

"We Asked Ahead of Time and Got Each Other's Consent": Adaptation of Dating Apps as Sexual Consent Devices by Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Visually Impaired Online Daters

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Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative survey of how the sexual consent practices of 86 deaf, hard of hearing, and visually impaired people are mediated by dating apps. Such populations are simultaneously at elevated risk of sexual violence (nonconsensual sex) and excluded from affirmative consent education that aims to mitigate unwanted sex by prescribing how consent "should" be exchanged: through spoken agreement ("yes means yes") and visual assessment of "enthusiasm." HCI research positions dating apps as both amplifying and protecting against sexual violence by shaping how consent is perceived, but without empirical representation of disabled people. Our findings show dating apps being repurposed as assistive consent devices, where sensory disabilities are circumvented by exchanging consent online to subsequent physical sexual activity, among other discovered consent practices. Through these off-label uses of dating apps, we emphasize the complete absence of guidance and associated technologies for accessible consent to sex, which the HCI community is uniquely positioned to address.

CCS Concepts

• Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in accessibility.

Keywords

Consent, Online Dating, Dating Apps, Disability, Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Visual Impairment, Accessibility

ACM Reference Format:

Devin Tebbe, Dylan Jenkins, and Douglas Zytke. 2026. "We Asked Ahead of Time and Got Each Other's Consent": Adaptation of Dating Apps as Sexual Consent Devices by Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Visually Impaired Online Daters. In *The 28th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility (ASSETS '26)*, October 25–28, 2026, Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 16 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3797867.3829066>

1 Introduction

"She answered the door in a robe, pulled me inside, dropped the robe, and started kissing me. [...] Enthusiastically. I kissed her back and

touched her. We both knew exactly what we wanted and discussed it [on the dating app] before I got there. [...] We asked ahead of time [online] and got each other's consent, and then several times during to make sure we were both still consenting throughout the experience." - P27; identifies as moderately hard of hearing

HCI research has had a persistent focus on sex and technology for at least two decades [12, 83], although its intersection with disability remains largely overlooked [27, 85, 86, 88]. Outside of HCI, people with disabilities have historically endured countless, often conflicting, misconceptions about sex: at once considered asexual and yet also unable to control their sexual desire [27, 85, 90]. As both interest in, and barriers to, sexual pleasure among people with disabilities have become more apparent [5], so has the significant gap in knowledge about how these experiences could be, or already are, augmented by technology. As Patel and Osipova et al. [88] write in their CHI 2025 review of literature on sex, technology, and disability: "... we find little knowledge making on the [sexual] desires of disabled people and how they could be technologically realised, augmented or supported. Particularly, we identified a lack of research into self-determined access to explorations of crip sexualities, preferably with a focus on negotiation and consent" (p. 15).

A focus on consent to sex is well justified because it is the defining quality of sexual violence [10, 16, 38] when it is absent. People with disabilities face significantly higher risk of nonconsensual sex than the general population, particularly individuals with "sensory disabilities" [27, 72], such as individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind, or visually impaired. Attention to how consent to sex and other interpersonal behaviors could be computer-mediated has steadily grown in HCI research [124], although disability has yet to be centered in this work. Prior research, spanning online dating [33, 121–123] and VR contexts [105], finds that technology shapes how people give and (think they) receive consent to sex in both positive and negative ways.

HCI literature has advocated for affirmative consent as a model for how consent to sex "should" be exchanged, and as a standard that technologies should be designed to support [19, 58, 66]. Affirmative consent is predicated on explicit and enthusiastic consent, often taught as a spoken exchange of permission ("yes means yes") [42] with an emphasis on interpreting "enthusiasm" behind consent decisions through facial expressions and other nonverbal cues. These normative understandings of consent privilege particular modes of communication while overlooking the diverse ways disabled people otherwise do or could negotiate consent.



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ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-2521-0/2026/10
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3797867.3829066>

Social technologies such as dating apps may play a key role in addressing this gap by enabling or augmenting alternative forms of explicit consent exchange for people with sensory disabilities through additional modalities for communication before and during sexual encounters. Yet there is currently minimal knowledge, in any field, about the sexual consent practices of people with sensory disabilities, let alone those mediated by technology. We address this gap with a qualitative survey study of 86 deaf, hard of hearing, and visually impaired online daters about their sexual experiences through dating apps. Our research questions were:

RQ1: *How do deaf, hard of hearing, and visually impaired online daters give and perceive to receive consent to physical sexual activity?*

RQ2: *What roles do dating apps or other technologies play in the sexual consent practices of deaf, hard of hearing, and visually impaired online daters?*

Our findings show that dating apps play two different roles in mediating consent to sex for daters across all of our participants' disability groups. When dating apps are used as **assistive consent devices**, users discuss sexual boundaries and intentions with their partners in detail on the dating app and sometimes explicitly exchange consent through messaging for physical sexual acts that later occur in person. Users vary, however, in whether their online understanding of sexual interest and consent is explicitly confirmed in person before initiating the physical sexual act. When dating apps are used as **sexual comfort-building devices**, users engage in a prolonged period of trust-building through the dating app (although not necessarily through explicit discussion of sex). This helped develop enough comfort to either entrust one's partner to take the lead in initiating physical sexual activity and inferring consent, or comfort to engage in explicit, affirmative consent exchange to sex and endure the inherent awkwardness associated with its practice.

We use the study's findings to problematize affirmative consent as an inaccessible consent model and highlight a critical opportunity for HCI to create accessible technologies and guidance for exchanging consent to sex that support, rather than seek to "correct," disabled people's existing consent practices.

2 Related Work

2.1 Sex, Technology, and Disability

Disability research over decades has *"sought to advance a more nuanced and robust understanding of the sexual lives of disabled people"* [21]. Assumptions about sex and disability have been wide-ranging, portraying people with disabilities as simultaneously asexual and hypersexual [27, 85, 90]. Literature across fields has debunked and corrected misconceptions from the public [30] about the role of sexuality in the lives of people with disabilities, ultimately showing that, yes, people with disabilities do have sex and consider it an important part of their lives [5, 86].

As disabled people's interest in sex has become more apparent, so has their elevated risk of sexual violence (nonconsensual sex). A meta-review of 68 studies [72] found that *"individuals with disabilities were at significantly higher risk of sexual victimization than persons without disabilities,"* and this risk was most pronounced for individuals with *"sensory disabilities"* such as hearing and vision. Individual studies from around the globe with deaf people [100] and

individuals with visual impairments [17, 93] echo this conclusion; for example, deaf women in Norway experienced sexual violence at almost double the rate of hearing women [65]. This elevated risk for individuals with sensory disabilities may be due to challenges with communicating consent, which we discuss in the next subsection.

Given perceptions that people with disabilities are asexual or, worse, should not be having sex [30, 114], sexual education has historically been inaccessible or exclusionary of people with disabilities [3, 7, 35, 43, 79, 107]. More recent work, including at CHI [9], has explored how sex education can become more inclusive through computer-mediation such as online sexual programs for adolescents with physical disabilities [6]. Research explains how poor and nonexistent sex education can render people with disabilities vulnerable to *"exploitative and disempowering"* sexual relationships, including sexual violence [27, 108]; an issue likely worsened by persistent challenges with reporting sexual assault [82] and accessing sexual health support [8].

The field of HCI has had a persistent interest in sex and technology [83, 85], although its intersection with disability needs further study [27, 85, 86, 88]. Formative work explores cybersexual activity such as sexting and nude image sharing among deaf teenagers [1], people with autism [68], and people with intellectual disabilities [31], as well as the distribution of sexual content on OnlyFans by disabled people [50]. Other work has studied how to make pornography more accessible to visually impaired people through audio descriptions [24, 47, 69]. Design for masturbation [55], such as with Internet-enabled sex toys and vibrators, has also been studied both as tools that can cause injury to people with disabilities [56] and enable sexual activity for those with mobility limitations [46, 96]. Emerging technologies like AI [54] and sex robots [39] have also been speculated to augment sexual experience for people with disabilities [88].

2.2 Implications of Disability on Computer-Mediated Consent to Sex

Patel et al. [88] explicitly reference consent as an area needing further HCI research at the intersection of sex, technology, and disability (p. 15). This is an understandable focal point given that consent (or the lack thereof) is the defining quality of sexual violence and harassment and other harms such as child abuse and intimate partner violence [10]; many of which occur through computer-mediated communication [26, 41, 45, 81, 89, 95, 101].

Precise definitions of consent have been debated in the literature [14], but they generally agree that consent is an action performed voluntarily [48, 52] that expresses willingness to engage in a sexual activity [73]. How sexual partners should perform consent exchange is also debated, with affirmative consent [13] widely considered best practice currently. Characterized with the slogan *"yes means yes"* [42], affirmative consent puts responsibility on the initiator of a sexual act to ask for and receive explicit consent [53] that must be freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific (captured in the acronym FRIES by Planned Parenthood [92]). While there is no clear consensus on how *"yes"* to sex can or should be explicitly communicated [42, 61], it is commonly described as (and in some cases legally required to be [61]) a spoken exchange.

Affirmative consent, while well-intentioned, poses significant barriers to practice for people with sensory disabilities [72]—such as people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or visually impaired—who are also at elevated risk of nonconsensual sex [27, 72]. For instance, people who are deaf or hard of hearing may not be able to hear their partner say “yes” to sex aloud, and may similarly struggle to communicate their own consent in this way. While people with visual impairments may be unobstructed in spoken communication of consent, they may be challenged with assessing enthusiasm behind a partner’s consent decision. “Enthusiastic” consent is a core tenet of affirmative consent to ensure agreement is voluntary and freely given [58]; while there is no clear prescription on how enthusiasm should be gauged, prior work indicates it is interpreted through nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language [19].

These challenges are at least partially supported by the limited research on sexual consent practices of people with sensory disabilities. Deaf and hard of hearing sexual partners have reported keeping the lights on during sex to support visual communication of consent [104], as well as tactile communication of consent through sign language on the partner’s body [67]. No research on sexual consent practices of visually impaired people exists to our knowledge (and there is sparse literature on sexual relationships of visually impaired people more generally [91]).

Affirmative consent has been under-adopted by the public at large, who find it too awkward to practice [29], if they are even able to define what affirmative consent means [11, 75]. Scholars have also been critical of affirmative consent for its seeming exclusion of non-heteronormative sexual partners [23, 32, 99] and non-Western cultures [51]. Within HCI, scholars [106] as well as social platform users [19] have been critical of affirmative consent, claiming that computer-mediated communication makes the model even harder, if not impossible, to consistently practice. While new models and practices for consent exchange tailored to computer-mediated environments have been suggested [80, 113, 121, 122], there remains no knowledge of computer-mediated consent practices of sexual partners with sensory disabilities.

2.3 Online Dating and Disability

We use dating apps as our vector for studying computer-mediated sexual consent exchange of people with sensory disabilities. Prior work finds that dating apps are sometimes intentionally used or envisioned to augment sexual consent exchange [122], yet in other cases, they mediate sexual consent exchange in ways that render users susceptible to both victimization and inadvertent perpetration of sexual violence through misinterpretation of consent. For instance, users have been found to interpret interest and consent to sex from seemingly innocuous online signals such as physically revealing profile pictures and emojis in messages [123, 125], and their understanding of consent is not always confirmed upon meeting face-to-face [33]. There is mounting work pointing to a practice where dating app users interpret platform participation or agreeing to meet as signaling consent to sex [64, 112, 123], or where short digital prompts (e.g., “DTF?”) stand in for explicit agreement [64]. Similarly, Smith et al. show that increased dating app use is associated with greater reliance on these platform-derived signals as indicators of consent, often reducing the likelihood of explicit

sexual discussion [112]. Relatedly, the gamified and accelerated nature of dating apps has been shown to encourage rapid, impulsive decision-making and reduce deliberation in intimate encounters [120]. At the same time, further research highlights how consent negotiated online can become difficult to retract, as digital persistence, blurred online-to-offline boundaries, and gendered sexual scripts create pressure to follow through on prior agreements [64, 77, 120].

Users with sensory disabilities have not yet been included in research on computer-mediated consent to sex; however, disability has been centered in research about online dating [25, 40], alongside growing attention to marginalized user groups in online dating more broadly [28, 36, 87, 117, 118]. Some of this work frames dating apps as a beneficial, if not “vital” [102], avenue for people with disabilities to develop romantic and sexual relationships [74, 76, 103]. Yet other work portrays dating apps as a significant sexual violence risk factor; for instance, one study found 88% of users with a disability in their sample had experienced “*dating app facilitated sexual violence*” [116].

Additional work reports strategies that could mitigate identity-based harm and harassment through strategic self-disclosure of disability to potential dating partners [119]. This research finds that users spend considerable time and labor [94] navigating stigma associated with disability, which other HCI research on bias and discrimination in online dating would suggest is warranted [70]. There is at least indirect indication that dating apps could potentially augment sexual consent exchange in ways that differ from affirmative consent and computer-mediated consent practices previously discovered. For example, Cao et al. [22] found that deaf and hard of hearing online daters preferred using text-based communication to reduce the need for spoken dialogue; however, consent itself has not been a subject of study.

3 Method

We explored our research questions through an IRB-approved qualitative, open-ended survey study with a multinational sample of dating app users who were visually impaired, deaf, and/or hard of hearing (N=86). We opted for a survey as opposed to interviews or focus groups to be most inclusive of accessibility challenges related to communication [71]. Accordingly, the survey was confirmed to properly function with screen readers. The survey had an estimated completion time of 45 minutes, and ranged in completion time from 8 minutes and 31 seconds to 1 hour, 54 minutes, and 1 seconds with a mean time of 36.6 minutes. The survey directed participants to report on a specific sexual experience with another online dater, with emphasis on how interest in and agreement to sexual activity was communicated, received, and/or inferred during face-to-face interactions, as well as any prior content and communication online.

3.1 Participants and Recruitment

Participant recruitment for the survey was conducted through Prolific, an online platform for human subjects research recruitment that allows specification of granular participant demographics. Inclusion criteria necessitated that participants be 18 years or older; self-identify as deaf, hard of hearing, and/or visually impaired; have

previously used a dating app; and have had an attempted or completed sexual encounter with another dating app user (although their partner did not need to have a sensory disability). The consent form specified that the survey would inquire about their past sexual experiences in online dating, including *“how openness to such experiences may have been expressed.”* Participants were compensated \$10 USD for survey completion. We received 126 survey responses, but 40 were removed, either for failing to meet the eligibility criteria or for empty responses. Table 1: Participant Demographics in the Appendix details participant demographics.

Survey participants were asked to self-identify as deaf and/or hard of hearing and/or visually impaired, with options for varying levels of severity accompanied by descriptive examples. These severity categories were informed by established clinical and organizational definitions of sensory disability [4, 60, 84]. For deaf and/or hard of hearing, participants selected from mild (13), moderate (19), severe (11), or profound (1). For visual impairment, participants selected from mild (18), moderate (41), severe (3), or total blindness (1). The exact wording of all disability severity descriptions is provided in the Appendix. In total, there were 23 participants who reported being deaf and/or hard of hearing only, 42 participants who reported having a visual impairment only, and 21 participants who reported having both hearing- and vision-related disabilities. Because deafness and/or hardness of hearing and visual impairments were collected as separate survey questions rather than through self-identification as DeafBlind, the group that identifies as having both disabilities should not be interpreted as representative of the DeafBlind community.

Participants were from 15 countries spanning multiple regions, including 31 from North America (the United States (23), Mexico (6), and Canada (2)); 28 from Africa (South Africa (25) and Kenya (3)); 25 from Europe (the United Kingdom (11), Poland (6), Italy (3), the Czech Republic (1), France (1), Germany (1), Portugal (1), Spain (1)); 1 from Australasia (Australia (1)); and 1 from South America (Chile (1)).

42 participants identified as women, 42 as men, and 2 as non-binary; 3 participants also identified as transgender. 53 identified as heterosexual, 20 as bisexual, 7 as homosexual, 5 as pansexual, and 1 as asexual. Regarding ethnicity, 33 identified as White, 32 as Black or African American, 11 as Hispanic or Latino, 5 as Asian, 1 as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 4 as Other/Multiracial. The mean age was about 31.5 years, with a range of 18–56 years old.

Most participants (45) had used dating apps for over a year, and all but 5 used dating apps for at least a month at the time of the survey. Most participants used dating apps daily (50), and all participants used dating apps at least a few times a month. Almost all participants used multiple dating apps, with the most popular being Tinder (81), Bumble (43), Hinge (25), Grindr (13), OkCupid (5), and several others used by smaller numbers, including Plenty of Fish, Badoo, Facebook Dating, Boo, Match, eHarmony, Zoosk, and Barq (all = 19).

The mean number of online messaging partners was about 61.9, with the max being 1000. The mean number of in-person dating partners was about 11.3, with a max of 300. The types of physical sexual contact reported included kissing (78), vaginal sex (65), fondling or rubbing (63), oral sex (58), and anal sex (21).

3.2 Participant Care and Safety

Given the sensitivity of the research topic, we consulted with a certified sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE) and two psychology researchers about our method. Each has professional experience interacting with sexual violence survivors and perpetrators in clinical settings, and/or in conducting empirical research about sexual violence. The foundation for the advice we received was the trauma-informed approach [57], which broadly seeks to mitigate re-traumatization (stress response from reliving a traumatic event) through carefully curated interaction. As it pertains to our study, we reflected on survey question wording to avoid accidentally labeling participants' sexual experiences as harmful or nonconsensual (which would reduce their agency in identifying the nature of the experience) and also to avoid accidentally blaming participants for unwanted sexual acts they may have experienced.

As an example, we never used terminology for sexual acts that would imply harm, such as “rape” or “sexual violence,” because participants may not agree with these terms. We also never referred to participants or their sexual partners as “victims” or “perpetrators” due to psychological reactance that may be incurred through forced identification with these labels. Specifically to avoid blaming participants for sexual harm they experienced, when inquiring about sexual acts they did not want we used phrases such as “were you able to communicate that you did not want the sexual act?” in an effort to avoid implying that participants were at fault for letting a nonconsensual sexual act happen. Furthermore, we omitted the word “consent” from the survey entirely, due in part to its association with unwanted sex and also to avoid preconceptions about how consent “should” be exchanged (i.e., such as those learned in school) that may lead participants to self-censor their survey answers. We instead used the phrase “want to engage in this sexual act” as suggested by our nursing and psychology consultants.

The survey, regardless of the participant's entries, concluded with a resource list curated by our advisors for sexual/domestic violence centers and hotlines, should participation in the survey incite re-traumatization or recognition of past experience as sexual violence. Participants were encouraged to skip any questions during the survey that they were not comfortable answering.

3.3 Positionality Statement

This study was conducted by three researchers representing a Computer-Mediated Consent Coalition, curated by this paper's last author, which brings together HCI researchers, consent and sexual violence experts, and stakeholders representing various disabilities and other populations at disproportionate risk of sexual violence to ideate ways for computer-mediated sex to be more consensual. Of the three researchers on this particular study, two have multiple previous publications at the intersection of online dating, sexual violence, and consent. Two of the authors identify as autistic and neurodivergent. While none of the authors identify as d/Deaf, hard of hearing, blind, or low vision, this study was devised and conducted through a federally funded cohort of accessibility researchers, some of whom do identify as low vision and evaluated early drafts of the study design. Two of the three authors are within the age range at which sexual violence is the most likely to occur

[98], and the third identifies as a survivor of nonconsensual sex. All three researchers are from the United States.

3.4 Data Collection

As part of qualifying for the study, participants must have used a dating app. If they selected that they had, participants were presented with a list of dating apps to select from (Tinder, Hinge, Bumble, Grindr), as well as an "Other" option in which they were asked to report what app(s) they used. All but 22 participants selected from the list of apps we presented, and otherwise specified apps very similar to those on the list (as seen in Section 3.1 Participants and Recruitment).

The survey first asked participants to specify a particular physical sexual experience that occurred in person in the past year with someone met on a dating app. All subsequent questions inquired about that particular sexual experience chronologically, starting with the discovery of the partner's dating app profile and computer-mediated communication with them through messaging and audio/video calls, followed by face-to-face interaction during and surrounding the sexual experience.

Questions about communication online inquired about if and how the participant conveyed their own "*openness to sexual activity*" prior to meeting face-to-face, and if and how they understood their partner's openness to sexual activity prior to meeting face-to-face. Questions about the physical sexual activity itself inquired separately about consent to initiation of the sexual act and ongoing consent during the sexual act. The flow of questions varied depending on whether the participant was the initiator or recipient of the sexual advance, and whether either partner did not want the experience to happen or continue (from the participant's perspective). The questions generally sought to amass understanding of how each partner was able to communicate that they wanted (or did not want) the sexual act, if that agreement to sex changed during the course of the act, and (if so) whether the change of agreement was communicated. Refer to Participant Care and Safety for why we used the phrase "*want to engage in this sexual act*" in lieu of the word "*consent*" in survey questions.

3.5 Data Analysis

The open-ended survey responses were subjected to reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) [15], which has six steps: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) initial coding; (3) initial theme generation; (4) developing themes; (5) refining and defining themes; and (6) writing the findings.

Data familiarization (step 1) was conducted by transposing all survey responses for each participant into Miro, a collaborative visual workspace, to facilitate holistic familiarization with each participant's online dating sexual experience story. Participants were organized in three groups: self-reported visual impairment, self-reported as deaf and/or hard of hearing, or both. Coding (step 2) began by applying a code to each participant's entire survey response that attempted to capture a high-level defining characteristic of their online-to-offline practice of consent to sex (e.g., "consent explicitly given online in messaging to a physical sexual act that subsequently occurred in person").

Initial theme generation (step 3) involved reorganizing participants' holistic survey responses into categories defined by their consent practice codes. Each disability subset (deaf and/or hard of hearing, visually impaired, and some combination of both) was originally analyzed separately. Significant overlap in coding between the disabilities led to converging on one shared thematic structure. Themes were reviewed and refined (steps 4 and 5) through applying more granular codes to phases of online-to-offline interaction between sexual partners that were pertinent to how sexual interest and agreement were communicated or inferred. In writing the results (step 6), we stabilized our thematic structure around two fundamentally different uses for dating apps in sexual consent exchange, and four different computer-mediated consent practices under those.

4 Findings

Dating apps played two distinct roles in mediating consent to physical sexual activity in our participants' experiences. When dating apps were used as **Assistive Consent Devices** (Section 4.1), participants outsourced aspects of consent exchange to the dating app, where sensory disabilities could be more easily accommodated. This involved discussing sexual boundaries and expectations on the dating app that would inform later consent to sex, and in some cases, even explicitly exchanging consent online for physical sexual acts that would later occur in person.

When using dating apps as assistive consent devices, participants differed in how online interactions about sex and consent influenced their in-person consent practices. Some assumed consent based on prior online interaction and did not think it needed to be explicitly asked for or given during physical encounters; we coded this as **Consent Ticket** (Section 4.1.2) to reflect the perception that consent given online could be "redeemed" later in person without explicit confirmation. In a different consent practice that we coded as **Nonverbal Explicit Consent Assemblage** (Section 4.1.3), spoken confirmation of consent did occur for penetrative sexual activity, with sensory-related challenges reduced through chains or assemblages of nonverbal online-to-offline acts that specified and confirmed the intended activity.

Other participants used dating apps as **Sexual Comfort-Building Devices** (Section 4.2), through which they engaged in prolonged trust-building on the dating app without necessarily engaging in any explicit sexual discussion or consent exchange online. This gave rise to two distinct in-person consent practices. In the **Delegated Consent practice** (Section 4.2.2), participants relied on trust developed online to circumvent disability-related in-person communication challenges. This allowed partners to "take the lead" and initiate sex without explicit consent. In contrast, in the **Computer-Normalized Affirmative Consent practice** (Section 4.2.3), that same trust-building online served to normalize explicit spoken consent negotiation to sex in person for participants whose sensory disabilities allowed for such dialogue.

Throughout the following subsections, participant quotes are attributed using anonymized identifiers (P#). Each identifier is accompanied by a label indicating the participant's sensory disability: DHH (deaf and/or hard of hearing), VI (visually impaired), or B (both deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired).

4.1 Dating Apps as Assistive Consent Devices

Many participants used dating apps to ease the communicative burden of sexual consent exchange in person by performing communication-intensive facets of informing and giving consent on dating apps, where their varying sensory disabilities could be better accommodated. In Section 4.1.1, we explore how consent to physical sexual activity was communicated and informed online prior to in-person meetings. In Sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3, we then explore the diverging implications of this online consent-related communication on in-person consent practices.

4.1.1 Accommodating Sensory Disability By Communicating and Informing Consent Online Before Meeting In Person. Decisions about consenting to sex between online daters can, and should, involve clear communication. Participants who used dating apps as assistive consent devices opted to use dating apps to redistribute the labor of various facets of consent communication, including the exchange of consent itself to subsequent physical sexual acts, but also essential precursors like establishing sexual expectations and boundaries. Deaf and/or hard of hearing participants more frequently described using primarily text-based communication online, whether it was for trust-building or for explicit consent negotiation. For instance, one participant explained that *“messaging worked best for me as I have a hearing problem and it was easy for me to communicate my sexual preferences with people,”* (P92, DHH). Visually impaired participants more often emphasized voice calls in their online exchanges.

Most notably, some participants exchanged consent (agreement) online to specific physical sexual activities that would later occur in person. One participant recalled *“before we [met] he asked me what are we going to do if we meet, and I told him that I want to have sex with him and we both agreed,”* (P4, DHH). These online agreements to subsequent sex often entailed very specific and nuanced depictions of the sexual acts that partners anticipated, including sexual positions and the expected duration of sex. For instance, P69 (B) discussed with their partner *“how many times we would make each other cum, how many rounds of sex we wanted, favorite sex positions and so forth.”* Similarly, another participant recalled *“we [were] talking about our past sex positions and we ended up wanting to experience some of the sex positions so we decided to meet up and have the experience together,”* (P33, B).

Explicit agreement to sex online was not common across all participants. However, it was universal for participants coded under this theme to at least discuss sexual boundaries and desires over messaging in dating apps; information that would inform later sexual consent decisions during eventual meetups. For example, one participant noted, *“I would [...] outright say what I preferred and what I was comfortable with [...] and sometimes things that I was not comfortable with or found weird/cringey,”* (P97, VI), while another explained their boundaries by stating, *“I was asked about being asexual and I explained the forms of intimacy that I value the most and ranked where sexual/erotic intimacy would be placed”* (P52, VI).

Dating app profiles also functioned as initial disclosure spaces for sexual “intentions” (P4, DHH) and desires for some users. Sometimes this involved text content describing sexual preferences, whereas in other cases it involved profile pictures that were intended to

communicate interest in sex. For instance, P51 (DHH) described their sexual partner as having included *“explicit warnings in their profile header [...] that contained kink information,”* whereas P113 (DHH) included a line in their profile bio stating *“having a threesome is my dream.”* Regarding profile picture content, P57 (B) recalled including *“a picture of me that shows my ‘dick print’ and that shows how much I am open to sexual activities.”*

4.1.2 Consent Ticket: Assuming Consent to Sex In Person Based on Prior Online Interaction. For some participants, more frequently those self-identified as visually impaired, online discussions about physical sexual activity, including explicit agreement to those acts online, were treated as a ticket to sex that could be redeemed at a later time to engage in the respective sexual act in person without explicit verbal confirmation. As one participant explained, *“we had previously spoken about it online so as soon as [we] got a private session [in person] we just went with the flow,”* (P9, B). The motivation behind skipping overt confirmation of consent to sex was grounded in participants’ interpretations that their prior online communication about sex was definitive consent, even if the act in question happened days later. Consent was no longer tied to a specific moment in time, instead existing as a standing invitation. For example, when explaining how they communicated their own agreement to sex, P35 (VI) wrote *“I had previously asked her [online] if we could engage in sex.”* Similarly, P5 (B) wrote that their *“expectations [for meeting in person] were to have sex and we did that.”*

In the absence of verbal consent, physical touch and other non-verbal cues were the primary ways of confirming agreement to sex in person, particularly the absence of resistance to touch. Participants described escalation through actions such as kissing, touching, or undressing without explicit dialogue: *“we started kissing and one thing led to another,”* (P3, VI); *“she put her hand on my leg [...] from how far up my thigh, I could tell where this was going,”* (P32, DHH); *“when we were together kissing [...] he was touching me down there,”* (P30, VI). For many, these actions were understood to be consistent with agreement or expectations for sex established online; essentially acting as a last chance for one’s partner to express if they have changed their mind about wanting sex. For some deaf and hard of hearing participants, physical touch was sometimes described as consent itself. Per P32 (DHH): *“it wasn’t anything spoken aloud, it was kind of making eye contact, and watching her eyes move down to me [...] we both kind of communicated our consent with the actions.”*

With limited opportunities for real-time clarification of consent in person, participants sometimes admitted uncertainty about whether they had correctly interpreted a partner’s consent. One participant recalled *“being nervous about the entire exchange, wondering whether this was really what was happening or maybe somehow [they were] just misreading the situation,”* (P32, DHH). There was at least one definitive case of nonconsensual activity in our sample, where P52 (VI) was forcibly kissed despite telling their partner in the moment that they did not want the behavior. Per P52 (VI): *“right after I pulled away and wanted to leave, they pushed themselves against my body so I couldn’t leave. The kiss felt forced this time and I told them no but they wouldn’t listen. I didn’t cry out for help but stood there frozen and let them finish what they wanted to do to me.”* These accounts demonstrate that while the Consent Ticket practice may reduce

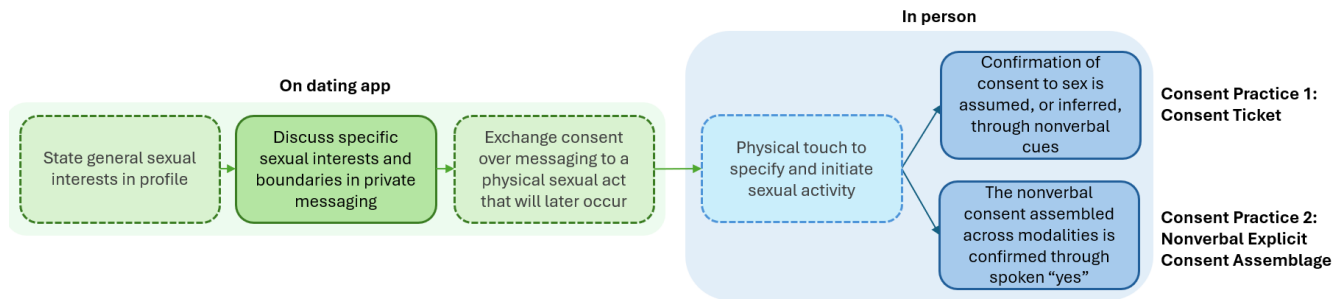


Figure 1: Consent practices associated with using dating apps as assistive consent devices

communicative burden by allowing prior interaction to stand in for explicit consent exchange in person, it also poses a significant risk of unwanted behavior if one’s interest in sex changes between online and in-person settings.

4.1.3 Nonverbal Explicit Consent Assemblage: Simplifying Verbal Consent to Penetrative Sex Through Chains of Nonverbal Communicative Acts. Some participants, primarily those who self-identified as deaf or hard of hearing, described a practice of lessening the communicative burden of spoken, affirmative consent to penetrative sexual activity through a series of nonverbal acts and dialogues across online and in-person settings to clarify and confirm desire for the activity. In effect, consent was intentionally assembled across multiple moments and modalities, therefore only needing to be verbally confirmed before engaging in the activity in person.

Per P27 (DHH): “we were both telling each other [other messaging on the dating app] how much we wanted to f**k each other. Saying flat out that they want me inside them is pretty clear [...] we interacted [online] until we were comfortable with each other, then met when we had free time specifically for sex [...] She answered the door in a robe, pulled me inside, dropped the robe, and started kissing me. Enthusiastically I kissed her back and touched her [...] We both knew exactly what we wanted [penetrative sex] and discussed it before I got there. We asked ahead of time and got each other’s consent, and then several times during [penetrative sex] to make sure we were both still consenting.”

P27’s (DHH) story captures the most common elements of this nonverbal consent assemblage, starting with explicit and in-depth dialogue over messaging on the dating app about mutual intent for penetrative sex, and then using physical but non-penetrative acts of intimacy in person to confirm interest in penetrative sex. Participants were commonly very explicit about anticipated penetrative acts before meeting, which occurred through messaging as well as phone calls. This clarification of intended acts prior to meeting face-to-face, in turn, made it easier for participants to verbally ask for and receive consent to the behavior. Per P109 (DHH) regarding the use of phone calls: “I knew from the way she behaved when we spoke via the phone she always told me she can’t wait to come over

she told me I made her underwear wet [...] it was not hard for me to initiate having sexual contact I just said it then she agreed.”

Once in person, P27 (DHH) and other participants described the use of kissing to re-establish and affirm interest in physical sex. To clarify, P27 (DHH) and other participants used non-penetrative physical acts like kissing not as activities requiring consent themselves, but as nonverbal mechanisms for confirming intent to engage in a subsequent penetrative sexual experience. P56 (B) described this most clearly in their description of kissing as a form of communication used prior to verbal, affirmative consent exchange: “I communicated by kissing her and asked her if she’s ready and okay with that. She gave me an affirmative answer and we did it.” Non-penetrative physical touch also provided an opportunity for partners to clarify when they were *not* interested in penetrative sexual acts, which became easier through prior online communication that established their (lack of) desire for sex. Per P45 (VI): “I pushed his hand away and told him that we discussed this. And he agreed to not be pushy.”

This is not to say that non-penetrative physical touch was a standard element of the nonverbal consent assemblage for all participants coded in this theme. In some cases, participants relied exclusively on online communication about anticipated physical sexual acts, which was elaborately “planned” (P54, DHH) prior to meeting. In these cases, participants used verbal confirmation of consent to penetrative sex without any preceding physical touch. P76 (DHH) noted that their partner “asked if it would be ok first via text before the encounter and made sure I was ok and consented. They then asked again in person if it was ok,” while another described how “he said it [that he wanted sex] and his eyes were also telling it... he also asked for consent,” (P92, DHH). P54 (VI) relayed a similar story: “i had a plan for us to enjoy ourselves and it happened as planned [online] i asked if she wanted to do it and she said yes.”

4.2 Dating Apps as Sexual Comfort-Building Devices

For some participants, their sexual consent practices with online daters were strictly performed in person without direct augmentation from dating apps; namely, 1) a delegated consent practice

where participants sidestepped consent communication challenges related to sensory disability by simply trusting their sexual partner to correctly infer consent and initiate sex in person, and 2) a traditional verbal affirmative consent practice for those with requisite sensory abilities.

For these participants, dating apps played an indirect role in their consent practice by serving as a space for cultivating trust in potential sexual partners. They used prolonged interaction on dating apps to determine if they would be comfortable practicing delegated or affirmative consent with the applicable partner. In Section 4.2.1, we first unpack sexual comfort-building practices on dating apps. In Section 4.2.2, we explore the delegated consent practice during in-person dates, and Section 4.2.3 reviews affirmative consent as normalized through prior online interaction.

4.2.1 Building Sexual Comfort and Trust on Dating Apps Without Discussing Sex. In contrast to the previous theme, where dating apps were used to have explicit and nuanced discussions about sex online, participants under this theme rarely talked directly about sex before meeting their partners in person. They nonetheless had prolonged conversations online *"over time, creating anticipation and trust"* (P23, B) in eventual physical sexual activity. The duration of these online *"daily"* (P105, VI) dialogs often spanned weeks if not months; per P8 (DHH): *"We spoke about life in general for about 3 months and we agreed to meet [at] a public space."*

Sensory disability was an important driver behind these prolonged online interactions, where participants could utilize multimodal channels to best meet their communication needs. For instance, P61 (DHH) explained using text messaging over an extended period of time instead of synchronous voice/video calls because of their hearing impairment: *"This individual and I mostly texted each other before meeting in person. Because of my hearing impairment it's difficult for me to comfortably make voice or video calls."*

Participants under this theme sometimes attempted to communicate and detect sexual interest online, albeit in relatively indirect or implicit ways. Profile content was typically used to broadcast sexual interest; whereas P20 (VI) had a *"written bio"* that was *"quite open to the reasons for joining [the dating app]."* Other participants were more subtle. As P23 (B) described, *"I conveyed openness [to sex] through subtly suggestive photos, a bio mentioning adventurous interests, and tagged interests in nightlife and fitness."*

As participants progressed in their messaging interactions with sexual partners, expression of sexual interest in particular users remained intentionally opaque. Some participants acknowledged in their survey responses that they did develop expectations or interest in sex during online interactions, albeit without disclosing or discussing this interest in sex with their partner before meeting. Per P80 (VI), for example: *"While I was open to the idea of developing a more intimate connection, I didn't set specific expectations around that happening during the first meetup."*

In lieu of dialogue about sex, most participants in this theme used their extended online interactions to discuss *"basic topics, like each others personalities, opinions, values"* (P74, VI) that were important to developing a sense of compatibility and comfort with the prospect of sex. "Comfort" and "connection" were common terminologies used by participants here. For instance, P80's (VI)

"idea of developing a more intimate connection" quoted in the previous paragraph was preceded by multimodal interaction across platforms: *"Our conversations were light and fun at first, focusing on getting to know each other (discussing hobbies, favorite movies, and travel experiences). As we got more comfortable, we had a few voice calls, which helped us build a deeper connection in Discord. We also shared some photos and videos to give a more personal touch to our exchanges."*

4.2.2 Delegated Consent: Trusting Sexual Partners to "Take the Lead" Without Explicit Consent. For some participants, particularly those self-identified as visually impaired, trust developed online carried into offline encounters as a willingness to let partners *"take the lead"* with initiating sexual contact. Communication (or rather, inference) of one's consent to physical sexual contact was delegated to the partner, thus framing the participant as a passive party to sexual contact whose only role in consent exchange was to *"let"* sex happen. Without any sexual boundaries or expectations clearly established online, participants often described in-person encounters as going *"with the flow"* (P13, VI) where sex *"just happened"* (P110, VI). Per P20 (VI): *"I think it just happened. He started kissing me and then one thing led to another. I didn't stop him as I was happy to keep going to see where it would go."*

Common in participants' descriptions of their sexual encounters was a sense of submission to one's sexual partner, where the partner was allowed, if not expected, to initiate and drive the sexual encounter without any overt permission seeking. As P37 (VI) described: *"I just went with the flow. I gave in to him. He was on the lead."* P38 (VI) gave a similar description: *"He invited me over to his house [...] he started getting closer trying to kiss me, I allowed him and one thing led to another."* In many cases, however, participants did describe confirming their consent to sex through reciprocal physical touch. As P86 (DHH) put it, comfort with sex was *"communicated and understood [...] through actions"* rather than words. Some participants had partners who deliberately allowed space in their escalation of sexual activity for the other person to confirm consent through reciprocation of physical touch. Per P80 (VI), their partner *"started with light touches [and] paused briefly, allowing me to reciprocate or pull back."*

This process of reciprocal touch for probing and confirming consent to sex became quite elaborate for a few participants, who described an escalating progression of physical acts leading up to penetrative sex. Per P103 (VI): *"I remember the moment she put her crotch on top of my leg [...] I responded to that with a kiss and touched her breasts then I kissed her breasts, then [...] she began to rub my crotch."*

The reliance on one's partner to initiate and escalate sexual activity without overt consent poses an obvious risk of misunderstood agreement to sex, which some participants acknowledged in their responses, especially when escalation to penetrative sex was abrupt. P37 (VI) recounted such an experience: *"We were laying on the sofa in my apartment, listening to music and talking about our lives. Slowly, he started to move closer to me and kissed me. Then it went fast - he started to kiss me hard and got me undressed. Then we had sex."*

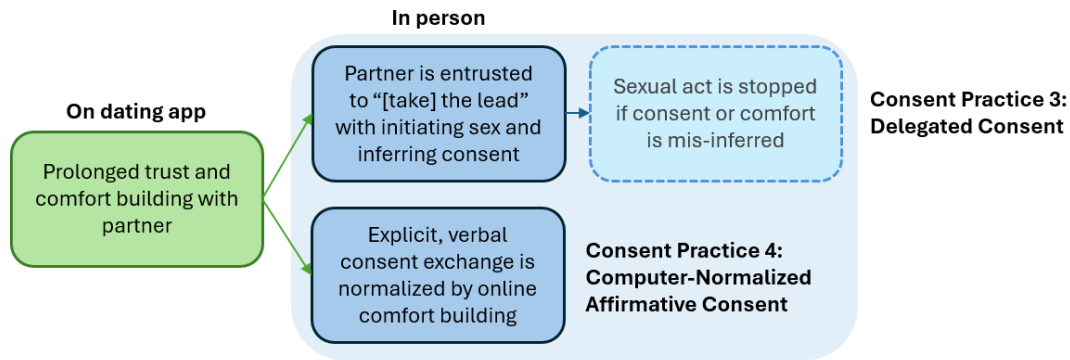


Figure 2: Consent practices associated with using dating apps as sexual comfort-building devices

There were actually several instances in the data where the participant did not want a given act to occur. In contrast to physically-driven escalation of sex, it was the stopping of sexual encounters that was almost exclusively verbal per participants' accounts. As P80 (VI) described: *"I communicated that I did not want to engage in vaginal sex [...] I expressed my feelings clearly and respectfully, emphasizing that I was enjoying our time together but wanted to keep things at a pace that felt right for me. Throughout our interactions, she was very understanding and did not pressure me, which made me feel comfortable and respected."*

Some participants did indicate a delay in verbally expressing refusal of an act, however, such as P19's (VI) case, where some physical contact occurred before they verbally acknowledged their discomfort: *"A couple of 'hugs' with a touch here and there, but I wasn't pleased to do it [...] I initially let it through but after some groping I plainly said that I was uncomfortable and that I was leaving."*

4.2.3 Computer-Normalized Affirmative Consent: Explicit Verbal Consent Enabled Through Trust. Some visually impaired participants, and a few DHH participants, viewed in-person meetings as the exclusive and definitive site for explicit negotiations of sexual consent. While direct verbal consent was reserved for these face-to-face encounters, it was evident that the trust and comfort built through digital interactions helped shape the conditions under which clear, verbal consent could develop, creating a sense of familiarity that made explicit affirmation feel more natural once partners finally met. For instance, P105 (VI) explained that *"we talked on video and voice calls and talked to each other daily to build a relationship"* before meeting face-to-face.

Sexual encounters described by these participants were all characterized by a clear, spoken exchange of one partner asking for or stating a desire for sex and the other person responding with a spoken yes. Per P65 (VI), for example: *"She just asked me if I'm ready to do it. And I said yes."* It was also common for such participants to also report preceding, non-penetrative acts like kissing that did not necessarily happen through the same verbal agreement. As P61 (DHH) described: *"We were seated on their bed kissing when I asked if they wanted to and they said 'yes!'"* Verbal, affirmative consent

was thus more a way to confirm that both partners *"wanted to keep going"* (P47, VI) towards a penetrative sexual act in particular.

Participants appeared to acknowledge the possibility that their *"feelings"* or hunches about a partner's willingness to engage in penetrative sex could be wrong, and positioned verbal affirmative consent as a way to *"ensure"* their understanding and avoid unintentionally committing an unwanted sexual act. P61 (DHH) recounted, *"I had a feeling that they wanted to but I didn't know for certain until they told me after I asked them."* P23 (B) similarly emphasized, *"Clear communicated, affirmative responses [...] ensured a shared understanding"* of consent.

Verbal consent exchange also enabled participants and their partners to express a denial of consent, which participants did report and may have been comfortable expressing due to the sustained comfort-building online prior to meeting. For example, P105 (VI) described declining consent to sex after initial physical contact: *"I gently pushed him away and apologized for giving him the wrong signals and told him that I was not ready to have sex with him on the first date."* They used the opportunity to verbally clarify the non-penetrative acts that they would be comfortable engaging in: *"I communicated it verbally and told him that I would not be comfortable with doing more than just kissing and touching."*

5 Discussion

In this paper, we presented a survey study of the sexual consent practices of online daters identifying as deaf, hard of hearing, or visually impaired. The study builds on the burgeoning HCI research into the intersection of sex, disability, and technology through an emphasis on the current roles of technology in mediating how permission to sexual activity is negotiated across online and in-person modalities.

Participants described four distinct practices for computer-mediated consent to sex. When dating apps were used as assistive consent devices, participants accommodated their sensory disabilities by communicating and informing consent to physical sexual activity online well before meeting, although they varied on whether this online communication of consent and consent-related information 1) alleviated the need for any explicit (re-confirming

of) consent in person or 2) normalized and assisted still-necessary verbal confirmation of consent in person. For participants who used dating apps for sexual comfort-building, their consent practices were not directly augmented by technology but rather dating apps were used to determine if they were comfortable enough to 3) allow their partner to "take the lead" and initiate sex without overt consent in-person, or 4) practice verbal, affirmative consent in person with their partner which is typically socially awkward [44, 49, 110].

Our findings diverge notably from prior studies of sexual consent practices of other online dating populations spanning LGBTQIA+, Arab/SWANA, and cisgender demographics [63, 64, 112, 123]. In particular, prior work showcases inadvertently problematic computer-mediated consent practices of online daters that could lead to misinterpretation of agreement to sex, such as inferring consent through unreliable online signals [64, 112, 123] and short digital prompts (e.g., "DTF?") [64] that may reduce the likelihood of explicit sexual discussion and consent exchange in person [112]. By contrast, our study shows very deliberate selection of consent practices intended to manage or circumvent communicative challenges related to sensory disabilities. Our findings are more comparable to those of US Arab/SWANA online daters studied by Karizat & Andalibi [63], showing how consent practices are an intentional part of ongoing "safety work." Zytka et al. found a similar practice by LGBTQIA+ Tinder users in their attempted normalization of affirmative consent online [123].

In this section, we reflect on our findings through two complementary framings from prior work on technology, disability, and sex. First (Section 5.1), we use our findings to critically examine normative assumptions about how sex, and particularly consent exchange, "should" happen. Second (Section 5.2), we consider how technology could be designed to intentionally scaffold consent exchange of disabled sexual partners, but in doing so we argue against medicalized, pharmacological, or otherwise solutionist inclinations towards correcting the sexual consent practices of disabled online daters to be more in line with ableist "best practices" for how consent to sex should be exchanged. Through these reflections, we aim to motivate future work on accessible computer-mediated consent models and associated technologies that build upon, rather than replace, the sexual consent practices of disabled online daters.

5.1 The Heresy of Sensory Disabled Consent Practices: Problematizing Normative Assumptions about Sex

There are surely aspects of the discovered consent practices that could be argued as problematic, not least because of participants' own disclosure of sexual experiences that were unwanted or at least uncomfortable. Yet any critical reflection on participants' sexual consent practices should first acknowledge the lens through which "right" and "wrong" ways of exchanging consent to sex are understood, so that such a lens can itself be subjected to criticism. Patel et al. [88] call out "*the lack of investigations into the normative assumptions*" about sex in disability-oriented HCI research; an argument that they in turn borrowed from Porter et al. [94], who advocated for more consideration of the role of "*societal expectation*" in their study of disability disclosure on dating apps. Inspired by these calls, we acknowledge that the normative lens through which consent to

sex "should" be exchanged, and through which the public's consent practices are judged, is affirmative consent [13].

Commonly taught as best practice in sexual consent education, affirmative consent puts the onus on the initiator of a sexual act to overtly ask for and overtly receive permission for sexual activity [53]. While there is no definitive and universal take on exactly "how" that permission should be asked for and received, it is commonly understood and recommended to be a spoken exchange, hence the popular slogan "yes means yes" [42]. Likewise, affirmative consent necessitates that consent be "enthusiastically given" [58, 92], yet there is no prescriptive guidance on how enthusiasm should be assessed (beyond allusions to visual, nonverbal signals such as facial expressions and body language [19]). Taken collectively, common formulations of affirmative consent require both vision and hearing senses to communicate consent decisions and detect enthusiasm behind those decisions.

Many of the consent practices described by the disabled online daters in our study are almost heretical through the lens of affirmative consent; not because they deviate from affirmative consent, but because they do so *intentionally*. Decades of research into the public's sexual consent practices show that affirmative consent is seldom practiced [29], but this is typically due to a misunderstanding of what affirmative consent even is [11, 75] as well as a perception that affirmative consent is too impractical and mood-killing for consistent adoption [19, 29, 44, 49, 106]. Our findings show how affirmative consent deviations through dating app use were intentionally assistive, not obstructive, to consent exchange through their circumvention and augmentation of sensory disabilities that legitimately do render affirmative consent exchange impractical.

The two most problematic (or affirmative consent-opposing) practices found in our study were the Consent Ticket and Delegated Consent practices. Under Consent Ticket, online daters intentionally gave or perceived to receive consent online to a subsequent physical sexual activity and considered that online-given consent as redeemable at a later time in person without needing to overtly re-ask for/give consent. This practice problematizes affirmative consent by showing its temporal limitations (can consent be given overtly online to a later act in a different modality?), which Kafer's concept of *crip time* similarly critiques [62], while also revealing the absence of any "best practice" guidance for how consent can be overtly exchanged in person without spoken dialogue and visual assessment of enthusiasm. Under Delegated Consent, online daters trusted their sexual partners to initiate and escalate sexual contact without any overt consent exchange, which similarly challenges affirmative consent's assumption that consent exchange requires an explicit request for permission. These experiences resonate with Mingus's concept of *access intimacy*, in which a "*felt sense*" of ease emerges when someone understands and responds to one's access needs [78]. These practices can also be understood through Crawford and Hamidi's Relational Access Framework for Communication (RAF-Comm) [2]. In particular, RAF-Comm's Conditional Use of Technology component describes how the value of a technology emerges from how partners integrate it into their relationships, which may help explain the two distinct ways participants incorporated dating apps into their consent practices.

Perhaps most damning of affirmative consent is that participants acknowledged the Consent Ticket practice as suboptimal, yet still

practiced it, through admission of situations where they were parties to unwanted physical contact due to misunderstandings of their consent. The Delegated Consent practice should be viewed similarly: as a practice with obvious risk, but one borne out of satisfying [111] communicative obstruction. We argue that such stories should not be used to villainize or chastise disabled online daters' sexual consent practices, but to point out an utter absence of guidance (and technology) for how sexual partners with sensory disability "should" exchange consent when normative, verbal-intensive affirmative consent is inaccessible.

5.2 Medicalized, Pharmacologicalized, and Solutionist: Why Disabled Online Daters' Consent Practices Should Not Be "Corrected"

Recent HCI work has sought "to counter the curative and solutionist narratives" [83] surrounding sex and disability, which frame disability as a barrier to sexual pleasure and thus a problem to be solved. Approaches in this solutionist direction are commonly "medical" [83, 88] and "pharmacological" in nature, which idealize "genital-centered, penetrative views" of sex [83]. They seek to enable normative penetrative sexual intercourse for people with disabilities through pills, injections, and so forth. This solutionist framing of disability is similarly described as *technoableism*, or the design tendency to treat disability as something to be overcome [109].

In reflecting on how we could similarly avoid, if not subvert, technoableist and other solutionist narratives towards sexual consent practice augmentation for disabled online daters, we are very conscious not to frame their consent practices (even the self-acknowledged problematic ones) as in need of "correction." In other words, we are wholly disinterested in advocating for technologies or future research that seek to "fix" issues in disabled online daters' consent practices or otherwise enable them to practice affirmative consent like individuals without sensory disabilities. This perspective aligns with disability justice works that center disabled people's agency in negotiating their own intimate experiences [59, 78].

However, we do not reject technological interventions entirely. Rather, we argue that any such technologies should support how disabled partners already negotiate consent, rather than prescribing how consent ought to be exchanged. Building on Osipova and colleagues' proposal of sex as "*a means to highlight marginalized knowledges*" in HCI [85], we therefore envision a future work agenda that uses empirical knowledge of computer-mediated consent practices of disabled sexual partners (such as this study) as a basis to create new and more accessible technologies for consent to sex that advocate for alternative models of how consent can or should be exchanged. This echoes calls by Zytoko et al. to go "beyond affirmative consent" [126] in considering how technology can augment consent to sex, albeit with a more deliberate emphasis on disability. In this sense, we encourage consideration of participants' consent practices not as right or wrong, but as a source for (re-)thinking how consent exchange could be.

The deliberate and off-label [34] use of dating apps as consent assistive devices found in our study reminds us that there currently exists no dedicated technologies for augmenting consent to sex, despite years of empirical knowledge of how dating apps and other

social technologies inadvertently mediate perceptions of consent to sex [37, 64, 97, 112, 123, 125]. Fortunately, there is emerging work in this direction, though not necessarily for our specific participant demographics; namely, Burger & Zytoko's "Consent Ring" to support consent exchange between neurodivergent sexual partners [20]. The Consent Ring is an emerging example of technology designed to make consent exchange more accessible through a shared device for signaling and negotiating consent [20], albeit one that still assumes some level of spoken dialogue to clarify the act being consented to through haptic feedback. The rings function by allowing one partner to initiate a consent request through a button press that produces a haptic buzz on the other partner's ring. If the request is accepted through a corresponding button press, both rings produce a shared haptic pulse indicating consent. Beyond that, there is at least indirect precedent for the HCI field to produce novel consent technologies, as evidenced by innovative tools for sexual communication such as Várhidi et al.'s "Pussy Palette" [115], the neurodildo [46], and the now-decades-old "Kiss Communicator" for exchanging intimate gestures [18].

Future work should further seek to understand how disabled individuals experience and conceptualize consent, including what they consider missing from current consent definitions, education, and practices, and how they imagine these gaps might be addressed. Likewise, future work could involve disabled online daters and other sexually active stakeholders in co-designing consent technologies and underlying "best practice" models for how consent should be exchanged between disabled sexual partners. Such designs should not seek to "solve" disabled people's consent practices, but rather support them in practicing consent in ways that align with their own needs and preferences. While our study shows how dating apps are currently repurposed as consent devices, there is yet limited knowledge on how technologies could be deliberately designed to augment consent to sex as envisioned by individuals with disabilities.

5.3 Limitations and Future Work

Disability is not a singular experience, and consent practices are likely to differ based on factors related to different disability experiences and communication practices. While our study includes participants who identified as deaf, hard of hearing, and/or visually impaired, we did not collect detailed information on several other dimensions of disabled experience and identity that may meaningfully shape consent practices and our findings, including whether and how our participants used signed languages, whether they identified with Deaf cultural communities (separate and in addition to their self-identification of deafness as a physical disability), and DeafBlind identity. In particular, our categorization of participants who identified as being both deaf and/or hard of hearing and visually impaired should not be understood as representative of the experiences of DeafBlind individuals as a distinct cultural and communicative community. Likewise, while our sample included participants from multiple nationalities, races, genders, and sexualities, our findings did not reveal any clear differences in the consent practices identified across these identities. As a result, our findings cannot speak to how these factors may influence how individuals conceptualize and negotiate consent. Future work should

examine these demographics and intersecting identities more intentionally, so as to create a more complete understanding of the consent practices across disabled communities.

Our study also does not examine how consent practices may differ across encounters involving different disability configurations between partners (e.g., disabled-disabled versus disabled-nondisabled partners, or deaf-deaf versus deaf-visually impaired partners). Because participants were not asked to report their partners' disabilities, we cannot assess how these differing dynamics may impact consent experiences. Future work should explore these relational dynamics to better understand how shared disability experiences, differences in access needs, and power dynamics shape consent negotiation and contribute to unique consent practices.

6 Conclusion

This paper examined how online daters identifying as deaf, hard of hearing, and/or visually impaired exchange consent to sex through mediation by dating apps. These user populations sit at a critical intersection, facing elevated risk of sexual violence while also being excluded from normative, ableist models of affirmative consent, which prescribe how consent “should” be exchanged through sensory-reliant means, including spoken agreement to sex and the visual interpretation of enthusiasm behind a partner's consent decision. At this intersection, prior HCI research has shown that dating apps shape how consent is perceived, sometimes amplifying and sometimes mitigating risk, yet this body of work has largely overlooked the experiences of disabled people.

Our findings show that dating apps play a role in sexual consent exchange in two different ways. First, as assistive consent devices, users communicate sexual boundaries and expectations, and sometimes exchange explicit consent, online for physical sexual interactions in advance of the in-person encounters where they would occur. In some cases, this online dialogue about sex is perceived to replace the need for overt (confirmation of) consent to physical sexual activity, whereas in other cases it serves to simplify the communicative burden of still-essential verbal confirmation of consent. Second, as sexual comfort-building devices, users gradually built trust with their sexual partner through the dating app without explicitly discussing sex or exchanging consent. This trust, in turn, makes users comfortable to either trust their sexual partner to infer their consent to sex in person without overt confirmation, or conversely, to practice verbal affirmative consent exchange in person. These off-label uses of dating apps for managing consent problematize affirmative consent “best practices,” representing a critical opportunity for HCI to create accessible guidance and supporting technology for exchanging consent to sex.

Acknowledgments

This material is based upon work partially supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation under Grant No. 2211896, 2339431, 2401775, 2349350, and 2426230. We thank Brooke Bui, Brooklyn Kelly, Britney Wang, and Camryn Toth for their efforts regarding participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis.

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A Survey Wording for Disability Severity

The options for deafness and hardness of hearing were Mild (e.g., can hear and repeat words with normal voice, needing hearing aids varies), Moderate (e.g., can hear and repeat words with raised voice, hearing aids are typically recommended), Severe (e.g., can hear some words when loudly spoken into the better ear, having hearing aids are needed or knowing lip-reading is recommended), and Profound (e.g., unable to hear a shouted voice, hearing aids may support in understanding of words, lip-reading and sometimes signing is essential).

The options for visual impairment were Mild (e.g., difficulty with small print or minor visual disturbances such as blurriness, glare sensitivity, eye strain), Moderate (e.g., significant difficulty with reading, recognizing faces, or seeing in low light), Severe (e.g., very limited vision, reliance on assistive devices for most tasks such as screen readers, braille displays, or white canes), Total blindness (e.g., no light perception).

B Demographics

Table 1: Participant Demographics (N = 86). Values are counts (n) and percentages of the sample within each category.

Category	n	%
Disability		
Deaf and/or Hard of Hearing	23	26.7
Visually Impaired	42	48.8
Both	21	24.4
Age (Years)		
18–24	23	26.7
25–34	36	41.9
35–44	19	22.1
45+	8	9.3
Gender		
Woman	42	48.8
Man	42	48.8
Non-binary	2	2.3
Transgender		
Yes	3	3.5
No	82	95.3
Did Not Answer	1	1.2
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	53	61.6
Bisexual	20	23.3
Homosexual	7	8.1
Pansexual	5	5.8
Asexual	1	1.2
Country of Residence		
South Africa	25	29.1
United States	23	26.7
United Kingdom	11	12.8
Mexico	6	7.0
Poland	6	7.0
Other	15	17.4
Ethnicity		
White	33	38.4
Black or African American	32	37.2
Hispanic or Latino	11	12.8
Asian	5	5.8
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	1.2
Other / Multiracial	4	4.7