief.

Accessibility and Convenience of Forming Connections

Participants emphasized the accessibility and convenience of forming social connections through dating apps, particularly when traditional

social settings were unavailable due to personality traits, anxiety, or external circumstances such as the pandemic. Participant N stated:

“Nagdownload lang ako ng dating apps dahil gusto ko ng conversation.” *[I only downloaded dating apps because I wanted a conversation.]*

Here, the participant’s personal factor, a desire for social connection but limited opportunities in face-to-face contexts, did not act in isolation, but intersected with the environmental affordances of dating apps, which provide accessibility, anonymity, and reduced social pressure. This interplay enabled the occupation of initiating conversations with strangers, an activity that otherwise felt unattainable in traditional social spaces. The meaningful engagement that emerged was not simply a result of the digital environment alone, but of how the individual’s motivations and constraints dynamically aligned with the platform’s features, reshaping the form and quality of interaction. In this sense, online dating becomes more than a substitute for face-to-face engagement. It is a co-constructed occupation in which the person’s social dispositions, the characteristics of the digital environment, and the occupation of dating itself continuously influence and adapt to one another. This reflects the transactional essence of the PEO model (Law et al., 1996), in which participation is enabled by the fluid interaction among personal, environmental, and occupational dimensions rather than any single factor.

Participant C shared:

“Hindi kasi talaga ako nakikihalubilo at hindi din ako maimik. Pero naging mas madali kasi makipaginteract talaga.” *[I am not really the type to socialize, and I am not talkative either. But it became easier to interact.]*

This illustrates how the online environment and the person’s social disposition dynamically intersect to reshape the occupation of socializing. For a naturally quiet participant, the asynchronous, less pressured communication afforded by dating apps reduces the performance demands of face-to-face interaction. In this way, the environment does not simply accommodate the person but actively transforms the occupation itself; interaction shifts from requiring immediate verbal fluency to allowing gradual, typed exchanges. The person’s comfort level, the digital environment’s affordances, and the occupation of building connections continually influence one another, creating a more manageable and meaningful form of participation. This transactional relationship reflects the essence of the PEO model, in which

occupational performance emerges not from isolated factors but from the adaptive overlap of person, environment, and occupation in practice.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified the reliance on online platforms for social interaction. Participant V shared:

“Ayaw ko sana talagang mag-download ng dating apps noong pandemic pero modification kasi siya ng relationships.” *[I really did not want to download dating apps during the pandemic, but it is a modification of relationships]*

Here, the environmental disruption caused by lockdowns constrained typical opportunities for social participation, pushing individuals to adapt their occupational engagement through digital platforms. While the person initially expressed reluctance toward online dating, the necessity created by the broader social context reshaped this stance, enabling a modified yet still meaningful form of relationship-building. In this process, the environment (pandemic restrictions), the person’s disposition (hesitance yet need for connection), and the occupation (maintaining and forming relationships) became intertwined, co-constructing a new way of engaging in social life. Rather than acting as a mere substitute, the digital space actively transformed how the occupation was experienced; what once relied on face-to-face encounters was reconfigured into virtual exchanges that sustained psychosocial well-being. This dynamic alignment reflects the transactional nature of the PEO model, in which occupational behavior emerges through continuous negotiation among personal factors, contextual realities, and the evolving meaning of the occupation itself (Wiederhold, 2020).

Participant E echoed this, stating:

“Yung gusto ko kasi sa online dating pwede kang maka-match ng ibang tao sa ibang lugar.” *[What I like about online dating is that you can match with different people from different places.]*

This sentiment illustrates how digital dating reconfigures the occupation of forming relationships by expanding its geographical scope. The environment’s digital reach interacts with the person’s curiosity and openness to diversity, enabling participation that extends beyond the limitations of immediate social circles. In this dynamic interplay, the occupation of dating is not merely maintained but transformed, shifting from localized interactions to a broader exploration of relationships across varied cultural and social contexts. The individual’s motivation for connection, the technological affordances of the

environment, and the evolving occupation of dating continuously shape one another, reflecting the integrative essence of the PEO model, in which meaningful participation emerges from this fluid interaction.

Additionally, Participant J remarked:

“Kasi yun nga since di naman ako totally often nakikipag-interact sa tao sa personal lalo na sa opposite gender.” *[Since I do not often interact with people in person, especially with the opposite gender, of course, I feel shy.]*

The participant’s personal barrier, shyness in opposite-gender interactions, did not simply exist in isolation but was reshaped through the environmental affordances of online dating, such as reduced pressure and a slower pace of interaction. These features created conditions that enabled the occupation of building connections to take place in a way that felt safe and manageable. Rather than the environment merely accommodating the person, the interaction between the individual’s emotional discomfort, the digital platform’s supportive features, and the gradual process of social participation co-constructed a meaningful occupational experience. This dynamic interplay reflects occupational enablement (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015), in which modifying environments does not merely remove barriers but actively transforms how participation unfolds, making social engagement possible for those who might otherwise avoid it.

Superficial and Transient Interactions

While participants acknowledged the accessibility and social convenience of online dating platforms, many expressed concern about the superficial and fleeting nature of interactions. These concerns underscore that, although online dating enables certain forms of occupational participation, it may at times lack the emotional and interpersonal depth needed to support meaningful engagement.

Participant N noted:

“As much as possible ayaw kong magkaroon ng attachments sa kausap ko kasi andun ako just to talk and hear feedbacks.” *[As much as possible, I don't want to form attachments with the person I'm talking to because I'm there just to talk and hear feedback.]*

Here, the person’s need for emotional regulation and low-commitment interaction merges with the environmental design of dating apps that facilitate asynchronous, low-pressure communication. This combination shapes the

occupation of casual, detached conversations, showing how superficial exchanges are not merely chosen but enabled and normalized by the person–environment–occupation transaction. What appears as individual preference is actually co-constructed within an environment that encourages brevity, transience, and limited attachment. This perspective illustrates how some users deliberately use dating apps in a detached, low-commitment way, emphasizing conversation over connection. This type of engagement reflects an occupation focused on emotional regulation or curiosity rather than on relationship-building, aligning with the PEO model’s person component, in which individual needs, emotional states, and goals shape occupational choice (Law et al., 1996).

Other participants highlighted more concerning aspects of transient use. Participant C stated:

“Madami kasi dun na ang tataas ng sex drive tas puro sex lang ang nasa isip.” *[There are a lot of people there with high sex drives, and all they think about is sex].*

This response reveals frustrations regarding the oversexualization of interactions and a perceived lack of authenticity or emotional sincerity. Participant L similarly shared:

“Yung mga tao kasi sa Tinder sobrang straightforward if gusto nila ay sex lang or maging friends.” *[People on Tinder are very straightforward if they only want sex or to be friends.]*

These accounts highlight a misfit between personal expectations (genuine social participation) and the environmental norms of digital platforms that often foreground sexualized, transactional encounters. This misalignment shapes social participation as an occupation marked by dissatisfaction, strain, and disappointment. From a PEO perspective, the issue is not simply that some users prefer different goals, but that the cultural and structural affordances of the environment channel occupational engagement into directions that may conflict with personal values and relational needs (Christiansen & Townsend, 2010).

Participant V described such interactions as hollow and stagnant:

“Very superficial talaga sila. Sasagot lang sila pero hindi nila nababalik yung conversations and hindi siya nag momove.” *[They are very superficial. They respond, but they do not keep the conversation going, so it does not move forward].*

This stagnation illustrates how the

environmental conditions of digital spaces (ease of disengagement, minimal accountability) intersect with the person's desire for reciprocity. The resulting occupational experience is unsatisfying and emotionally draining. According to Gupta (2021), this points to a weak person–environment fit, where accessibility and convenience fail to sustain depth, thereby shaping the quality of occupational participation as hollow. This quote illustrates the lack of reciprocity and emotional investment that characterizes many digital interactions.

The visual-driven nature of user engagement was also a recurring theme. Participant E admitted:

“Syempre sa picture hindi ko naman itatanggi kasi doon ako magba-base if trip ko yung tao.” *[Of course, I would not deny that I base it on their picture. So naturally, I decide if I am interested in them based on that].*

Participant A echoed this, saying:

“Pag maganda, tapos second naman yung sa bio. Tapos mag-i-swipe left ako pag panget.” *[If they are good-looking, then the second thing I check is their bio. Then, I swipe left if they are unattractive.]*

In these cases, the person's cognitive tendency to prioritize physical attractiveness aligns with the app's visual design, which drives swiping decisions. This creates an occupation of partner selection grounded in appearance, privileging instant judgments over relational depth (Hobbs et al., 2016). The PEO model shows that such behaviors are not isolated choices but are co-produced by the structural affordances of the digital environment, reinforcing transactional, surface-level participation. These responses highlight how appearance-based judgment plays a central role in app use, reinforcing the transactional nature of the occupation. As Hobbs et al. (2016) found, visual-centric decision-making often promotes surface-level attraction, which may not support long-term relational goals or deeper emotional engagement.

Finally, Participant J shared:

“Interacting with multiple girls at the same time noong pandemic.” *[Interacting with multiple girls at the same time during the pandemic.]*

Here, the person's agency and curiosity intersect with the environmental affordance of simultaneous conversations, shaping an occupation of social multitasking. While this can broaden opportunities, the outcome often fragments

attention, producing shallow ties and reinforcing the theme of superficiality. Within the PEO lens, this illustrates how the overlap of person, environment, and occupation produces not only the form of engagement but also its meaning, in which breadth replaces depth and transient connections become the dominant mode of participation. This reflects a multitasking approach to romantic interaction. While this may indicate agency and exploration, it also underscores how digital dating environments may encourage quantity over quality, contributing to fragmented attention and shallow social ties.

Drawbacks

While online dating provides unparalleled accessibility and convenience, participants in the study emphasized that these advantages often come at the cost of depth and emotional connection. The perceived design and pace of online dating platforms were frequently identified as barriers to forming meaningful social relationships, resulting in feelings of occupational dissatisfaction and disengagement.

Lack of Meaningful Connections

For example, Participant N stated:

“Pagdating sa problem sa nakakausap, minsan they are too quick to judge.” *[When it comes to issues with the person I am talking to, sometimes they are too quick to judge.]*

This quote reflects how the fast-paced and low-context nature of digital platforms limits opportunities for mutual understanding. The tendency toward quick evaluation and minimal interaction may inhibit users from fully expressing their identities or emotions, compromising the occupational experience of relational engagement. This imbalance between environmental pace, personal needs, and occupational demands transforms interactions into shallow encounters, reducing satisfaction.

Similarly, Participant C shared:

“Lagi na lang kasing hi at hello tas wala na, lagi pa ako nagghost.” *[It is always just 'hi' and 'hello,' and then nothing more. I keep getting ghosted constantly.]*

This account emphasizes the transient and repetitive nature of many online interactions. In this case, the environmental feature of anonymity and easy exit amplifies the person's vulnerability in seeking connection. Ghosting disrupts occupational continuity, creating cycles of repeated beginnings without sustained engagement. The result is occupational dissatisfaction rooted not in the

person alone or the app alone, but in how these elements intersect to produce fragile, easily abandoned interactions (LeFebvre et al., 2019). With this, occupational participation is initiated but not sustained, leading to feelings of rejection and reduced occupational satisfaction.

Participant L noted:

“The connection is missing sometimes, lalo na if ang hanap ay physical lang” [*The connection is missing sometimes, especially if you are looking for something physical.*]

This statement highlights a critical environmental limitation in online dating: the absence of non-verbal communication and physical presence. In occupational science, occupations are not just actions, but are meaningful, embodied experiences situated within social and cultural contexts (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). The text-based format of most dating apps reduces the richness of communication, which can affect the user’s ability to form authentic relationships.

Participant V remarked:

“Sa online kasi maraming choices kaya madali mang ghost. Kaya nababawasan yung seriousness and commitment sa relationship” [*Relationships online are different because there are so many choices, making it easy to ghost. Then, seriousness and commitment in relationships decrease.*]

This illustrates how the paradox of choice, an abundance of potential matches, can lead to reduced commitment and relational investment. According to Wu and Ward (2018), the gamification and swipe-based mechanisms of dating apps foster a consumerist mindset that views people as disposable. In occupational terms, this undermines the occupation’s meaning and continuity, making sustained engagement difficult.

The cognitive and emotional burden of online dating also emerged in participants’ accounts. Participant E shared:

“Challenging for me is marami akong kausap, kaya nakakalimutan ko sinasabi ko sa kausap ko” [*Challenging for me is that I am talking to so many people that I forget what I said to each one.*]

This reflects occupational overload, a state where the demands of an activity exceed a person’s capacity to meaningfully engage. In the PEO model, this represents a mismatch between the person (e.g., cognitive limits, emotional readiness), environment (e.g., constant availability of matches), and occupation (e.g., digital relationship

management) (Law et al., 1996). This occupational overload arises from the interaction among P–E–O elements: personal capacity, environmental stimuli, and the repetitive demands of the occupation (Law et al., 1996).

Finally, Participant J highlighted the disconnection between digital and real-life experiences:

“Sa online dating kasi di ko sure kung magkikita kami kasi basically strangers kami” [*In online dating I am not sure if we will ever meet, because we are basically strangers.*]

This sentiment points to the low sense of shared reality and accountability in virtual spaces. In-person meetings often involve shared context, body language, and environmental cues that are integral to building trust and emotional intimacy. The absence of these elements diminishes the occupation’s relational meaning, raising doubts about its authenticity and future direction.

Taken together, these narratives underscore how online dating, while promoting opportunities for interaction, may also lead to occupational disappointment when the experience lacks depth, continuity, and emotional resonance. From a Person–Environment–Occupation perspective, many of these issues arise when the environmental features of dating platforms (e.g., speed, anonymity, choice overload) do not align with users’ personal needs and expectations or support meaningful participation in the occupation of relational development.

Emotional Fatigue from Repeated Failed Interactions

Online dating, as an occupation, requires individuals to repeatedly engage in conversations, present aspects of their identity, and navigate emotionally vulnerable interactions. However, when these efforts frequently result in superficial connections or unreciprocated interest, they can lead to emotional fatigue and eventual occupational disengagement. Participants in the study expressed growing frustration and emotional exhaustion due to the monotonous, repetitive nature of interactions on dating platforms.

For instance, Participant V shared:

“Deteriorating siya overtime kasi nagiging superficial lang siya” [*It deteriorates over time because it just becomes superficial.*]

This statement reflects the participant’s recognition of a decline in the emotional value of online dating as an occupation. Here, the environment’s design (speed, novelty, choice) repeatedly frustrates the person’s emotional goals (depth, reciprocity), stripping meaning from the

occupation. From an occupational science perspective, meaningful occupation is rooted in the fulfillment of emotional, social, and personal goals (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). When these goals are consistently unmet, individuals may experience occupational fatigue, characterized by emotional exhaustion and reduced motivation to continue the activity. This cyclical misalignment produces occupational fatigue, an emotional exhaustion tied to the activity itself (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015).

Participant L similarly remarked:

“Dinelete ko siya kasi it gets tiring, paulit-ulit kasi na introduction and it becomes monotonous” [*I deleted it because it gets tiring, the introductions keep on repeating, and it becomes monotonous.*]

This reflects the cognitive and emotional burden of repeatedly initiating conversations that often do not progress beyond surface-level exchanges. According to Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017), users of dating apps frequently report burnout from the constant effort required to maintain and initiate communication, especially when it yields few meaningful results. This cyclical pattern leads to occupational disengagement, where individuals deliberately withdraw from the activity to preserve their emotional well-being.

These experiences highlight a growing misalignment between the person’s psychosocial needs (e.g., connection, emotional reciprocity) and the digital environment (e.g., swipe-based interfaces, asynchronous communication) within the occupation of online dating. When this dynamic fit becomes imbalanced, such as when users consistently experience unfulfilling interactions, the occupation loses its meaningfulness. This mismatch may prompt individuals to temporarily or permanently disengage, illustrating the consequences of a poor person–environment–occupation fit.

Functions of Online Dating

Online dating, as a contemporary social occupation, serves various psychosocial functions for early adults. It facilitates novel interactions, emotional exploration, and opportunities for relational experimentation. Participants in this study described their roles in providing meaningful experiences, emotional excitement, and a sense of safety and control, while also revealing complex issues around trust and authenticity. These functions reflect how online dating supports both personal needs and social participation, as shaped by the dynamic interplay of person, environment, and occupation.

Novelty in Social Interactions

The use of online dating as a social occupation demonstrates its ability to provide novelty in social interactions, particularly through the subtheme of opportunity for exploration and experimentation. This highlights how online dating offers users a distinct space to explore diverse relational dynamics and engage in varied social experiences.

Opportunity for Exploration and Experimentation

Participant A emphasized how online dating provided enjoyment and a sense of meaning, stating,

“Ito kasi yung hinahanap ko sa online dating, yung fun and excitement sa buhay at meaningful experience” [*Because this is what I am looking for in online dating, the fun and excitement in life, and its meaningful experience.*]

This quote illustrates the affective dimension of the occupation, where online dating is perceived not merely as leisure but as a meaningful pursuit that contributes to personal fulfillment. Here, the person factor—a desire for excitement and meaningful experiences in early adulthood—interacts with the environmental structure of online platforms, which offer accessible opportunities to meet new people without geographical or social barriers. This interaction enables the occupation of relational exploration to become not just leisure but a personally fulfilling pursuit. As Wilcock and Hocking (2015) note, it is this intersection of individual needs, contextual opportunities, and occupational engagement that allows activities to shape well-being and identity.

Similarly, Participant E described the refreshing and stimulating nature of conversations initiated through dating apps:

“First time in a long while na hindi ako nauubusan ng sasabihin, at excited ako mag gabi kasi mag-uusap kami” [*For the first time in a long while, I did not run out of things to say. I was excited for the night because we would talk.*]

This reflects the occupation's capacity to sustain engagement and emotional anticipation, thereby reinforcing its value in daily routines. This example shows how the person’s need for connection and reciprocity was supported by the environmental affordances of digital communication (asynchronous communication and immediate access to partners), sustaining the occupation of meaningful conversation. The

anticipation of these interactions integrates into daily life, creating emotional continuity and enhancing occupational satisfaction (Pierce, 2001). Participant V articulated the developmental relevance of online dating, stating:

“Malakas kasi desire nating nasa early 20s to form relationships with other people kahit casual or intimate.” *[We have a strong desire in our early 20s to form relationships with other people, whether casual or intimate.]*

Her statement situates online dating in Erikson’s (1950) stage of intimacy vs. isolation. Here, the person’s developmental drive (need for intimacy) is met by an environmental affordance (apps as socially sanctioned spaces for relational experimentation; Hobbs et al., 2017), which sustains the occupation of relationship-building. The transactional relationship among P, E, and O enables early adults to pursue companionship and identity formation even amid constraints such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, novelty in social interactions is not merely a characteristic of online dating itself. Rather, it emerges from how individual desires, technological structures, and the enactment of relational occupations continually shape one another. This dynamic interplay illustrates the integrative essence of the PEO model, in which occupation is meaningful only when supported by both the person and the environment in a mutually reinforcing manner.

Trust and Safety

Online dating as a social occupation presents unique challenges and benefits, particularly in the domain of trust and safety. Participants’ responses revealed two key subthemes: perception of safety due to virtual engagement and the risks and challenges of trusting strangers online. These findings underscore how users navigate the complexities of building relationships while balancing the convenience of virtual interactions with concerns about authenticity and security.

Perception of Safety Due to Virtual Engagement

The perception of safety in online dating emerges as a significant theme among participants, particularly given the virtual nature of the platforms, which enable selective engagement and personal boundary-setting. Within the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model (Law et al., 1996), this experience highlights how individuals navigate their environment (in this case, the virtual space) to enhance occupational fit, enabling a safer, more controlled experience of social interaction.

Participant N reflected on this perceived control and safety in the virtual environment:

“Kaya din ako nasa apps kasi mas safe yun and I do not have to meet them in person.” *[That is why I am on those apps—because it is safer and I do not have to meet them in person.]*

Here, the person’s need for security and reduced social risk is supported by the environment’s virtual affordances (ability to connect without physical presence). This interaction enables the occupation of online relational engagement to be perceived as safer, even if it involves cautious or selective participation. The “fit” between his comfort level and the app’s affordances produces occupational enablement, creating conditions for participation that would otherwise feel unsafe in face-to-face contexts.

Similarly, Participant C shared how she carefully curated her profile to protect her identity:

“Nilagay ko dun na profile ay yung picture ko na may face mask, para hindi sobra mareveal yung identity ko.” *[I put a picture of myself wearing a face mask on my profile so that my identity would not be too revealed.]*

This highlights the adaptive strategies individuals use to manage occupational risk. In online dating, individuals exercise control over how they present themselves, aligning with Goffman’s (1959) self-presentation theory, which remains relevant in the occupational choices people make in virtual settings. This illustrates how occupational engagement in online dating includes negotiating exposure and control. The person’s concern about overexposure, combined with the environment’s tools for selective presentation, results in a safer—but also constrained—form of participation. Thus, “safety” is not inherent in the app itself but emerges from the transactional alignment of personal needs, environmental affordances, and occupational choices.

However, despite the affordances of virtual engagement for safety, concerns about authenticity and vulnerability remain prevalent. Participant V expressed this tension:

“Sa totoo lang, I never met someone outside of Bumble kasi nakakatakot. As a girl, there are risks and at the end of the day, strangers pa rin sila.” *[To be honest, I never met someone outside of Bumble because it is scary. As a girl, there are risks and at the end of the day, they are still strangers.]*

This underscores how gendered person factors (being a woman and being aware of vulnerability), environmental constraints (anonymity, lack of accountability), and the occupation of dating (attempting to build trust) create tension during dating (Mojola, 2014). While digital environments may buffer against harm, they do not entirely eliminate the psychological and emotional unease associated with trust and safety. The very environment that allows her to connect also generates unease, showing how the PEO relationship is not always harmonious but can be marked by friction and imbalance. As Participant J also reflected:

“Parang scary tingnan ng online dating kasi di ko alam kung kanino pwede makipag interact.” [*Online dating seems scary because I do not know who I might be interacting with.*]

These narratives reflect how the occupational experience of online dating is deeply contextual, shaped by the interaction of personal factors (e.g., gender, emotional readiness), environmental affordances (e.g., anonymity, control), and the nature of the occupation itself (e.g., risk, novelty, relational demands). This aligns with Laliberte Rudman’s (2010) concept of occupational possibilities, wherein individuals navigate socio-material contexts to determine how, and whether, they engage in occupations that reflect their desires and constraints.

Moreover, the virtual modality of online dating may afford a form of “safe distance” that supports emotional exploration while minimizing immediate risk, an emerging occupational trend especially during and post-COVID-19 lockdowns (Lopez et al., 2020). In this sense, the PEO model helps explain how the environmental structure of dating apps mediates a person’s capacity and willingness to engage in this form of social participation. When a fit is achieved between the person’s comfort level, the app’s privacy features, and the demands of initiating a relationship, online dating becomes a meaningful and accessible occupation.

Risks and Challenges of Trusting Strangers

Despite the perceived safety and convenience of virtual interactions, participants in the study emphasized the inherent risks and challenges of forming connections with strangers online. While dating apps offer a platform to meet new people, they also create an environment where deception, mistrust, and emotional harm may occur, ultimately threatening occupational engagement and well-being.

Participant N shared concerns about the

authenticity of users on dating apps, stating:

“Hindi lahat ng nakakausap ko sa online ay genuine.” [*Not everyone I talk to online is genuine.*]

This highlights how the environment in the PEO model, specifically the virtual space, may not always facilitate trust and safety. When the environment lacks cues for verifying identity and intent, the dating experience can become unpredictable and emotionally risky. According to Law et al. (1996), optimal occupational performance occurs when there is a good fit between the person, environment, and occupation. In this case, the misalignment between personal expectations and the online dating environment diminishes that fit, reducing occupational satisfaction.

Participant L elaborated on this theme of vulnerability and exploitation, recalling her personal experience:

“Maraming mga tao na nag take advantage saakin at ginamit nila ako for a certain purpose.” [*A lot of people took advantage of me and I was used for a certain purpose.*]

Such experiences illustrate the emotional toll of occupational risk when participation in an activity—here, social occupation through online dating—results in harm rather than enrichment. In occupational science, occupations are seen as inherently meaningful (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015), but that meaning can be compromised by negative social interactions. Emotional distress from being manipulated online leads to withdrawal or disengagement, undermining the social and affective goals of the occupation.

The theme of infidelity and dishonesty in online spaces was also evident in Participant V’s response:

“Ang kinakatakutan ko is jowa ng iba ay nasa dating apps din pala, kasi ang daming mga cheaters sa dating apps.” [*What I fear is that someone’s partner is also on dating apps, because there are so many cheaters on dating apps.*]

This fear reflects a deeper issue of mistrust in the virtual social environment, where a lack of transparency and anonymity often obscures users’ true relationship status. This highlights how the **environmental ambiguity** of dating apps (hidden relationship status) interacts with a **person’s moral expectations** and their **occupation of intimacy-seeking**, resulting in mistrust and protective disengagement. Research by Hobbs et al. (2017) found that while dating apps provide opportunities for relational exploration, they also contribute to relational ambiguity and moral uncertainty,

particularly among early adults navigating emerging intimacy. Participant A echoed this sense of caution and emotional distance in her statement:

“Hindi ko sineseryoso yung kausap ko kasi hindi ko naman talaga sila kilala in person.” *[I do not take the person that I am talking to seriously because I do not really know them in person.]*

This underscores a protective disengagement strategy, where individuals emotionally distance themselves from the occupation to avoid potential harm. From a PEO perspective, this can be interpreted as a mismatch between the personal need for authenticity and the environmental barriers to verifying it. This is not simply an environmental barrier; it represents a transactional adaptation: the person lowers emotional investment, the environment continues to obscure identity, and the occupation is reshaped into a lighter, less vulnerable interaction. While online dating holds the potential for meaningful connections, the perceived risk of deception leads users to modify their participation and expectations.

Lastly, Participant J highlighted the emotional strain associated with uncertainty in online interactions:

“Hindi kasi ako mabilis magtiwala sa iba kasi hindi ako sure kung ako lang kinakausap.” *[I do not trust them easily because I am not sure if I am the only one they are talking to.]*

This statement reveals the emotional labor required in online dating, including managing expectations, guarding trust, and navigating feelings of exclusivity. Trust here is not just an internal trait but an occupational demand shaped by the environment’s anonymity and the person’s past experiences. The burden of emotional labor emerges from the PEO dynamic itself, as individuals try to sustain participation while navigating doubt and ambiguity. As Pierce (2001) describes, occupations are not only tasks but also emotional experiences shaped by their contexts.

In summary, the challenges of trusting strangers online represent a barrier to full occupational engagement. When the environment is perceived as unsafe or deceptive, and interpersonal trust is low, individuals may become disillusioned, leading to withdrawal or altered participation. Through the lens of the PEO model, it is evident that environmental constraints (e.g., anonymity, deception) disrupt the person’s ability to engage meaningfully in the occupation of online dating. Consequently, while online dating offers social opportunity, its associated risks can erode

the occupational value of the activity, requiring individuals to adapt or retreat to preserve their emotional well-being.

Meanings of Online Dating

Self Discovery and Growth

Beyond its forms and functions, online dating holds deeper meanings for individuals. As expressed by the participants, it reflects themes of self-discovery and growth, specifically through developing self-awareness via feedback and interactions, and changing perspectives on relationships.

Developing Self Awareness Through Feedback and Interactions

Online dating, like many occupations, creates spaces for participation and performance that can be evaluated both internally and externally. For some participants, this engagement led to unexpected personal insight and a growing recognition of their social capabilities.

Participant N shared:

“At the end of each conversation, lagi silang may feedbacks. Na-emphasize sa sarili ko na magaling pala ako makipag-usap.” *[At the end of each conversation, they would always give feedback. It made me realize, I am good at conversing with others.]*

This narrative illustrates not only a personal gain in confidence but also the **transactional fit** among the person, the environment, and the occupation. The person (N’s developing self-concept) was enabled by the environment (a digital platform that normalizes feedback and structured conversations), and together these shaped the occupation (online dating as a socially interactive practice). In this way, occupational participation became a source of identity reinforcement, where feedback from others mediated the person’s awareness of their abilities. As Christiansen (1999) noted, occupational identity emerges through what people do and how environments scaffold those actions.

Participant L similarly expressed how her perception of relationships evolved as a result of interacting through dating apps:

“Nabago ang tingin ko sa relationships in the sense na I was able to meet people.” *[My view on relationships changed at some point in the sense that I was able to meet people.]*

This change in perspective demonstrates the reflective potential of online dating. Here, the

online environment expanded her exposure to diverse relational experiences, while her personal readiness to engage enabled her to reinterpret relationship meanings. The occupation of dating thus became a reflective space where self and environment interacted to shift values and expectations. According to Wilcock and Hocking (2015), occupations provide contexts for self-exploration, allowing individuals to revise existing beliefs and develop new understandings through engagement. In this case, emphasize that such shifts occur when occupations become contexts for self-exploration, particularly in environments that differ from conventional settings—such as the digital dating sphere.

Participant A echoed this experience, emphasizing how consistent participation enhanced his interpersonal abilities:

“Dahil sa online dating, I get to meet new people and nahasa yung social skill ko.”
[Because of online dating, I get to meet new people and it improved my social skills.]

From an occupational science perspective, this illustrates how repeated occupational engagement in a supportive environment fosters competency development. The repetition of online social encounters fostered skill development, showing how the environment’s low-barrier accessibility enabled the person’s motivation to socialize and, together, shaped the occupation into a learning platform.

Moreover, the digital dating app environment of dating apps provided a low-pressure space that enabled individuals to practice socialization at their own pace. This was particularly evident in Participant J’s reflection:

“Doon ko na sanay sarili ko sa pakikipag-usap sa ibang tao. Dahil dun mas naging social ako and may nakilala akong new people.”
[That is where I got used to talking to others. Through that, I became more social and I got to know new people.]

This indicates that online dating served as a transitional occupational space—bridging discomfort in real-life social situations with an environment that encourages participation without immediate physical presence. Research by Bianchi et al. (2021) supports this, finding that dating apps often function as “safe rehearsal spaces” where individuals can gradually practice expressing themselves before transferring those skills to offline contexts.

Collectively, these participant narratives demonstrate how online dating can be understood

not only as a means of connecting with others but as a mechanism for personal growth and self-reflection. When digital platforms provide the right environmental affordances, such as feedback loops, conversational structure, and psychological safety, they enable positive occupational engagement, facilitating self-knowledge and social competence. The PEO model offers a valuable lens for understanding how these experiences emerge from the interaction among the person (motivations and needs), the environment (the design and culture of dating apps), and the occupation (relating, conversing, dating).

Changing Perspectives on Relationships

Online dating as an occupation offers more than just a means to find companionship—it serves as a dynamic platform for reshaping one’s perspectives on relationships. As emerging adults navigate online dating, their views evolve regarding commitment, emotional intimacy, and the significance of shared values. Through continuous engagement, users learn from interactions, redefine their priorities, and develop a deeper understanding of relational dynamics.

Participant C described how online dating enabled deeper insights into commitment and connection, stating:

“I learned a lot of things. Kasi dun ko na kilala yung mga taong nag stick and yung isa ay naging jowa ko.” *[I learned a lot of things. That is when I realized who stuck around and that person became my partner.]*

Through this meaningful relationship, Participant C transitioned from casual engagement to valuing long-term relational investment. His story reflects how occupational engagement (sustained communication) within the dating app environment enabled her to identify relational qualities she valued, which, in turn, reshaped her personal goals. The relationship that emerged demonstrates how authentic connections arise from the fit between a person’s desire for intimacy, the enabling features of the environment, and the occupation of sustained relational exchange (Law et al., 1996). In line with Persson and Erlandsson’s (2014) work, meaningful occupations, such as online dating, can foster continuity in self-perception and psychological well-being.

Participant L also expressed a transformation in her relational values, sharing:

“Nagbago ang tingin ko sa relationships kasi na value ko yung pagbibigay ng commitment, loyalty, trust, and requirement of being open.” *[That is when I also realized*

that my view on relationships changed, because I started valuing commitment, loyalty, trust, and the requirement of being open.]

Here, the shift in mindset signifies not just a cognitive realization but an occupational transition influenced by social learning and reflective practice. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) reinforces that personal factors, behavior, and environmental influences shape human functioning. Participant L's evolving perceptions stem from iterative interactions within the online environment that required navigating diverse personalities and expectations. Within the PEO model, her personal values were reshaped through repeated engagements in a structured yet flexible online environment that exposed her to new norms and expectations.

Additionally, age and life experience influenced how participants redefined their dating goals in dating. As Participant V reflected:

"Yung goal ko kasi noon sa Bumble ay fun lang. Pero ngayon pag may kausap ako gusto ko for serious relationship." [My goal on Bumble was to have fun. But now, when I talk to someone, I want a serious relationship.]

This remark shows how the nature of occupational engagement can shift across the lifespan. As suggested by Kielhofner (2008), occupational behavior changes with time, influenced by internal motives and external demands. What once began as a recreational or exploratory pursuit matured into an avenue for seeking long-term companionship, illustrating the adaptive function of online dating as a social occupation. This illustrates occupational evolution across the life course. The dynamic interplay here is clear: personal maturity shifted her motives, the online environment provided a platform to test and refine them, and the occupation itself shifted from casual entertainment to a pursuit of stability. Christiansen and Townsend (2010) argue that occupations evolve as both individuals and environments change; this was visible in how participants reframed their dating experiences over time.

Participant A similarly acknowledged the utility of past experiences in preparing for future relationships:

"Yung mga natutunan ko at naranasan ko sa online dating ay pwede ko siyang gamitin sa susunod na relationship." [With the use of the learnings and experiences I got from online dating, I can use it in my next relationship.]

This reflects how occupational engagement fosters learning and skill acquisition. In occupational science, this aligns with the idea that participation in daily life activities contributes to meaning-making and capability building (Hammell, 2009). Online dating, therefore, operates as a reflective space, allowing individuals to apply previous insights to future relational endeavors.

Lastly, Participant J described how meeting diverse people and feeling various emotions broadened his perspective:

"I meet a lot of personalities and feel different emotions, kaya mas nag bukas ang isip ko noon." [I met a lot of personalities and felt different emotions, so that opened my mind more.]

This statement captures the emotional and cognitive shifts that occur during occupational engagement. His experience reflects how exposure to diverse online interactions engaged his personal emotional capacities, which were activated through his dating occupation. In turn, this broadened his worldview, demonstrating how the transactional PEO relationship continuously generates new meanings and developmental opportunities (Hitch et al., 2014).

In summary, the participants' shifting perspectives on relationships reveal that online dating is not merely a casual leisure activity. It functions as a significant occupation that shapes and is shaped by the person's internal values, the environmental context of digital interaction, and the evolving goals of relational connection. This occupation fosters meaning, growth, and transformation, making it a legitimate focus of inquiry within occupational science.

Escape

Online dating serves as a temporary outlet for individuals seeking distraction, emotional relief, or validation. Many users use dating apps not necessarily to form romantic connections but to cope with boredom, loneliness, or emotional distress. This usage reflects how online dating can serve as a low-effort form of entertainment, a mechanism for self-esteem enhancement, or a way to temporarily avoid deeper emotional struggles.

Coping with Loneliness or Boredom

Participants' predominant meaning for online dating apps was their utility as a coping mechanism to escape feelings of loneliness or boredom. This functional use aligns with the occupational science perspective on how people engage in occupations that give meaning, regulate mood, or simply fill idle time (Wilcock & Hocking,

2015).

Participant C shared,
“Nabored kasi talaga kami nung friend ko.” [My friend and I got bored.]

Here, the participant seeks stimulation and companionship through casual online conversations in a readily accessible, low-barrier digital space. The overlap of these three elements produces an occupational fit where online dating becomes a meaningful, albeit temporary, response to an otherwise unstimulating context.

Similarly, Participant L remarked,
“Naghanapan na lang kami ng kaibigan ko dahil bored ako.” [My friend and I would just look for people together because I was bored.]

Such experiences highlight how the person’s psychological state, which is boredom, combined with apps always available on mobile devices, results in occupational engagement that regulates mood and fills empty routines. This reflects Wilcock and Hocking’s (2015) view that occupations often emerge at the intersection of need, context, and opportunity, serving both restorative and adaptive functions. These narratives reflect how online dating, while not necessarily pursued with the intention of forming romantic relationships, becomes an occupation—a personally meaningful and purposeful activity—taken on to manage an unstructured environment and emotional discomfort.

Participant V highlighted the superficiality that sometimes results from prolonged use of dating apps:

“Superficial na lang yung connection so I had a Bumble detox era.”

Here, the culture of superficial connections no longer supported the person’s deeper needs for emotional connection, disrupting the occupation’s meaning. This misfit produced occupational imbalance (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007), prompting withdrawal from the app.

Participant E also described using dating apps after a breakup:

“Ginamit ko syang coping mechanism para mapataas ang self esteem.” [I used it as a coping mechanism to boost my self-esteem.]

This demonstrates how, following personal distress such as post-breakup vulnerability, the apps designed to provide quick social feedback supported an occupation of self-presentation and interaction that helped regulate, affect, and restore self-worth. The emergent outcome was not purely

environmental or personal, but rather a negotiated fit where digital affordances were used to meet psychosocial needs. This insight reveals that the occupation of online dating may also serve as an adaptive response to emotional distress. Online platforms offer immediate access to social feedback, often perceived as affirming, which helps users regulate affect following a loss. Research supports this idea. Chan (2020) reported that early adults often use digital spaces not solely for connection, but to manage emotional fallout and transitions in relationships, consistent with the concept of emotional regulation through occupation (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015).

Moreover, these experiences reflect what Laliberte Rudman (2005) terms “occupational possibilities,” or the societal structures and norms that define what occupations are accessible or idealized. Online dating is increasingly normalized as a way to manage emotional life, offering new “possibilities” to cope with common psychosocial challenges.

Seeking Validation and Boosting Self Esteem

Another emergent theme was the role of online dating apps in meeting psychosocial needs related to self-worth and validation. Engagement in occupations that reinforce a sense of identity and value is a core tenet of occupational science (Kielhofner, 2008). Participants highlighted how attention and interaction through dating apps temporarily enhanced their self-esteem and provided perceived social support.

Participant N expressed this sentiment:

“Nafufulfill niya yung wants and needs ko in terms of socialization.” [It fulfills my wants and needs in terms of socialization.]

From the PEO perspective, the person experiences a need for connection or affirmation, the environment (dating apps) facilitates immediate interaction, and the occupation becomes self-expression through curated conversation or self-presentation. The outcome is a temporary restoration of emotional well-being through the validation of one’s social value.

Participant L shared:

“May naka talking stage ako at nag-ing friends din kami. Tapos nahikayat din niya ako na itake ang program ko and vice versa.” [I met someone on the dating app whom I had a talking stage with. We also became friends, and even encouraged me to take my program, and vice versa.]

This connection illustrates how what begins as superficial engagement can evolve into a

more authentic, mutual relationship, reshaping the occupation from a coping mechanism into a socially meaningful interaction. Such evolution aligns with the occupational science notion of *co-occupations*—shared experiences that build mutual meaning and support (Pickens & Pizur-Barnekow, 2009).

However, this form of validation also exposes users to risks of objectification and dissatisfaction. As Participant V stated:

“Sa una actually masaya na nakakareceive ng gratification from online dating apps kasi feeling ko ang ganda ko, wanted ako.” [At first, it was actually fun receiving gratification from online dating apps because I felt so beautiful and wanted.]

This illustrates how the environment (e.g., algorithms prioritizing appearance and swipes) influences the occupational experience—initially fulfilling, but potentially fostering dependency on external affirmation. Research by Ward (2017) found that Tinder users, particularly women, often report mixed experiences: feelings of empowerment and self-worth initially, followed by disillusionment and emotional fatigue due to performative interactions.

These insights reflect the dynamic and evolving nature of occupations, especially in digital contexts. As Hammell (2004) argues, occupation is not only about productivity or leisure—it is also about identity formation, emotional healing, and relational engagement, all of which are evident in these users' experiences of online dating.

Online dating, through the lens of occupational science, can be understood not merely as a casual activity but as a meaningful social occupation—a form of engagement where individuals participate in goal-directed, emotionally invested interactions that shape their sense of self and connection with others (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020; Pierce, 2001). From this standpoint, online dating facilitates social participation, emotional exploration, and identity expression, especially in contemporary contexts where digital environments have become central to socialization.

To better understand this phenomenon, the Person–Environment–Occupation (PEO) model (Law et al., 1996) offers a helpful framework. This model conceptualizes occupations as outcomes of the dynamic interplay between the person (e.g., motivations, age, emotional readiness), the environment (e.g., dating apps such as Bumble and Tinder, cultural expectations), and the occupation itself (e.g., initiating conversations, maintaining online presence, forming relationships). The voices

of participants in this study demonstrate how engagement with online dating platforms influenced their evolving perspectives on relationships, emotional priorities, and personal growth.

To begin, Participant C expressed how sustained engagement in digital interactions led to personal growth:

“I learned a lot of things. Kasi dun ko na kilala yung mga taong nag stick and yung isa ay naging jowa ko.” [I learned a lot of things. That is when I realized who stuck around, and that person became my partner.]

This quote exemplifies how meaningful and consistent online interactions can result in authentic interpersonal connections, satisfying the need for emotional reciprocity and stability. In this context, online dating becomes a space for relational occupation, which supports intimacy and identity development. These findings are consistent with the work of Sumter and Vandenbosch (2019), who emphasized that online dating fulfills both emotional and social needs, particularly among emerging adults.

Participant L reflected on a shift in her perception of relationships and emotional values:

“Nagbago ang tingin ko sa relationships kasi na value ko yung pagbibigay ng commitment, loyalty, trust, and requirement of being open.” [That is when I also realized that my view on relationships changed, because I started valuing commitment, loyalty, trust, and the requirement of being open.]

This transformation highlights how participation in online dating can promote psychosocial development—a key feature of occupational growth in adulthood. Viewed through the PEO model, the structured environment of dating platforms allowed Participant L to refine personal values (Person), shaped by her engagement in intentional digital communication (Occupation) within the interactive platform (Environment).

Furthermore, Participant V articulated a change in dating intentions over time:

“Yung goal ko kasi noon sa Bumble ay fun lang. Pero ngayon pag may kausap ako gusto ko for serious relationship.” [My goal on Bumble was to have fun. But now, when I talk to someone, I want a serious relationship.]

This evolving goal reveals that the meaning and purpose of an occupation can shift with life transitions. As users gain experience, their motivations may shift from casual fun to

meaningful commitments. This aligns with Christiansen and Townsend's (2010) view that occupations are personally meaningful, contextually embedded, and dynamic, adapting to changing life circumstances.

Similarly, Participant A emphasized how her past online dating experiences contributed to personal learning:

"Yung mga natutunan ko at naranasan ko sa online dating ay pwede ko siyang gamitin sa susunod na relationship." [With the use of the learnings and experiences I got from online dating, I can use it in my next relationship.]

This statement reflects a key principle of occupational science: learning through doing. It underscores that relational occupations can foster self-reflection, interpersonal skill development, and preparation for future engagements (Pierce, 2001; AOTA, 2020).

Finally, Participant J highlighted the cognitive and emotional expansion resulting from diverse online interactions:

"I meet a lot of personalities and feel different emotions, kaya mas nag bukas ang isip ko noon." [I met a lot of personalities and felt different emotions, so that opened my mind more.]

This experience demonstrates how exposure to varied personalities within dating platforms can cultivate empathy, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility. These outcomes are consistent with Yerxa et al. (1990), who emphasized that meaningful occupations foster personal growth, adaptive capacities, and social understanding.

Occupational engagement in online dating entails a series of purposeful actions, such as swiping, chatting, managing profiles, and navigating emotional labor. These actions require effort, decision-making, and reflection, fulfilling the criteria for meaningful occupation. Yet, these actions cannot be separated from the person who brings individual desires, vulnerabilities, and developmental tasks; nor from the environment, digital, cultural, and social, that provides both opportunities and constraints. In this way, the findings align with Pierce's (2001) assertion that occupations exist within structured environments and also demonstrate the PEO model's central premise: occupational engagement is shaped by the ongoing, dynamic negotiation among the individual, their context, and their activities.

Taken together, participant insights show that online dating is a multifaceted occupation, ranging from casual conversations and hookups to deep emotional and romantic commitments. These

shifting functions reflect how personal needs (e.g., intimacy, experimentation, identity affirmation) are expressed through environmental affordances (e.g., algorithms, accessibility, anonymity) and realized in occupational enactment (e.g., initiating chats, disclosing information, sustaining conversations). The functions of this occupation include companionship, emotional support, sexual exploration, and identity formation (Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019; Orosz et al., 2015). Importantly, these are not fixed; individuals transition from entertainment-driven engagements to pursuits of deeper intimacy. Such fluidity underscores the transactional essence of the PEO model: occupations evolve as the person and environment mutually shape one another in context.

The study also revealed occupational risks. Emotional exhaustion, ghosting, and dissatisfaction disrupted engagement, diminishing occupational well-being. These risks highlight mismatches within the PEO dynamic—when personal expectations (e.g., longing for emotional reciprocity) are frustrated by environmental realities (e.g., superficiality, algorithmic speed), leading to occupational disengagement. Ellison et al. (2006) similarly argued that the efficiency-driven design of dating apps often limits deeper connections, while Ward (2016) noted that fast-paced, appearance-oriented systems undermine compatibility. Within the PEO lens, these risks are not isolated flaws of either the person, environment, or occupation, but the outcome of their transactional misalignment.

In conclusion, the findings affirm that online dating is a legitimate social occupation embedded within modern digital life. It enables emerging adults to navigate identity development, intimacy, and relational fulfillment in ways that would otherwise be constrained by social or temporal barriers. The PEO model shows that outcomes in online dating—whether fulfilling or frustrating—are products of the interplay between personal goals and readiness (e.g., desire for intimacy, resilience to rejection), environmental structures (e.g., technological features, cultural norms), and occupational processes (e.g., swiping, messaging, negotiating expectations). This integrative perspective clarifies that occupational engagement in online dating is never static but dynamically constructed in context.

Ultimately, this study supports the premise that online dating is more than a fleeting digital activity; it is a transformative occupational experience. Grounded in occupational science, it emerges as a medium through which individuals pursue connection, self-knowledge, and participation in meaningful social life within

evolving relational landscapes. By applying the PEO model integratively, the study highlights how personal motivations, digital environments, and occupational enactments continually interact to shape both opportunities and challenges in modern relational engagement. Future research should expand this scope to include broader age groups, diverse applications, and gender and LGBTQ+ perspectives to better capture the heterogeneity of these occupational experiences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study explored online dating through the lens of occupational science and occupational therapy, recognizing it as a dynamic social occupation with diverse forms, functions, and meanings. The primary objective was to examine how Filipino early adults residing in the province of Batangas engage with dating applications as a social occupation, focusing on the form, function, and meaning of their participation. The findings revealed that online dating provides individuals with opportunities for social participation, emotional regulation, and identity exploration.

This study recognized online dating as a dynamic social occupation with diverse forms. Dating applications became extensions of individuals' everyday routines and occupational roles. For some participants, online dating was integrated into their daily schedules like other habitual occupations, while for others it served as a temporary or situational coping mechanism. The fluidity with which users entered and exited engagement with dating apps reflected the adaptability of this occupation, showing that its form could shift based on individual needs, intentions, and life circumstances. Within the PEO model, this illustrates the interplay between the person (needs, intentions), the environment (digital dating platforms, cultural expectations), and the occupation (online dating as participation).

The study revealed that online dating served multiple occupational functions. It provided opportunities for social participation, emotional regulation, and identity exploration. Participants engaged with dating platforms for various reasons: seeking companionship, pursuing romantic relationships, coping with loneliness, or engaging in self-discovery. Online dating also functioned as a tool for social experimentation, fostering new connections, and enabling individuals to manage trust and boundaries within virtual spaces. Furthermore, it offered a relatively safe and low-pressure environment for exploring aspects of identity and interpersonal dynamics that some participants found challenging to navigate in face-to-face interactions. In line with the PEO

model, the interaction between individual capacities (person), the features of virtual platforms (environment), and the chosen engagement in online dating (occupation) shaped these occupational functions.

The meanings participants attributed to online dating varied widely. For some, the experience was exciting and novel, while for others it led to emotional fatigue and detachment due to the transient and often superficial nature of digital interactions. Repeated cycles of matching, chatting, and managing ambiguous intentions sometimes created feelings of burnout. Challenges such as ghosting, deception, misrepresentation, and overwhelming communication further shaped the meanings of this occupation, affecting emotional well-being and occupational balance. Despite these difficulties, online dating held personal significance by influencing social identity, emotional experiences, and everyday participation, highlighting its complex role in contemporary digital life.

Overall, this research contributes to a broader understanding of digital occupations and highlights the importance of viewing online dating through an occupational lens. It emphasizes the role that digital interactions play in shaping social identity, emotional experience, and participation in contemporary society. The insights gained from this study offer important implications for occupational therapy, particularly in promoting digital literacy, supporting emotional regulation, and fostering positive social engagement in virtual environments. The PEO model further underscores that meaningful participation is optimized when there is harmony among personal capacities, digital environments, and the occupation itself.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for future research and occupational therapy practice. It is recommended that future studies explore the use of other dating platforms, such as OkCupid and Grindr, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of user experiences across a broader range of digital environments. Including participants from a broader age range is also suggested, as this would help capture diverse perspectives, life stages, and motivations related to online dating.

Future research should aim to ensure greater gender and LGBTQ+ representation to reflect the full spectrum of identities and experiences within the online dating community. Expanding the geographic scope of the research to include participants from regions outside Batangas province is also encouraged, as this could reveal cultural and regional variations in dating behaviors and social expectations.

It is also recommended that future studies explore how different occupational roles, such as students, professionals, caregivers, and individuals with disabilities, may influence how people engage with dating apps. Understanding these dynamics could help inform targeted interventions. Lastly, occupational therapy practitioners may consider designing programs or resources that enhance digital literacy, strengthen social coping skills, and promote emotional resilience in virtual social spaces. These approaches could help users engage more meaningfully with online dating as part of their social participation and overall well-being, while also aligning with the PEO model's focus on person–environment–occupation interaction to support healthier, more balanced engagement.

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