

Classifying disinformation on dating platforms: swiping left on fake profiles, false information and deceiving intentions

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Clasificación de la desinformación en las plataformas de citas: deslizar hacia la izquierda en perfiles falsos, información falsa e intenciones engañosas

ABSTRACT RESUMEN

Little attention has been given to disinformation in the context of dating platforms. Dating apps become an attractive means for disinformative agents to target users, since their design and affordances shape users' behaviours and can contribute to the creation and dissemination of disinformation. This study explores how online daters define, perceive and experience disinformation on dating platforms, and the impact it can have on usage and behaviours. A mixed method approach was employed combining a survey (n=309) with interviews (n=11). Findings show that although disinformation has its own theoretical framework online daters perceive it beyond, pointing to differences in how it is theoretically conceptualized and how it is experienced. Users hold dating platforms responsible for not detecting disinformation efficiently, pointing to the need for mandatory verification of users' information. While dating platforms employ several technologies and strategies to deal with disinformation, users rate them as insufficient.

Se ha prestado poca atención a la desinformación en las plataformas de citas. Estas se convierten en un medio atractivo para que los agentes desinformativos ya que su diseño y posibilidades pueden contribuir a la creación y difusión de desinformación. Este estudio explora cómo las personas definen, perciben y experimentan la desinformación en las plataformas de citas, y el impacto que puede tener en el uso y los comportamientos. Se combinó una encuesta (n=309) con entrevistas (n=11). Los resultados muestran que, aunque la desinformación tenga su propio marco teórico, los usuarios de plataformas de citas la perciben más allá, lo que señala diferencias en cómo se conceptualiza teóricamente y cómo se experimenta. Los usuarios responsabilizan las plataformas de citas por no detectar desinformación de manera eficiente, señalando la necesidad de una verificación obligatoria de la información. Los usuarios consideran insuficientes las estrategias para hacer frente a la desinformación.

KEYWORDS PALABRAS CLAVE

Disinformation; Misinformation; Online dating; Dating apps; Mixed methods research.

Desinformación; Información falsa; Citas online; Aplicaciones de citas; Métodos mixtos de investigación.

Classificació de la desinformació en les plataformes de cites: lliscar cap a l'esquerra en perfils falsos, informació falsa i intencions enganyoses

RESUM

S'ha donat poca importància a la desinformació en les plataformes de cites. Aquestes es converteixen en un mitjà atractiu per als agents desinformatius ja que el seu disseny i possibilitats funcionals poden contribuir a la creació i a la difusió de desinformació. Aquest estudi explora com les persones defineixen, perceben i experimenten la desinformació en les plataformes de cites i l'impacte que pot tenir en el seu ús i els comportaments dels usuaris. Es va combinar una enquesta (n=309) amb entrevistes (n=11). Els resultats mostren que, encara que la desinformació tingui el seu propi marc teòric, els usuaris de plataformes de cites la perceben més enllà, cosa que assenyalava diferències com es conceptualitza teòricament i com s'experimenta. Els usuaris responsabilitzen les plataformes de cites per no detectar desinformació de manera eficient i assenyalen la necessitat d'una verificació obligatòria de la informació. Els usuaris consideren insuficients les estratègies per fer front a la desinformació.

PARAULES CLAU

Desinformació; Informació falsa; Cites en línia; Aplicacions de cites; Mètodes mixtes de recerca.

1. Introduction

The use of dating platforms has become popular. The supply of this type of service has increased, especially with the emergence of the smartphone, making dating applications a significant market (Albury et al., 2017). Also, the number of users has been increasing and currently exceeds 300 million worldwide (Curry, 2022).

Among the variety of dating apps, Tinder, which has been on the market since 2012, is the most popular, with 50 million users worldwide, being particularly common among the 18-24 (35%) and 25-34 (25%) age groups (Iqbal, 2023). It works by geolocation, accessing the smartphone's location service. Although Tinder didn't invent the swipe gesture and the functionality isn't exclusive to this app, it did popularize the command, that is, the indication whether or not the person is interested in the profile suggested on the smartphone screen.

Dating platforms, in general, find themselves involved in criticism that describes them as services where emotions are treated as commodities (Illouz & Kotliar, 2022) and that promote a "hook-up culture" (Hobbs, Owen & Gerber, 2017). Tinder has garnered special attention from academia. The way profiles are displayed, its swipe function, the lack of clarity about how profiles are combined and users' (negative) experiences are some of the main research topics.

Research has also focused on dating platforms' affordances, with studies showing that they shape users' behaviours, by constraint or imposition, throughout various stages of (Duguay, 2017).

Research, and media in general, has also focused on the upsides of online dating. Reports of fake profiles, deceit, deception, harassment, fraud, scams or misinformation are some of the issues associated with user experiences in the context of online dating. (Buchanan & Whitty, 2014; Sorell & Whitty, 2019; Whitty, 2008).

Even so, to our knowledge, no study has listened to users of dating platforms to understand how they perceive, classify and experience disinformation in such a particular context and with such specific rules.

The main goal of this study is to explore the topic of disinformation on online dating platforms (users' definition), map users' experiences related to disinformation in the context of online dating, and the impact it has on usage. It does so by focusing on how dating app affordances can partly explain the specific disinformation environment and practices. It reflects on how dating apps must be seen as partially responsible or accountable for such an environment and the circulation of disinformation.

2. Disinformation: an approach

Disinformation has gained increased attention from citizens, democratic societies and researchers due to the proliferation of fake or misleading content and the growth of social media platforms, which have become a source of information for users and allow for mass self-communication (Castells, 2010). Since many people can communicate autonomously and directly, leading to anyone being able to disseminate information that, unlike traditional media, is not mediated, except for the guidelines of the platforms themselves, this context allows disinformation to take on a new magnitude and become widespread. So, anyone can be a disinformation agent, challenging debunking efforts (Krafft & Donovan, 2020). The design and affordances of dating platforms, by facilitating the reach and speed of information dissemination, have an impact on the context of online disinformation.

Disinformation is generally defined as "content that is intentionally false and designed to cause harm" (Wardle, 2020), with the aim of deceiving, manipulating, or influencing behaviour (Song, 2021). It should be distinguished from misinformation, which also refers to false content, but is spread unknowingly by the person sharing it (Wardle, 2020). According to the European Commission (2018), disinformation refers to "proven false or misleading information that is created, presented, and disseminated for economic gain or to deliberately deceive the public, and that is likely to cause public harm." This attempt to define disinformation goes further, describing it from the standpoint of verification, intentionality, and impact: 1) it is "proven false or misleading" and therefore verifiable; 2) it is intentional and not a lapse or error, as it aims to "deliberately deceive"; and 3) regardless of its impact, it is "likely to cause public harm."

Additionally, Bennett and Livingston (2018) base their definition on three essential elements: 1) an intention, preferably political, 2) a falsehood, and 3) a formal presentation with the appearance of truth. Most analyses focus on disinformation that is widely shared and has a public impact. However, it can still be considered disinformation even when the impact is minimal or focused on one person. On an individual level, the focus of this paper, disinformation impacts the psychological states of people exposed, increasing depression, fatigue or panic (Rocha et al., 2023), and these impacts can even be unconscious (Bastick, 2021).

Disinformation can take on different forms, which Wardle (2020) organizes into seven groups, three of which are considered low damage (Satire or parody; False connection; Misleading content), while four can cause high damage (Contextual deception; Imposter content; Manipulated content; Fabricated content). Although disinformation has its own

theoretical framework, due to its several forms and formats, individuals can experience it in several ways. Therefore, RQ1 is formulated as follows: What do online daters classify as disinformation on online dating platforms?

3. Online dating app affordances as a prime mover to the disinformation environment

The operating logic of online dating services can be perceived in three stages: 1) registration and profile set up; 2) matching, which occurs when both users show interest in each other; and 3) discovery, the stage at which individuals find more about whom they have matched with (Markowitz, Hancock & Tong, 2018).

There are multiple ways for individuals to register on dating apps, such as through a social media account, a phone number or email address (Duguay, 2017). On several dating platforms, registration and subsequent use comes with the obligation to create a profile. This is the central element through which users present themselves. It is also through information shared in the profile that profiles are suggested, and users are matched with each other, which emphasizes the importance of users' self-presentation strategies (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006).

The format (text or image) and amount of information requested to create a profile may vary depending on the dating platform. Some platforms require users to fill out extensive questionnaires (e.g., OkCupid), while others require only basic information, such as name and age (e.g., Tinder). Although there may be a field for users to write a biography, it is usually not mandatory.

On the most popular dating platforms (e.g., Tinder, Badoo, or Bumble) (Statista, 2023), profiles are presented with a preference for images. They occupy the smartphone screen, while the text, such as the biography or personal interests, is relegated to the background. This presentation emphasizes what is often referred to as the visual affordance (Chan, 2017; David & Cambre, 2016). It leads users not only to favour presenting themselves using images instead of text, but also images that are flattering.

The large number of profiles on dating platforms can lead users to exaggerate information about themselves and not be entirely honest in their self-presentation. Studies have reported that omitting information on a profile and intentional falsification are common (Hall, Park & Song, 2010; Toma, Hancock & Ellison, 2008; Whitty, 2008). Catfishing, or creating a fake profile with the clear intention of deceiving someone and causing harm in a romantic context (Peterson, 2013), is commonly associated with online dating platforms. Note that women tend to be more concerned about catfishing than men

(Nolan, 2023) with studies showing that female victims of online dating scams are predominant (Sorell & Whitty, 2019).

The registration and profile creation stage allows users to create a persona that does not have to be authentic, in the sense of being fully factual or updated. The ease of profile creation, the emphasis on visual presentation, and the lack of biographical information in profiles might lead to a misleading and disinformative environment.

The matching stage, is a consequence of how users present themselves, set their preferences and how profiles can be viewed and selected. Among mobile dating platforms, the swipe movement has been commonly adopted. Swiping right on the viewed profile means being interested, swiping left means no interest. Although swipe is common in touch-screen technologies, in the context of online dating it shapes users' actions and perceptions (Duguay, 2017). Users must swipe the current profile to see the next, which can lead users to adopt matching strategies, such as swiping right on all viewed profiles and only reading the profiles of matches, a strategy referred to as a "shotgun approach" (LeFebvre, 2017). Thus, the profile information is not taken into account at the time of swiping and only when there is a match, if at all.

Such swiping logic may also create emotional distance towards dating (Krüger & Spilde, 2020) since it can be perceived more as a form of entertainment due to its game approach. Additionally, the portability affordance (Schrock, 2015) of mobile dating apps allows decisions about profiles to be made on the go without necessary consideration or attention.

Keeping in mind the implications of swiping, it can lead to users not paying the necessary attention to profiles, the information that is part of the presentation and that which they could consider important, in the case of a superficial action (Hobbs, Owen & Gerber, 2017).

In the discovery stage, users communicate with each other and/or seek information about the profiles with whom they have matched. The multimodality affordance (Schrock, 2015) play a significant role as dating apps can be combined with other digital solutions. This is particularly evident in the discovery stage, where online daters often search on social media platforms for the individuals they have matched with to bridge some possible lack of information, to contrast and verify, and to become "friends with" (Sepúlveda & Vieira, 2020).

Although the conversation might start on the platform chat, studies indicate that they often move to other messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp (Broeker, 2021). Users argue that the in-app chat does not meet their communication needs and that it is easier to message on other chat apps commonly integrated into daily activities.

The ease of registration and profile creation, the existence of profiles with little or non-factual information, the screening

and swiping logic, and the integration with other communications platforms create a particular and nurturing environment for the existence of disinformation on dating platforms. This leads to the second research question: RQ2: How do online dating users perceive and experience disinformation on dating platforms?

3.1. Strategies used by dating platforms to combat disinformation.

Disinformative behaviours have a significant impact on how users experience online dating. The consequences of such behaviour go beyond emotional distress, with victims reporting monetary losses or, in some cases, even physical harm (Buchanan & Whitty, 2019). Dating platforms, aware of the potential dangers that users face and how this can affect their business, have been implementing strategies and technological systems to ensure a better user experience.

The terms and conditions of dating platforms include a set of rules that users must agree to abide by when they register. These rules cover aspects such as users committing to not falsifying their identity, not soliciting money, or using the services for fraud, pyramid schemes, or similar behaviour (Tinder, n.d.a). However, these non-compliant practices are identified by users as happening on the platforms (Rege, 2009), and they also point to the weakness of and non-compliance with these rules.

It is general practice and often mandatory that registering on a dating platform requires a user to agree to its terms and services and, in theory, comply with them. The consequences of non-compliance can lead to temporary or permanent blocking, preventing the user from registering again. However, studies have reported users being victimized by individuals they met on dating platforms through romance scams or fraud (Ibrahim, 2016).

On many dating platforms, including the most popular ones, either the information contained in the profiles is not verified or verification is optional, thus raising questions about the authenticity of the profile and creating an environment of insecurity and discomfort. Users can choose whether to verify their profile; however, the option to verify another user's profile does not exist.

Profile verification, which aims to prevent fake, bot, scammer and similar profiles from appearing on dating platforms, has been gradually adopted on dating platforms with the objective of strengthening users' confidence (Raval, 2020). Verification can be carried out through photographs or videos that the platform requests from the user or through official government documents (e.g., MillionaireMatch).

Once the data has been verified, a badge is assigned to the user's profile, which aims to eliminate doubt as to the accu-

racy of the information. However, verification systems can be circumvented, and they do not guarantee that all information on a profile is completely true (Goode, 2022).

Most verification systems rely on verifying the authenticity of photographs and not the biography. Therefore, information related to data that users lie about (Hall, Park & Song, 2010) or intentions are not subject to verification. The badge assigned to a profile can be misleading, leading users to believe that all profile information has been confirmed when only part of it has.

It is common for dating platforms to provide safety tips to ensure that the user experience is as safe as possible. These tips may include advice on what type of data to avoid sharing (e.g., financial data) and what behaviours to adopt. As an example, users are encouraged to maintain conversations within the platform's chat and avoid switching to external messaging services (Tinder, n.d.b).

Restrictions on communication can also be imposed, limiting how users can express themselves on the online dating platform chat service. Rules determine what messages may contain, and that not everything is permissible. Photographs, when authorized, cannot contain nudity. If there is suspicion, the content can be blocked, or a pop-up message may appear as a warning. Conversations are monitored, and artificial intelligence is used not only to identify prohibited words or expressions, but also to mitigate the effect of automated profiles that send the same message to many profiles at the same time (Suarez-Tangil et al., 2020).

Dating platforms place a large part of the responsibility for policing their users on their own users. Security tips encourage users to report and block profiles whose behaviour may be suspicious or offensive, such as fraudulent profiles or some type of soliciting (Tinder, n.d.b). Despite the number and variety of tips provided and functionalities or verification systems implemented as a way of reducing user risks, these actions, separately or combined, seem to be insufficient. Users continue to report being victims of someone they met on an online dating platform (Al-Rousan et al., 2020), highlighting the lack of protection and attention regarding profiles.

The consequences of the existence of an unsafe environment have an impact on the business of dating platforms. Not only do they harm their image and users' trust in them, they also affect the platforms' revenue (Song, 2021). These facts lead to RQ3: What impact can disinformation have on online dating platform usage?

4. Methodology and Procedures

4.1. Survey

An online survey was conducted with the objective of 1) identifying what users classified as disinformation in the context of online dating; 2) ascertaining whether users have experienced disinformation in the context of online dating and how it was characterized; and 3) determine if and how disinformation has an impact on dating app usage. The survey was conducted through the Qualtrics program and distributed online through social media networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram). It was developed based on literature on online dating (Albury et al., 2017; Hobbs, Owen & Gerber, 2016; Markowitz, Hancock & Tong, 2018) and disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Wardle, 2020; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2019).

The questionnaire was available from November 2022 to January 2023, and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The following criteria were considered for participants' selection: 18 years or older, be a former or a current user of dating apps. Participants did not receive any compensation for their participation. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, and data was collected anonymously, with respondents given the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Data analysis was carried out using SPSS statistical software.

4.1.1. Sample characterization

In total, 309 Portuguese-speaking respondents participated in the survey (55.7% women) with ages ranging from 23 to 70 years old ($M = 38.8$, $SD = 8.6$). Around half (55.7%) had used dating platforms for more than two years, and 18.8% were recent users (less than one year). Tinder was the most common platform used by participants ($n=245$) followed by Bumble ($n=70$), Badoo ($n=55$), Happn ($n=51$), Grindr ($n=24$), Felizes ($n=14$), FacebookDating ($n=13$), Match ($n=3$), Hinge ($n=2$), and FuckMarryKill ($n=1$).

4.2. Semi Structured Interviews

With the aim of contextualizing and deepening the classification of disinformation in the context of online dating, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The following criteria were considered in selecting participants: being 18 years old or over, being a current or former user of dating platforms, having had contact with what they could consider misinformation on dating platforms. The script for the interviews consisted of three dimensions: 1) classifying disinformation on dating platforms; 2) describing the experience with disinformation on dating platforms; and 3) evaluating the disinformation impact on dating platform usage.

The interviews were conducted online between December 2022 and January 2023 and lasted between 35 and 90 minutes.

Recruitment was carried out through the questionnaire that was being administered combined with the dissemination of the study on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram). Participants were informed of the objectives of the interviews, and oral and written informed consent was obtained, while providing assurances that personal data would be anonymized to respect privacy. Participants' names were pseudonymized. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and speech was coded using thematic analysis in order to identify patterns (Braun & Clark, 2006).

4.2.1 Sample characterization

The participants (n=11), 6 women and 5 men, all Portuguese speakers, ranged in age from 24 to 52 years old (average age = 38.6 years). Regarding dating platforms usage, participants had used them for less than 1 year (n=2), between 1 and 2 years (n=5), and more than 2 years (n=4).

5. Results

5.1. Classifying disinformation in the online dating context (RQ1 and RQ2)

As described in the methods section, for the first research question we asked users what they perceive and classify as disinformation in the online dating context. Three major dimensions were identified related to 1) characteristics, 2) practices, and 3) intentions.

The second research question provided the specific content or action where users perceive the disinformation in the online dating context. Also, three major types of content/action were identified related to 1) fake/false profile, 2) sharing fake information, and 3) deceiving others.

Combining perceptions and classification with content or action, we created an association between RQ1 and RQ2, as described in Table 1.

Fake or false profiles. Most participants (n=271; 87.7%) classified as disinformation a profile that was fake, i.e., containing information that was not real or was fraudulent, or a profile that was false, that is, a profile that contained information

Dimensions of disinformation	N=	%=
Characteristics: Fake/false profile	271	87.70
Practices: Sharing fake information	233	75.40
Intentions: Deceiving others	210	67.96

Table 1. Dimensions of disinformation classification on online dating context. Source: Author's own elaboration.

that was untrue, not factual or factually incorrect, but also with deliberate omissions.

A fake profile was characterized as someone who pretended to be someone else (n=241; 77.99%). The information contained in the profile, which could be both visual and textual, was fraudulent and/or did not belong to that person.

A false profile could accumulate characteristics such as photographs not being current, the use of filters to improve the user's appearance and appeal, or textual information (as part of the biography or which was shared during conversations), which was not entirely factual. Interviewees indicated the existence of different levels of disinformation that could be interpreted as less or more harmful. Someone lying about their hobbies to appear more cultured or interesting, for example, was considered less harmful than someone lying about their name or age.

This idea of different impact degrees goes in line with Wardle (2020) disinformation damage levels. Participants, although not using the exact same classification, point not only to different forms of disinformation but also the different damages it can cause. Meanwhile, a false profile that can be understood as false connection or misleading content (Wardle, 2020), is considered having lower damage than a fake profile that reflects imposter, manipulated or fabricated content.

The deliberate omission of information or those users that participants perceived as somehow trying to hide something, were also considered false profiles and, therefore, disinformation. In this context, the interviewees referred to people who omitted their marital status (even when directly asked about it), or those profiles that did not have photographs or in which it was not possible to see the face clearly. "If you are on Tinder and do not have photos, it is because you are hiding and, if you hide, it is because you are not honest", stated Isabel, highlighting dishonesty as a characteristic of disinformation.

Still, in the context of classifying fake and false profiles as disinformation, questionnaire participants pointed to bots (programs designed to appear to be human) and to profiles created by the dating platform itself (n=107; 34.63% and n=104; 33.66% respectively) as two other examples. "There are those profiles that dating platforms create to attract people. It works like this: there comes a point when, to continue chatting, you have to pay a subscription. When you pay, and can finally talk without restrictions, they never reply", reports André, who used several dating platforms. Dating platforms have been suspected of creating fake profiles as a way of attracting users or paid-for membership (Mooney & Senior, 2019).

"Fake and false profiles are common". When questionnaire participants were asked about the type of disinformation they had come across, the most common was related to fake or false profiles (n=140; 67.3%). The participants also had iden-

Characteristics of fake and false profiles	N=	%=
The photography makes me suspicious (e.g., it looks too professional; uses filters)	212	68.61
The behaviour is erratic (e.g., doesn't communicate for a long time; makes a lot of spelling mistakes; asks too many personal questions; shares too much about himself)	172	55.66
The information shared about him or herself does not make sense (e.g., it is contradictory, fanciful or questionable)	169	54.69
Never available to talk on the phone or make a video call	155	50.16
Never available for a date	144	46.60
There are several sections of the profile left blank (e.g., hobbies; biography)	136	44.01
There is no profile photo or, where there is one, it does not show the face	132	42.72
Doesn't have a profile on online social media networks	130	42.07

Table 2. Characteristics of fake and false profiles according to users' experiences. Source: Author's own elaboration.

tified a set of actions or characteristics, according to their experiences, through which they classified the profile as fake, therefore disinformative (Table 2).

It can be seen that the disinformation is identified in the first stage of the online dating process, the one that corresponds to profile construction, namely through aspects such as: a) the photograph makes me suspicious (n=212; 68.61%), b) there is no profile photo or there is one but it does not show the face (n=132; 42.72%) and c) several sections of the profile have been left blank (e.g. hobbies; biography) (n=136; 44.01%).

Duarte stated that, for him, an indication that a profile is fake is the small amount of information. Luis agreed; he said, "those who want to create a fake profile don't bother to put in a lot of information. They put in the minimum, the basics." Isabel stated that "when there is little information, I swipe left". This understanding can lead to profiles being rejected. However, the lack or scarcity of information can also be a consequence of the dating platform affordances, due to 1) the type and amount of information requested at the time of setting up the profile; or 2) how information is shown, with visual affordances playing an important role.

Users reported having contact with disinformation also during the discovery stage, through indicators such as a) the behaviour is erratic (n=172; 55.66%), b) the information shared about oneself does not make sense (n=169; 54.69%), c) he or she is never available to talk on the phone or make a video call (n=155; 50.16%), d) he or she is never available for a date (n=144; 46.60%) and, e) there is no corresponding profile on online social media networks (n= 130; 42.07%).

In Mariana's opinion, "when you ask for their Instagram handle and they say they don't have an Instagram account, it's strange. Who doesn't have an Instagram account? Or any other social media?... This is suspicious." This fact points to the integration of other social media networks in the online dating

process, leading to the multimodality affordance (Schrock, 2015).

The profile creation and discovery stages are times when users evaluate others and the information they share within the scope of what could be considered disinformation, not limited to a specific moment, but to multiple stages of the online dating process. Disinformation is sometimes detectable only as the conversation progresses or when ascertaining availability for a date, whether online or in person.

Sharing fake information. For 233 (75.4%) respondents, disinformation in the context of online dating was the sharing of fake information by those with whom they were matched. In this context, disinformation was not related to data in profiles, but rather had to do with the users' practices of sharing fake data about someone or something. These could be on the most diverse topics, and happened when users were chatting.

The interviews indicated that this data, which could be either untrue or simply invented, was capable of being confirmed or exposed, thus highlighting why it is considered fake. "At the time of Covid-19, there were people who sent supposed news or studies regarding Covid-19 origin or cures. But the sources were not reliable and it was easy to unmask them. I normally told those people to get information from the national health service or WHO, but it seems like they preferred to believe in fake news", described Sara, illustrating one of her experiences.

There was no exclusive topic on which fake information was shared; it was more frequent on Specific People (36.11%), the Economy (35.56%), Institutions (15.56%), Health (15%) or events such as, for example, war (5.56%). Duarte, a former dating platform user, feels that "the main objective of those who share disinformation is to convince us of their point of view and consequently for us to change our opinion or beha-

viour. This is no different on dating platforms. But it's weird... it's something you don't even think about until it happens."

"He started sending me fake news." Still with regard to the type of disinformation that participants had experienced on dating platforms, having "received fake information" was the second most common (n=98; 47.12%). This could be related to: 1) the sharing of what participants indicated as fake news, that is, matters supposedly published in news media, using traditional media as a credibility stamp to support to that point of view or disinform about specific issues; 2) sharing specific data about something or someone.

The reasons for sharing fake news can be very diverse, and often people are unknowingly contributing to its spread (Pennycook & Rand, 2021), due to confirmation bias (information that aligns with their existing beliefs and reinforce their viewpoint), lack of critical thinking, or misinterpretation (believing it is true). But, in this case, the most relevant reasons seem to be emotional triggers (emotions like fear, anger, or excitement might compel individuals to share false information), social validation (to get approval or validation), desire for attention, and malicious intent (to deceive or manipulate others for personal gain).

These reasons can fit into a logic of persuasive attempts to shift people from information-based to identity-based reasoning, assuming disinformation is content shared to produce a particular judgment or course of action in online dating users, irrespective of the veracity, or bias of what is shared. (Oyserman & Dawson, 2021)

When we asked participants about the format of the disinformation, most responses varied between text (n=55; 56.67%) and image (n=53; 54.44%), but also acknowledged the presence of weblinks (n=35; 35.56%). Video and audio formats were also referenced, but less frequently (n=4; 4%; n=3; 3%).

Bearing in mind that sending unwanted pictures or links through chat can be considered spamming by dating platforms (e.g. Tinder), we asked users where they had received this disinformation. Online social media networks (n=93; 45.59%) were the most common means, followed by messaging platforms: WhatsApp (n=55; 26.96%), Messenger (n=15; 7.35%) and Telegram (n=1; 0.49%). This result reinforces studies (Broeker, 2021) that indicate that the discovery stage of the online dating process extends beyond the dating platform's chat. Additionally, it points to where conversations and the "relationship" evolve, but also to the potential for disinformation to circulate to other platforms from someone they met on dating platforms.

Nonetheless, the chat function of the dating platform itself was also a common means (n=35; 17.16%) through which users reported receiving fake news or fake data about something or someone. This result reveals an ineffective action by the plat-

forms in monitoring content that circulates online as well as pointing to some users being non-compliant with the platforms' terms and services.

Deceiving others. Participants not only characterized disinformation based on the specificities of a profile and users' practices, but also on the users' intentions. Using dating platforms with the intention of deceiving others (n=210; 67.96%) was classified as disinformation. Participants consider that the conscious intention to deceive was intended to obtain some type of gain.

In this context, 125 participants (40.45%) stated that those people who were registered on dating platforms for a purpose other than romantic or sexual were disinformation. Intentions that referred to emotional or personal gain, such as being registered to improve self-esteem: accumulate matches, likes, chat or to pass the: be entertained by viewing profiles, were given as examples. The participants justified that, as they understood that the purpose of the dating platforms was not that, these people by being there were deceiving others as to their true intentions.

Studies point to several motivations for using dating platforms that go beyond romantic or sexual encounters (Sepúlveda & Vieira, 2020). Some of them, such as entertainment or passing the time, are framed within the scope of gamification strategies inherent to dating platforms that lead users to continue using them.

Intentions that referred specifically to some form of economic gain were also highlighted: "there are those people who match to try to do some type of business (...). I've already found house sellers, coaches, matchmakers. When you start chatting they attract you to their personal pages and they are only interested in advertising services so you pay for them", explained Sara.

Disinformation, in the context of online dating, must be analysed in a more specific way. The content could be about how the person presented themselves, but also about what they say about themselves in conversations or even about different topics. For the participants, they do not appreciate the need, in the context of online dating, to distinguish between the concepts of disinformation and misinformation.

Such a fact was even more evident in the classification of fake or false profiles and the omission of information as a conscious intention to deceive another person. This awareness of the clear intention to deceive others was what led participants to classify deceptive actions as disinformation, coinciding with the fact that they believed that the objective was to deceive and consequently cause harm (emotional, financial).

Nevertheless, and although theoretically disinformation is "motivated by three factors: to make money; to have political influence, either foreign or domestic; or to cause trouble for

Characteristics of fake and false profiles	N=	%=
Sending links where I have to click	128	41.42
Asking questions that are too personal or for private information	127	41.10
Becoming very intimate quickly	117	37.86
Paying lots of compliments	109	35.27
Borrowing money	105	33.98

Table 3. Characteristics or behaviour of a user with fraudulent intentions. Source: Author's own elaboration.

the sake of it" (Wardle, 2020), users pointed to the importance of taking into account motivations on a personal level, a motivation that has the more natural impact of disinformation: on themselves.

In order to explore users' experiences on dating platforms, we asked participants whether they had encountered disinformation in such a context. Among the questionnaire participants, 208 (67.3%) said yes, 69 (22.3%) were unsure and 32% (10.4%) responded no. As for the interviewees, all reported some type of experience in accordance with their disinformation classification.

"Yes, I was a victim of fraud". Having been a victim of fraud (n=25; 8.1%) perpetrated by someone whose intentions were to deceive others for personal gain was the third experience reported in the context of disinformation on dating platforms. Participants, whether they been a victim of fraud or not, indicated characteristics or behaviour that they considered to be common to imposter profiles (Table 3).

These results reinforce some awareness by participants of some behaviours that can lead to deception and to becoming victims of fraud. Mariana states that "never clicks on the links they send. Even if they seem trustworthy... People hear many stories and are afraid. It could be a phishing scam."

Paulo, a fraud victim by a person he met on an online dating platform, points to more than just the financial consequences, highlighting the emotional impact that the situation had. "I felt like a fool. I trusted her, when in fact she was just interested in recruiting me into a pyramid scheme. It was all a lie. That messed with me. Made me feel insecure."

Joana admitted that she almost fell for the "military scam". Such a scam is characterized by a person pretending to a military on a mission abroad. After intense conversation they end up asking their victims for money. An example that illustrates the concept of "catfishing" (Peterson, 2013).

Testimonies from the interviewees refer to different forms of deception, but also the motivations inherent to it and its consequences. When we asked participants if they knew

someone who had been a victim of fraud, by someone they had met on a dating platform, the number of answers was higher (n=219; 70.9%) than actually being a victim. This data highlights how fraud appears to be common on dating platforms and allows us to reflect on the possibility of users being ashamed of admitting to it.

Regardless of how online daters experience disinformation on dating platforms, they were questioned about their actions towards it. Results show that participants most often reported the behaviour to the platform (n=162; 52.43%), followed by the unmatch action (n=155; 50.16%). At the opposite extreme, those stated as most unlikely to take place were reporting to authorities (n=273; 88.35%) and confronting the person who was deceiving them (n=144; 46.66%).

The question of fraud seems to be quite relevant, both in its impact on users and in the number of cases, with more than two thirds stating they know about at least one attempt of fraud, which shows it is a common disinformation action on online dating platforms. The actions of users regarding fraud confirm it is widespread but also shaping behaviours, as more than half respondents state they take some action at a social level (reporting to the platform) and a personal level (unmatching), but not going to the more extreme options (reporting to the authorities or personal confrontation).

5.2 The impact that disinformation can have on online dating platform usage (RQ3)

Participants (n=158; 51.1%) considered that they could not trust the information circulating on dating platforms being unanimous in holding dating platforms responsible for detecting disinformation in general (n=294; 95.15%), with a special focus on detecting fake and false profiles (n=307; 99.4%). Table 4

Actions users feel dating platforms must take as a way of detecting disinformation	N=	%=
Mandatory profile verification	260	84.14
Be more demanding in the type and amount of data they request	193	62.46
Ask for feedback on matches	167	54.05
Request valid identification document	159	51.46
Mandatory request for a telephone number	72	23.3
Monitor conversations automatically and through keywords	55	17.8

Table 4. Actions users feel dating platforms must take as a way of detecting disinformation. Source: Author's own elaboration.

shows a set of actions that users considered the platforms must take into account as a way of detecting disinformation.

Interviewees pointed out the lack of action of platforms regarding the demand for mandatory information in profile creation or the non-verification of information. Joana said, "it should be mandatory for platforms to request information and verify it. They should pay special attention to profiles with photos of famous individuals, such as models, actors, or musicians. They should clean up profiles based on behaviour or reports." The inaction of platforms in the face of user reports is also highlighted by Duarte. For him, platforms should "adequately monitor the number of reports and understand why they are being made."

Such actions not only highlighted the need of platforms to verify the identity of users, through various mechanisms, but also to monitor conversations. The goal seems to be platforms to identify disinformation at different stages of the online dating process.

Additionally, participants considered that users who were faced with content that was disinformative, either because they perceived that the profile was fake or because they received fake information, had a responsibility to report that profile (n=136; 44.01%).

"Whoever uses it has the power to report it. That function is there. So why not do it?", says Ana, who says she reports all profiles that, in her opinion, behave according to her sense of disinformation. However, regarding profiles, Pedro calls attention to the platform's inaction, since "you make a report, but nothing happens. The profiles are still there..."

In order to assess the impact that disinformation has on the usage of dating platforms, we first asked participants how disinformation made them feel. Most responses revealed a negative impact. Participants stated that both the possibility and the real existence of disinformation in the context of dating platforms made them suspicious (n=175; 56.63%) as reported by Luis: "there is a tendency not to trust information, leading to a permanent feeling of suspicion". This distrust could be related to the profiles they were seeing, the information they received from these profiles, but also the intentions of these people.

Additionally, disinformation could lead users to a feeling of insecurity. Also in this context, users considered that they could not trust others (n=124; 40.13%) and felt deceived (n=110; 35.60%) when they realized that they had been the target of disinformation, feeling sad with the effect of the situation (n=41; 13.3%) and resulting in a decrease in self-esteem for some of the participants (n=29; 9.39%).

We also asked participants how the existence of disinformation affected trust in dating platforms, with more than half

stating that they felt disappointed (n=167; 54.05%), indicating that they were unwilling to use them (n=163; 52.75%).

As a form of protection, questionnaire participants indicated developing a set of strategies. Thus, it was common for participants to look for the profiles of users with whom they were matched on other social media networks (n=294; 95%), in addition to checking the existence of mutual friends to obtain more information through them (n=281; 90.01%), carrying out a textual search on Google (n=272; 88.03%) and asking more questions of the person with whom they had matched in order to obtain more information than that available in the profile (n=303; n=98%). However, actions that could be more complex, such as, for example, making a reverse image search on Google, were stated by practically half of the users (n=154; 49.83%).

The strategies mentioned were not reported to be used with the same frequency. Searching for profiles on other social media networks, textual searches on Google and asking more questions were frequent actions. However, asking questions of mutual friends rarely happens. These data may indicate that there is still some taboo and stigma related to the use of online dating platforms, preferring not to "reveal" to others they use them.

In general, interviewees stated that they carry out the verification that platforms ought to do, highlighting the fact that they were expecting to be able to trust dating platforms, but it was not like that. Pedro made it clear when sharing his opinion: "you can't trust!"

Recognizing dating platforms' limitations in detecting disinformation, interviewees said that assessing users' intentions is something that goes beyond dating platforms. Nonetheless, and although interviewees considered that disinformation was hard to eliminate or prevent, they shared the general feeling that platforms could do more and better of what they are doing.

6. Conclusion

One of the main issues we tried to explore was how online daters define, perceive and experience disinformation, pointing to differences in how it is theoretically conceptualized and how it is experienced.

The most common effects of disinformation, studied by various researchers, often include political consequences, distrust in media and institutions, or social division, which do not seem very relevant in online dating, but also economic impacts, cognitive impacts and psychological effects. The latter two are quite relevant, according to users, since what they perceive as disinformation influences their beliefs and

attitudes, and leads to emotional responses and loss of trust, both in other persons and in the platforms.

The results allow us to widen the disinformation/misinformation concepts in the online dating context, as there seem to be more nuances when trying to classify and interpret the results, and the impact it can have on usage and behaviours.

It can be argued that due to the design of dating platforms (and the lack of security felt), daters might not always be aware of their own disinformative behaviour, and as a way of protecting themselves might even do something that can be perceived as a disinformative behaviour (by omitting some information from their personal profile, for example).

But, in general, both the survey and the interviews point out that users have a strong and wide perception of online dating platforms being places where disinformation and misinformation run almost free, and it can be found in any of the online dating stages: registration/profile construction, matching and discovery. Two thirds stated they had encountered disinformation in such a context.

The users point out as causes for the existence of disinformation on dating platforms the ease of registration and profile creation, the existence of profiles with little or non-factual information, and even the screening and swiping logic.

Despite the classification of high damage or low damage disinformation (Wardle, 2020), online dating users consider any type of dishonesty as a characteristic of disinformation and, as a consequence, these platforms to be an unsafe environment.

One of the keywords, according to the results, is deceiving. As an example, we can point to the existence of catfishing, a specific type of disinformative action in online dating. But the widespread sharing of fake information by those with whom users were matched, especially with the intention of deceiving others for personal gain (whether fraud or not), and any deceptive actions, was classified as disinformation. Also, users do not feel the need to distinguish between the concepts disinformation and misinformation in the online dating context.

In general, all people who were registered on dating platforms for a purpose other than romantic or sexual were considered as sources of disinformation by sharing "content that is intentionally false and designed to cause harm" (Wardle, 2020). In the context of online dating, even with its specificity, disinformation is perceived both by the intent and the effects. The content could be about how the person presented themselves, but also about what they say about themselves in conversations or even about different topics.

One of the more relevant data from the study is the potential amount of fraud, with more than 70% stating they were, or know someone who was, a victim. This data highlights how

fraud appears to be common on dating platforms and allows us to reflect on the possibility of users being ashamed of admitting to it, but shows it is a common disinformation action on online dating platforms.

The actions of users regarding fraud confirm it is widespread but also shaping behaviours, as more than half respondents state they take some action at a social level (reporting to the platform) and a personal level (unmatching), but do not go to the more extreme options (reporting to the authorities or personal confrontation).

On an individual level, the focus of this research, disinformation impacts the psychological states of people exposed, increasing depression, fatigue or panic (Rocha et al., 2023). Users pointed to the importance of considering motivations on a personal level, and the impact of disinformation on themselves, namely the emotional impact that disinformative behaviours, information and actions had during their online dating usage, creating distrust in other persons, in the platforms and in themselves, in terms of self-esteem or security.

When asking participants how disinformation in online dating made them feel, most responses demonstrated a negative impact, making them suspicious and leading users to feeling insecure. The practical consequences are not trusting others, feeling deceived and sad or even having a decrease in self-esteem. The consequence for the platforms is that more than half of users felt disappointed and unwilling to use them.

One relevant outcome is the way dating apps are seen as partially responsible or accountable for such an environment and the circulation of disinformation. The criticism of the platforms themselves point to their need to be more vigilant about what is easily verifiable, including the identity of users, certain profile information, and to monitor conversations. Users even acknowledge that they carry out the verification that platforms ought to.

Users' perception of what disinformative content is in online dating might not fit totally in the most common definitions for disinformation and misinformation, but it has a negative influence on platforms' usages and experience, preventing a full and positive experience. By considering this disinformation problem, users feel obligated to develop and implement defensive strategies to protect themselves and even their own self-esteem and blame the platforms for not taking enough action to protect their users and their own business.

The study might be considered as an exploratory approach to disinformation presence, understanding and consequences in the dating platforms ecosystem. Further research, with wider and representative samples, is needed to explore the results, insights and trends shown in this article. The study would also benefit from interviews with platforms' representatives

in order to obtain their view on disinformation, their strategic actions and plans to combat it.

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