

To Affinity and Beyond: How Otome communities are re-constructing romantic expectations
through engagement with the game 'Love and Deepspace'

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Abstract

The increasing merger of reality and the digital word has meant concepts such as romantic love are given a global platform to be informed, deconstructed and renegotiated beyond the sociocultural confines of one's physical location. '*Games for young women*', or '*Otome*' games, are one such forum for this process. Past research indicates that Otome games allow players to engage in 'low risk, high reward' fictional narratives of love, focusing on passion, emotional engagement, and depth. However, in the wake of new realities where love now embodies fleeting relationships and shallow connections, this study intends to explore how '*Love and Deepspace*' (LADS) players negotiate these juxtaposing beliefs. Further, we explore whether these beliefs are grounded in ideals or achievable reality, and what this means for the future of romantic relationships.

Employing a mixed method design while using the lens of Moscovici's (1961/2008) Social Representations Theory (SRT), Study 1 quantitatively compared the mean scores in levels of romanticism (ROMBEL) alongside romantic partner and relationship ideals (IPR) within a diverse sample of LADS players ($n = 296$) and non-players ($n = 79$). Results revealed higher levels of romanticism and stronger ideals held for romantic partners and relationships for LADS players. 12 participants from diverse cultural backgrounds partook in semi-structured qualitative interviews for Study 2, where thematic analysis of the data revealed 3 themes and 8 further sub-themes. Themes centred how core beliefs of love were formed, how the game reinforces them, and how they conflict with contemporary society. The analysis expands upon Abric's structural approach to SRT, identifying the possible existence of a third structure between the core and periphery: the '*symbolic core*' - a collection of emotionally gratifying love narratives seen as inessential within reality, yet strengthening the central core through engagement with fictional narratives. Future directions and implications of the research are discussed.

Introduction

To love and to be loved in all its forms; once described as perhaps the pinnacle of humanity's maturational achievements by American psychologist Rollo May (1969/2007), the concept of love has been subject to decades of debate surrounding its universality (Bode & Kushnick, 2021; Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992). *Romantic love* - henceforth referred to as love – is defined as a strong physical or emotional attraction and connection that fosters a sense of care (Bode & Kowal, 2023). Contemporarily, it is regarded amongst the most socially valued of its many configurations (Lelaurain *et al.*, 2018). However, the downward trend in traditional romantic relationships alongside an increase in engagement with romantic fiction suggest something deeper is unfolding (Beddington, 2025). Perceived as desirable in media yet unattainable in reality; questions are posed surrounding how and why these juxtaposing narratives of love have come to exist simultaneously. To address this unfolding phenomenon and gain greater understanding into how people negotiate multiple, and often conflicting, beliefs of love, the current study intends to investigate these questions through the lens of *otome* game players, a community who regularly engage with highly idealised interactive portrayals of romance.

Literature review

A Tale as Old as Time: Theoretical frameworks of romantic love

Biological Phenomenon or Social Construction

Many researchers have sought to explain the phenomena of love. Within the last two decades alone, studies which outline love as intrinsic in nature have been prolific (Bode *et al.*, 2025; Bode & Kowal, 2023; Bode & Kushnick, 2021; Fisher *et al.*, 2005, 2006; Sorokowski *et al.*, 2023). Consistent with biological and evolutionary theory, indications of an innateness solidify its position as a cross-cultural universal. However, variations in how love is

experienced and expressed across different sociocultural contexts suggest an additional element of acquisition and dialogical construction (Sprecher *et al.*, 1994; Ferrari & Mancini, 2020).

Traditional and digital media such as books, music and movies play a key role in the proliferation and establishment of these ideas, perpetuating normative scripts of what romantic love should be within a given society (Lukšík & Guillaume, 2018). Embodying Sternberg's Triangular Theory (1986), western ideas of love are typically characterised by idealistic notions centring passion (physical and romantic attraction) intimacy (emotional closeness), and commitment (enduring) (Fletcher *et al.*, 1999; Fletcher *et al.*, 2015). Here, popular myths surrounding displays of love see the concept presented as a double-edged sword; conquering all yet tied to an inevitable loss or suffering (Sánchez-Hernández *et al.*, 2020).

Whilst there is no iteration that is inherently 'truer' than any other, groups and individuals alike must find ways of deciphering the multitude of different representations they are subjected to within the expanding public sphere. Owing to this, the current study seeks to utilise a theoretical approach that heeds the variation – and contestation – of such beliefs. Thus, a useful lens for doing so is found within Social Representations Theory.

Social Representations Theory and Love

First developed by Serge Moscovici (1961/2008), Social Representations Theory (SRT) can be used to explain how individuals and groups construct, interpret, and proliferate ideas of romantic love. Here, unfamiliar (or abstract) concepts are familiarised using a shared framework of practices, beliefs and norms within the established sociocultural context. In turn, these *social representations* are regarded as a reference point for everyday encounters, forming the collective common-sense knowledge widely recognised within a community

(Jovchelovitch & Gervais, 1999; Wagner *et al.*, 1999). Abric's (1993) structural approach to SRT suggests representations consist of a central core and a periphery. Whilst the core is stable, shared, and constant, the periphery is more flexible; malleable at the hands of the individual and adaptable in the face of new knowledge (Abric, 2001). As the core is tied to the history, standards, and values of its cultural origins, changes here may pose representational change and identity threats (Pilishvili & Koyanongo, 2016). The job of the periphery therefore is largely one of protection; a buffer preventing destruction of elements within the core, as well as affirming it through similar knowledge one may encounter.

At the heart of SRT are two key processes: anchoring – where unfamiliar concepts are linked to existing representations using categorization or naming - and objectification – where the abstract is made concrete through association with tangible entities such as images or symbols. As with theories of attachment (Bretherton, 1992) and social learning (Bandura, 1977; Ladd, 2007), SRT stipulates that key socialising agents in the process of anchoring, objectifying and internalising representations in early life are adults and peers (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). Past research shows that with regards to love, most adults view family as the most important knowledge source informing romantic relationships (Wisnieski *et al.*, 2015). Alongside interpersonal encounters, widescale sources of information such as traditional and digital media also play a large role in the dissemination of representations (Inzunza-Acedo, 2017). As such, representations across cultures carry with them an element of subjectivity as well as sameness. For children as young as four years old, *Disney* films and fairytales shape representations in a similar way, where love is anchored in ideas of commitment, attractiveness, closeness and amiability (Isaacson, 2016), and objectified with symbols such as hearts and meaningful dialogue (Brechet, 2015).

At the hegemonic level of widely shared beliefs reinforced by institutions, western notions of passion and commitment amongst others that saturate global media are reflected within the periphery of group representations of love in cross-cultural SRT research (de Andrade & Wachelke, 2011). Reflected in a seminal study by Pilishvili and Koyanongo (2016), collectivist communities such as Brazil, Russia and Central Africa displayed principles such as friendship, patience, companionship and respect at the periphery of their representations. However, their respective cores showed variation, reflecting cultural specificity. For Brazilians, the core centred honesty, reflecting a cultural focus on morality (de Andrade & Wachelke, 2011), whilst for Russians, it was suffering as well as family. Central Africans viewed love as something ‘divine’, guided by a culture that places emphasis upon religiosity (Lukšik & Guillaume, 2022).

In sum, whilst Western hegemonic notions of love diffuse through global media and reflect in peripheral elements of representations within other societies, core beliefs remain culturally bound. SRT highlights these representations are inherently dialogical in nature – actively moulded through interaction between individuals and the external sociocultural environment (Marková, 2003). In a globalised world therefore, individuals and groups are increasingly exposed to a growing diversity of knowledge and interactions. Here, emancipated representations from sub-groups offer alternatives that broaden the scope of love, and polemic perspectives directly challenge hegemonic ideals. Spurred on by technological advancements and social transformations, these new realities may force traditional romantic scripts to be questioned, altered, or abandoned entirely. However, there is limited research investigating how these encounters may influence the structure of representations of love: are new ideas incorporated into the periphery, do they replace existing elements, or do they even reshape the culturally dependent core?

Love in Postnormal Times

As mentioned, rapid social change, political turmoil and an evolving public sphere mark a period of transition. Shrouded in perpetual uncertainty and contradiction, these ‘*postnormal*’ times are fertile ground for the contestation and evolution of what was once fact, normative, or hegemonic (Sardar, 2010). The emergence of a new way of life brings with it a warping of what was once associated with concepts of love, including dating habits, a rise in liquid or jagged love, an increase in romantic apathy, and a shift in social norms. However, their impact on representations of love held at both the peripheral and core level remain largely unexplored.

The New Age of Love: Jagged, Liquid and Commodified

Negatively impacting global mental health (Harari *et al.*, 2022), education (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020), and the economy (Naseer *et al.*, 2023), the COVID-19 pandemic has destabilised a normality once taken for granted within society. The loss of *third spaces* between home and work saw widespread closures of nightclub, cafe, restaurant, bar and entertainment establishments (Mazierska & Rigg, 2021; Sedov, 2022). This not only contributed to feelings of social isolation, inhibiting the ability to connect, but also uprooted the physical locations of dating hotspots once seen as essential within courtship practices at the heart of many representations. Moreover, with younger generations (namely millennials and Gen-Z) decentering drinking culture and traditional dating habits (Burgess *et al.*, 2022), the physical spaces and practices that once anchored hegemonic love scripts become inaccessible or redundant. As a result, pursuits of love are forced to adapt.

Promising to fulfil fundamental needs for real connection, with 50 million worldwide monthly users on Tinder alone (Tinder, 2024), most romantic encounters are now mediated through the world of online dating. However, directly contradicting hegemonic narratives

where love is monogamous and stable (Toker & Ünal, 2024), resultant from this shift is the growth in what Bauman (2003) coins ‘Liquid love’. Here, love takes on a more transient form, self-fulfilling in nature and more reflective of polemic understandings outlined by Giddens’ (1992) *pure relationship*. Within heterosexual relationships especially, love is further characterised as unreliable, connected to loss or harm, and thus compensated for with preferences for short-term casual flirtations that reduce risk; keeping others at arms-length whilst unknowingly perpetuating this pattern (Shaji-George, 2024; Toker & Ünal, 2024). This results in a jagged love cycle, where despite individuals desperately seeking the organic love and sense of belonging offered within the ‘romantic masterplot’ of hegemonic representations, they must now do so within new and unaccommodating environments, creating disenchantment and fatigue in the process (Portolan & McAlister, 2021).

Social Media and Pressure to Perform

Added pressure to perform in line with this romantic masterplot of love also increases when social media creates an atmosphere of surveillance and perfectionism within generations characterised by increasing anxiety and loneliness (Burgess *et al.*, 2022; Kamari, 2024). Pedestalled relationships online showcasing idealised hegemonies of love instigate self-comparison, heighten standards, and increase fear of rejection or failure, making even the simplest pursuits of love feel like high-stakes scenarios (Hughes *et al.*, 2021). Further, alongside the growing acceptance of more emancipated representations of love from LGBTQ(IA+) and polyamorous communities (Roberts, 2019), there rises the possible barriers of misogyny, incel culture, and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric (Czerwinsky, 2024).

From here, we may postulate that these conditions challenge the stability of core representations or create competing scripts in the periphery. Although past research touches upon how these polemic representations contradict beliefs of love at the hegemonic level, it

does not explicitly position them within the framework of SRT. By doing so within the current study, we may gain a greater understanding of how these contradictions are navigated within the periphery and core. For instance, what happens to core beliefs of love meaning intimacy and commitment when the reality reflects otherwise (Sternberg, 1986)?

This volatile mix fosters both the rise of alternative representations and the polemic rejection of romantic love. Unlike Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) which implies an intolerable psychological discomfort associated with holding conflicting beliefs (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019), theories of *cognitive polyphasia* suggest an alternative. An extension of SRT, the term refers to the coexistence of differing, and even contradictory, knowledge systems within the same individual or social group (Jovchelovitch, 2008). This perspective can thus be used to help explain how love and dating can be objectified by both fidelity and commitment as well as conflict and deception simultaneously (Silva *et al.*, 2021). This study intends to use this theory alongside Abric's structural approach to address gaps in the research, exploring how individuals integrate or compartmentalise these contradictions, navigating representations of love in the face of a new normal.

Love and Cyberspace

Perhaps motivated by an amalgamation of the above, current generations have shown an increased romantic apathy in their lived realities. Reflected within decreased marriage intentions, staying single has seemingly become the new normal when marriage is now objectified as an expression of (an almost unachievable) love rather than one of social obligation (Kulathunga & Abeysinghe, 2024). Instead, current generations have been centering alternatives; focusing on self-growth (Burgess *et al.*, 2022), going 'boy sober' to decentre romance completely (Keens, 2024), and seeking safe places where promised hegemonies of love are reliably encountered: within romantic fiction.

As well as providing emotional fulfilment, escapism, and a means for identity exploration (Lawton & Cain, 2022), fictional environments and their resultant communities can function as spaces for encountering, reinforcing or negotiating social representations of love. Here, pre-packaged tropes of '*friends-to-lovers*', 'love triangles', or 'childhood sweethearts' reflect dramatised forms of real-world desires (Stinson *et al.*, 2021). However, they can also idealise these beliefs, creating unrealistic expectations of what love should be (Galloway *et al.*, 2015; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Research from Moss (2019) suggests real-world experience is what mediates this effect. However, past research does not examine contradictions between reality and fiction through the lens of cognitive polyphasia, overlooking the possibility of individuals holding both beliefs simultaneously across different context rather than completely disregarding the salience of one or the other. Moreover, much of past research focuses on the passive consumption of these ideals within literature, movies and television, raising questions as to whether the same trend would be found where idealised narratives are engaged with in more interactive formats.

Japanese in origin, *Otome* games – or 'games for young women' – see a predominantly female audience of players pursuing a series of virtual male suitors alongside intricate storylines and dynamic gameplay (Giard, 2024). Here, much of the previously mentioned romantic tropes play out alongside additional themes prominent within East Asian portrayals of love popular in K-dramas, manga, and anime. These include self-sacrifice, '*Yandere*' or overly 'obsessive' love, and '*Jeong*' – emotional intelligence where being deeply attuned brings wordless understanding alongside selflessness and a profound sense of belonging (Chang, 2024; Nelson, 2021; Randazzo, 2016). Otome game narratives thus align with both global and more culturally specific idealised romantic narratives.

Centring themes of '*yuanfen*' or fated love deeply rooted in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions (Li & Chi, 2020), 3d Chinese otome game '*Love and Deepspace*' (LADS)

is gaining traction worldwide. Within a sci-fi fantasy-based narrative, the game follows the player (also referred to as ‘MC’) partaking in combat gameplay and various interactive features as they navigate romantic encounters with 5 possible love interests. Surpassing 50 million global active users in January 2025 (IGN Global Studios, 2025), alongside its proven ability to fulfil needs for emotional support and companionship in a safe environment (Hidayat & Gietty Tambunan, 2025), its rapidly growing popularity raises some other important questions: are idealised narratives of love suddenly resonating so greatly with diverse global audiences as a result of postnormal times? And if so, how do they interact with core and peripheral structures of existing representations? In the past, otome games – including LADS - have proven to be functional spaces for challenging and exploring social norms of gender and sexuality, negotiating feminist identities as well as regaining agency over romantic narratives (Jha, 2025; Liu, 2024). Though, none have had quite the global reception as LADS has, raising questions as to whether it may facilitate negotiations of love representations in the same way cross-culturally. With the game still in its infancy, however, research into this topic is rudimentary.

The Current Study

As stated previously, media is a powerful force within the dialogical conception and proliferation of love representations. As such, positioned at the intersection of hegemonic love, globalised media, and personal meaning-making, games like LADS offer a unique perspective on how representations are sustained, challenged, or blended in an increasingly globalised and uncertain society. As such, the current study intends to dissect the following research question using a mixed methods study: *“Exploring how otome game players negotiate social representations of romantic love”*. By comparing otome players and non-players, study 1 intends to examine whether otome engagement is linked to higher romantic

standards or more idealised beliefs using quantitative surveys. Based on past research, the following hypotheses will be tested:

Hypothesis 1. Otome game players will demonstrate higher levels of romanticism than non-players.

Hypothesis 2. Otome game players will have stronger ideals for romantic relationships and partners than non-players

Moreover, through qualitative interviews, study 2 utilises the lens of SRT to gain further insight into how players negotiate these contradictory representations of love (cultural, idealised, and emergent postnormal narratives) within the core and periphery of their beliefs. The following section outlines the methodology used for Study 1.

Study 1

Methods

Research design

Past research has demonstrated that romanticism along with romantic partner and relationship ideals can be reliably assessed using quantitative measures (Fletcher *et al.*, 1999; Weaver & Ganong, 2004). As a result, the study implemented a between-subjects quantitative design consisting of two surveys (Appendix A) to compare between players and non-players of LADS.

Participants

The survey had 488 respondents recruited using volunteer sampling between 14/04/25 and 17/07/25. Before analysis, survey data was checked for completion and whether the participant had indicated agreement to take part. After data cleaning based on these criteria, the final analysis included data from 375 participants. 296 were players, and 79 were non-players of LADS. Average participant age was 26 years, the minimum 18, and maximum 78. Of the participants, 80% identified as female, 7% as male, 11% as non-binary or third gender, and 2% specified other. Relationship status was also recorded, with 9% dating, 9% married, 34% single, 3% specified as other, and 45% unspecified.

During recruitment, exceptional interest was shown by the LADS player community, which meant matching the sample size within the non-player community proved difficult. Whilst diverse data was also obtained on ethnicity and nationality, collection was via 'free text' format rather than a pre-defined selection of nominal categories. This was problematic as participants input identical categories in different formats (e.g., 'Australian', 'australian' and 'Aussie') leading to an inability to correctly group data in R which is case sensitive and requires specificity. In future, caution should be taken during survey creation to ensure

demographic variables can be measured optimally by software such as R-studio at the analysis stage.

Instruments

Participants beliefs surrounding romantic relationships. This element was measured using a version of the Romantic Beliefs Scale (ROMBEL) previously implemented by Weaver and Ganong (2004). Participants responded to 15 items (e.g., “I believe if another person and I love each other we can overcome any differences and problems that may arise.”) using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was reliable ($\alpha = 0.89$)

Standards for relationships and romantic partners. Participant’s standards for potential or current romantic partners were measured using shortened versions of the Ideal Partner and Relationship scales (IPR) (Fletcher *et al.*, 1999). A reduction of items from the initial full scales allowed for a succinct flow of questions within the survey without compromising their validity and robustness, as previously demonstrated by Fletcher and Simpson (2000). A 7-point Likert scale was used (1 = extremely unimportant, 7 = extremely important) where participants rated the importance of items across 5 subscales. Vitality (e.g., “Attractive appearance”), warmth (e.g., “Understanding”) and resources (e.g., “Financially secure”) measured partner standards, whilst passion (e.g., “Fun”) and loyalty (e.g., “Honest”) measured relationship standards. Cronbach’s alpha was reliable ($\alpha = 0.88$)

Procedure & Ethics

Digital posts including a recruitment poster (Appendix B) were uploaded across social media platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly twitter) and Reddit to recruit player and non-player participants. In particular, the subreddit ‘r/LoveAndDeepspace’ acted as a central hub within the community, hosting over 144,000 players and highlighting its aptness for the

recruitment process. Participants were directed to Qualtrics via web link and presented with and information sheet and consent form (Appendix C) signed electronically prior to taking part. Taking ethics into consideration, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured where no personal or identifiable data, including IP addresses, were collected. The right to withdraw was also explained to participants. Once consent was granted, participants completed the survey, starting with the IPR scale before moving onto the ROMBEL questions. On completion of the survey, participants were presented with a debrief form (Appendix D), where contact information and resources were outlined in cases of experiencing emotional harm. Ethical approval (application number 530887) for the entirety of the project was obtained from LSE Ethics Committee on 26/03/25 (Appendix E).

Results

Data was analysed in R-studio using a series of r-scripts (Appendix F). Prior to running statistical tests, assumption checks were carried out for both groups.

For ROMBEL data, a Shapiro-Wilk test indicated the data did not significantly deviate from normality for players, $W(296) = 0.9957, p = 0.5953$, and non-players, $W(79) = 0.97642, p = 0.1512$. Based on the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, a Levene's test indicated unequal variances, $F(1, 372) = 9.12, p = .003$. As a result, a Welch's independent samples t-test was used to assess Hypothesis 1, revealing a significant difference between the groups, $t(105) = 3.01, p = .003$, Cohen's $d = 0.41$. The player group ($n = 296$) had a higher mean score of 3.99 ($SD = 0.95$) while the non-player group ($n = 79$) had a mean score of 3.54 ($SD = 1.23$). As a result, we can reject the null hypothesis, accepting Hypothesis 1 that players show higher levels of romanticism than non-players.

To test Hypothesis 2, again a Welch's t-test was used when results of the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated the data did not significantly deviate from normality for players, $W(296) =$

0.99653, $p = 0.7697$, and non-players, $W(79) = 0.9834$, $p = 0.4188$, and a Levene's test indicated unequal variances, $F(1, 373) = 5.67$, $p = .018$). The Welch's t-test revealed a significant difference between the groups, $t(106) = 4.29$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.58$. The player group ($n = 296$) had a higher mean score of 5.3 ($SD = 0.55$) while the non-player group ($n = 79$) had a lower mean score of 4.94 ($SD = 0.7$). As a result, we can reject the null hypothesis, accepting Hypothesis 2 that players show stronger ideals for romantic relationships and partners than non-players.

Discussion

LADS players show higher levels of romanticism alongside stronger partner and relationship ideals than non-players. As such, results parallel past findings from other forms of romantic fiction (Galician & Merskin, 2007; Hefner & Wilson, 2013). This may signal an association between consumption of interactive idealised narratives of love such as LADS and the harbouring of more idealised beliefs. Here, love representations appear guided by ideas of soulmates, understanding, and undying passion common within the game. However, from these results alone we cannot guarantee whether LADS is the sole cause of these idealised beliefs for players or whether any pre-existing notions of love had led them here instead.

Moreover, with beliefs surrounding romance and perfect matches seemingly evolving within society (Toker & Ünal, 2024), holding onto such ideals seems inconsistent with reality. Thus, many questions beyond this study remain. Bearing in mind the dialogical nature of representations and their ability to be negotiated, where first-hand experience and parental guidance offer the first insights into love, are these notions then displaced in favour of the ideal, or do they coexist as cognitive polyphasia would suggest? Moreover, are these idealised love representations situated at the stable core or flexible periphery? And, if existing

at the core, how are these beliefs maintained when 'postnormal love' seemingly provides constant contradiction rather than reinforcement? Dissecting these themes qualitatively within study 2 may provide greater insight into these processes.

Study 2

Methods

Data collection

Past research into social representations of love have largely focused on quantitative methods (such as free word association tasks), used to establish initial understandings of what these shared beliefs are (Pilishvili & Koyanongo, 2016; Silva *et al.*, 2021). However, less insight is provided into the formation process and motivations behind these core and peripheral representations. In the current study therefore, the use of individual semi-structured interviews will ensure a rich data output where follow-up questions provide added detail and flexibility (Carruthers, 1990). In tandem with an extensive literature review, findings from a pilot study conducted during the MY421 qualitative methods course at LSE helped to inform the interview topic guide (Appendix H) and research direction. As a result, questions built upon topics of emotional need fulfilment and LADS disillusioning the reality of romance, as well as how postnormal representations of love are interpreted. The ‘Microsoft Teams’ platform was used to conduct and record interviews using its inbuilt software.

Participants

Twelve participants aged between 21 and 62 who currently play LADS were recruited using volunteer sampling. Of the twelve, two were married, one in a relationship, one in a ‘situationship’, and eight currently single (though most noted previous relationship experience). Participants were culturally diverse, coming from Southeast Asia, Canada, Australia, North America, and the Caribbean. All participants identified as female and have been playing LADS for varying durations ranging from 3 weeks to over a year.

Procedure

The study was advertised alongside study 1 in a recruitment post on the subreddit 'r/LoveAndDeepspace', a central point for information and interaction within the community. After expressing interest in partaking, participants were electronically sent the participant information and consent sheet (Appendix C). Once signed and sent back, participants took part in a semi-structure interview.

To accommodate the global nature of the player community, 1-to-1 interviews were conducted online via 'Microsoft Teams'. Confidentiality and the right to withdraw were explained to participants before their written consent was obtained. Here, they agreed for the interview to be digitally recorded, used to aid transcription at later stages. Interviews lasted between 25 to 57 minutes. Upon completion of the interview, participants were debriefed verbally before being sent a debrief form electronically (Appendix D). Here they were again reminded of their right to withdraw.

Data analysis method

Thematic analysis (TA) was chosen to analyse verbatim transcripts due to its systematic nature and affordances of flexibility (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Here, interpretive depth was maintained by identifying patterns in the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase approach: identifying a series of initial codes, developing them into sub-themes and themes, and uniting them within an overarching global theme, as seen within the thematic codebook (Appendix I). Data was coded by hand and a coding diary was kept, organising data and aiding the grouping of themes and sub-themes (Appendix K). An iterative style was used where, though largely data driven, past research and anecdotal findings also held weight in the initial meaning making of codes. For this reason, during this process interview transcripts

were consistently consulted to reaffirm relevancy of generated codes and themes as well as consistently acknowledging any possible biases.

Ethical Considerations & Reflexivity

Data was stored securely on LSE One Drive which ensured encryption and data protection. Participant transcripts were fully anonymised and no identifiable information was included. When discussing experiences involving love, inevitable sub-themes of heartbreak, loneliness, sexuality or discrimination may cause emotional distress or unease (Verhallen *et al.*, 2019). Thus, one's ethical competence (learnt during LSE MSc courses MY421 and PB410) was relied upon to determine participant wellbeing by maintaining vigilance over their emotional and behavioural cues.

Considering one's positionality, prior knowledge of otome games including LADS, as well as being female, fosters opportunity to build rapport with participants. Advantageous to the interview process, relevant follow-up questions can more easily be implemented with the understanding of game jargon and female experiences. However, there is the additional possibility of this knowledge creating subconscious bias during the interpretation of data. Consistent acknowledgement and reflection on these possible biases was practiced and past research continually consulted to maintain a broad perspective throughout the research process.

Analysis

The current analysis utilises and expands upon Abric's (1993) Central Core Theory within SRT. Participants' narratives revealed how romantic love is anchored within a 'central core' of ideals; characterised by a set of shared values consistent across contexts, distinguishable from the more fluid and adaptable 'periphery'. Through the coalescence of knowledge systems within familial, personal and media frameworks, core ideals were

grounded within a plausible reality and included concepts such as authenticity, emotional depth, and long-term commitment. Despite this, contention between these ideals (central core) and the unaccommodating reality of forming romantic connections in post-normal times (periphery) highlights the process of cognitive polyphasia: with the otome game players harbouring inconsistent beliefs and rationalities surrounding romantic love simultaneously.

In negotiating such tension, participants periodically invoked a possible third, novel layer within this structure — a collection of emblematic, emotionally gratifying attributes (e.g., fated love, devotion, dependability) seen as inessential to relationships within concrete-reality yet still holding substantial significance, especially within otome gaming experiences. To this I proffer the potential idea of a '*symbolic core*', encapsulating this intermediary buffer zone. This concept lends explanation for participants' ability to maintain coherence within their representations of romantic love whilst negotiating juxtaposing influences of social norms, lived experience and media portrayals of the ideal (Figure 1). Across the subsequent three themes (Figure 2) we explore the salience of these representational layers across various contexts, amounting to the global theme of 'representational homeostasis'; maintaining equilibrium within the core.

Figure 1
Central Core Network incorporating the possible 'symbolic core'

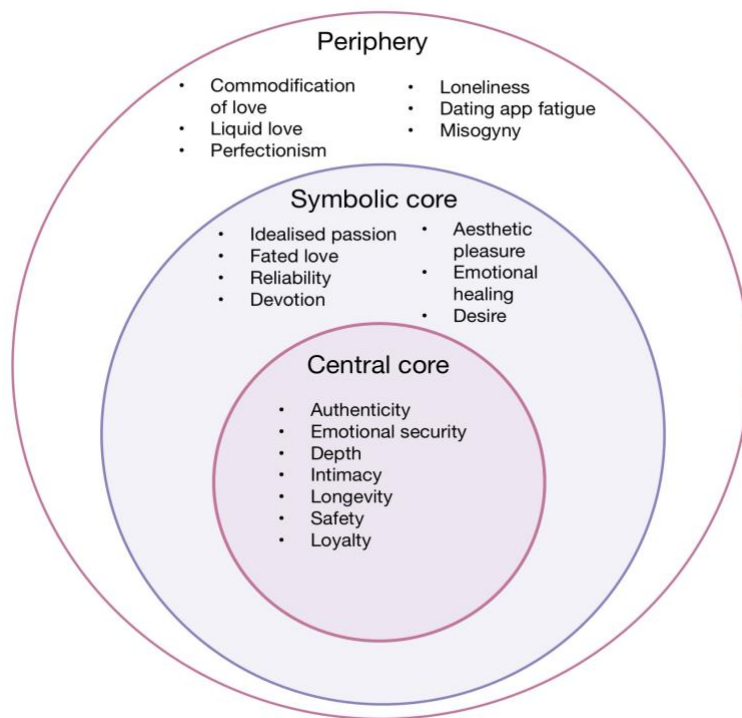
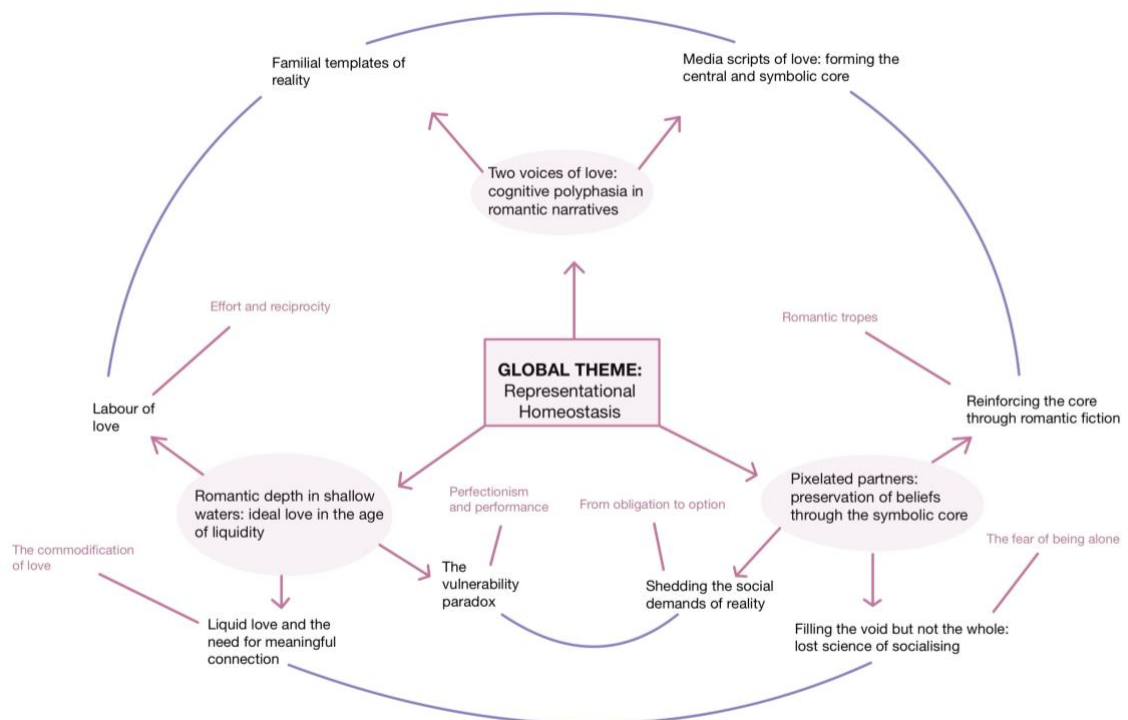


Figure 2
Thematic Network Map



Two Voices of Love: Cognitive Polyphasia in Romantic Narratives

Discrepancies between representational knowledge grounded within tangible reality contrasting the unrealisable yet desired ideal create contradictory expectations surrounding romantic love. Whilst media narratives promote romantic love in a pristine and idealistic manner, representations anchored in familial frameworks and personal experience disillusion the former. Despite reiterating a clear distinction between the two, participants use both knowledge systems to inform the creation of a ‘central core’: where the salience of romantic ideals is often determined by their verisimilitude within the concrete world.

Familial Templates of Reality

Echoing the work of Duveen and Lloyd (1990), within formative years, participants establish the familial network as half of the nucleus from which the formation and entrenchment of social representations takes place. When focusing on the concept of romantic love, primary caregivers play an imperative role in anchoring notions within it (such as behaviours and expressions of love, relationship dynamics or expectations, and what to look for in a partner), as well as – importantly - the valence attached to such notions. Deeply rooted within the immediate sociocultural context, these relational romantic schemas based on observable reality act as an initial reference point for what romantic love entails, allowing individuals to apply this knowledge when interpreting potential romantic encounters in future. Elder siblings and knowledgeable others may also take on this role. The coalescence of culture and core beliefs of love within such schemas is demonstrated by Participant 1 (P1), where acts of service (or the behavioural expressions of love) take precedence, a self-professed reflection of their cultural standing within the Dominican Republic.

“When I mentioned that companionship that is in a way sacrificial, is what I've been seeing with my, my grandparents, my own mother, and my family. Because

I've been shown that when you love someone, you do things for them. [...] you are caring for them” [P1, age 29, single, 110-115]

The concept of love thus becomes anchored via familial interactions and culture, where observable behaviour orients one's understanding of love within reality. P5 further demonstrates how a threshold of expectations for future romantic partners is set through the anchoring of proactiveness in being a discernible indicator of a good romantic partner.

“My dad has been an active caregiver. Like, he isn't really an affectionate dad, but he does a lot of the chores, and that really set the standards for how I wanted my future partners to be like.” [P5, age 33, single, 206-208]

Drawing on Abric's (1993) structural approach to SRT, these key concepts reflect a central core: stable, shared, and normative elements that organise the representation across both real and imagined contexts. The valence assigned to elements within familial and experiential schemas however is not always positive. For many, familial schemas which negatively highlight aspects of romantic love prompt an internal dialogical process where these aspects are decentred from the core, avoided, or no longer deemed a necessity in future encounters.

“[...] So... I don't think I wanna get married [laughs] because of that. But I want to be together with someone I love.” [P8, age 25, in a relationship, 204-206]

Significantly, here for P8, the rejection of an inherited anchor results in the decoupling of love from marriage within the dominant social representation, allowing the two concepts to exist separately without a reliance on one another.

Media Scripts of Love: Forming the Central and Symbolic Core

Whilst representations grounded within familial observation and personal experience tended to form the stable ‘core’ of beliefs surrounding romantic love, alongside this, universal across all participant recounts was the prominence of traditional and digital media in defining romantic expectations. Transcending their original sociocultural contexts and disseminating globally, from the enduring love taught within classic romances of Penelope and Odysseus, to the importance of ‘finding joy in the mundane’ emphasised through Japanese slice-of-life anime, some of these aspects were assessed as having plausible standing within concrete reality. Here, elements such as reciprocity, partnership, depth and communication as well as “*trust, loyalty, [and] being devoted to one another*” [P10, age 21, single, 143-146] corroborated existing knowledge systems and were subsequently further embedded within the central core.

Conversely, whilst depictions of unconditional devotion, fated love, or dramatic sacrifice, were separated as ‘not real’, ‘idealised’ or even a “*a naive perspective on love.*” [P8, 373-374], participants still retained them as something emotionally resonant, with P10 remarking:

“It’s like, fictional. It’s [laughs] it’s like the high standards of like, you would like do anything for each other. Like I would absolutely love that kind of love.”

[P10, 150-152]

Here, these more fictionalised yet valued aspects within representations of romantic love clustered to form a separate zone that I conceptualise as the “*symbolic core*”: a semi-stable layer of representations where media-borne fantasies of romantic love are not staunchly believed, yet still desired. P8 sums up this this liminal zone, sat between core beliefs and the periphery of reality, stating:

“[...] growing up, I kind of wanted someone who is able to do those stuff for me. And the thing is, um [pause] it just feels like this is the idealised version of love that I want. And... I kind of don't want to give that up.” [P8, 390-395]

Cognitive polyphasia explains how both cores are able to co-exist, and moreover, how they may persist in the face of a juxtaposing reality. As will be explored throughout the subsequent themes, the symbolic core has a significant role to play in the protection of core beliefs from contradictions encountered within lived experiences, maintaining some semblance of representational coherence.

Romantic Depth in Shallow Waters: Ideal Love in the Age of Liquidity

The following theme highlights tensions between the central core and periphery of the concrete world. Here, participants' core beliefs surrounding romantic love juxtapose their knowledge of the immediate reality, though both continue to co-exist. The idea that LADS is used to emotionally reconcile this contradiction is introduced.

The Vulnerability Paradox

For many participants, within the central core of their representations exists the belief that love is authenticity and emotional security. Here, moral categories such as honesty, trust and remaining true to oneself anchor romantic love. Whether protecting emotional resources through wanting to be honest with one's own feelings rather than *“fooling around and waiting for something to happen”* [P8, 226-233], seeing *“lies in general”* [P9, age 22, single, 78-81] as a dealbreaker for romantic relationships, or needing to *“have trust as a baseline.”* [P12, age 20, single, 64-66], for participants, this lens is consistently applied when evaluating the efficacy of love within the game as well as beyond in their lived experiences. Interestingly however, participants also expressed the pervasive awareness of an

unaccommodating cycle within the periphery of their representations: a ‘*vulnerability paradox*’.

Despite a desire for authenticity and security, participants divulged how society creates an unwillingness to render oneself vulnerable when forming sincere connections, fearing the risk of emotional harm or rejection in the process. With participants citing reasons such as the perception of having to live up to unreasonable standards portrayed in the media, perceived external scrutiny, and experiences of romantic encounters characterised by individuals holding ulterior motives, P4 summarises how this vulnerability paradox directly contradicts the central core. Here, they state that society struggles with:

“Being honest with where you are and what you're looking for because you're worried it's gonna possibly scare away somebody. But it's only through that honesty are you going to be able to find that somebody” [P4, 926-936].

These juxtaposing systems of knowledge, however, are reconciled through participants’ interaction with Love and Deepspace. Here, authenticity and emotional security are directly engaged with in a way that satisfies and maintains the core belief despite a co-existing knowledge of reality. Alongside a ‘flaws-and-all’ approach to characterisations of the love interests where the good and bad is laid bare, participants valued the transparency within the narratives of romance and the ‘low-stakes’ environment these pre-coded stories afford. P12 explains a willingness to invest emotionally, financially, and temporally in a space where risk from vulnerability can be mitigated by the predictable nature of familiar romantic tropes:

“[...] love interests in the real world, there comes a lot of like... danger, right? [...] you're inevitably going to have to sacrifice something. [...] Whereas in the game, like Rafayel, you know, Caleb and stuff, there's no, there's no danger for

me. [...] I have emotional investment in the characters, but number one, I can always replay the card, like [laughs] you know” [P12, 566-586]

Similarly, not having to decipher hidden intentions and decode meaning was particularly important for neurodivergent players, who noted that the reality of possible dishonesty when vulnerable in a high-risk environment is “*exhausting because you have to analyse everything. Nothing is free, nothing comes to you naturally.*” [P6, age 62, single, 505-509] whereas in the game “[...] it’s... I get what I see, and there’s no unexpected surprises that would negatively impact me.” [P3, age 25, single, 249-251]. This is in direct contrast with their knowledge of reality, where the verbalization of intentions often misaligns with behaviours. P10 recalls, “*There was one time on Hinge where I literally got five matches in a row, and all of them just wanted sex. [...] And they all had like, long term li- relationship on their profile*” [P10, 595-605]. Within the game, the idea of authenticity is thus maintained whilst neutralising beliefs of harm or deception that comes with it in the concrete world.

Liquid love and the need for meaningful connection

The propensity for surface-level connections fuelled by unclear intentions extends far beyond the vulnerability paradox. Prevalent in these findings was the recurring lamentation surrounding modern relationships, characterised by a lack of permanence and an inability to form deep connections within them. A reflection of “Jagged Love” (Portolan & McAlister, 2021), participants described the bleak nature of online dating; a cycle of burnout and fatigue from failed ‘talking stages’ — conversing fruitlessly within dating apps — where “[...] people were so flaky [...] not even just ghosting. Like, they didn’t even read my profile. [...] So demoralising. They, they have to ask for my name and I’m like, this is such a turn off.” [P5, 156-164]. Yet, this is paired with an inability to tear away from these modes of romantic love and connection when, as will be explored further in theme 3, factors such as the COVID-

19 pandemic and subsequent loss of third spaces have meant “*now it's just really hard to, like, meet people and, yeah, just date. Most of it has gone online*” [P7, age 21, single, 581-582].

This normalisation of ‘shopping around’ for love and in turn fostering shallow romances with a perceived lack of commitment is tied to Bauman’s (2003) liquid love theory, well reflected within P1’s experience with an ex-boyfriend:

“Social media makes you think in a very distort- distorted way that there's always someone waiting for you, someone better waiting for you [...] He wanted to, to date more people to be sure that he wanted to be with me [...]” [P1, 505-513]

This reality of superficial romantic connections characterising the periphery directly contradicts yet another representation within the central core for LADS players; romantic love meaning ‘partnership’: anchored by depth, longevity and commitment. Here, romantic love is not represented as something temporary or fleeting but instead understood as envisioning spending “*the rest of your life together with this person.*” [P3, 52]. It is displayed within the emphasis of growing together, needing the alignment of long-term goals, and grounded in the depth of “*Knowing and understanding the other person, like to the point where you don't even need to, like, speak [...] you both are just so deeply connected in that sense.*” [P7, 45-49], echoing aforementioned ideas of ‘Jeong’ (Chang, 2024).

Knowledge from the periphery of their lived experiences however integrates ideas that emphasis is no longer placed upon long-term goals and permanence but instead short-term gratification and fitting in with societal norms; often representing a means to an end or a social symbol in the performance of love. P12’s observations surrounding the dating culture in South Korea emphasise this:

“You'll get into relationship's pretty fast, but not, not because they like the person, not because they love the person, but just because of like the, the image of being in a relationship. like a lot of holidays in Korea like Christmas and stuff like that, um are like couple holidays. So, it's like, if you don't have, if you don't have a date on that, you're kind of seen as, I don't know, a loser, I guess” [P12, 786-795]

Participants' interactions with, and praise of, the LADS characters directly reflects this desire to connect meaningfully, revealing their capacity to continue holding onto these core values despite conflicting knowledges of reality. Here, the appeal lies within peeling back the layers of each character through main narratives, 'myth' content, and date 'cards' to understand them completely in ways reality won't permit, with P7 stating:

“I think that's where the emotional bond mostly comes from. 'Cause that's where you get to know them. And it's like, um, you know, you get to know their likes, their dislikes, their quirks and whatnot. Like what makes them who they are.”
[P7, 398-403]

Labour of love

Within the periphery, many felt that from this liquidity emerges a commodification of romantic love, transitioning towards goals of self-servitude rather than partnership and consistent effort, where now “[...] it's more a connection based on, like, hedonism” **[P11, age 25, married, 376-380]**. This idea contrasts yet another element within the central core: that love is effort. Here, the testament of true love is not the ability to maintain permanence over passion, but instead to persevere even in its absence. Thus, for the otome game players, love is often evaluated through this lens: represented as mutual, at times laborious, and ultimately sustained. This sentiment is grounded in the reality of love representations, where

“it's not just that you love each other, but also that there are negotiations that must be made, compromises that must be made.” [P9, 54-55] and good conflict resolution is seen as essential as *“if... the way they handle those rough times is... wrong for you, then you shouldn't stay.” [P4, 196-198]*. Here, love is seen as something requiring consistent labour from both parties to maintain it.

In LADS, this core belief is reinforced when the love interests show consistent effort when *“the dedication or like the, the lengths that the guys will go for, go to for the MC is very different.” [P3, 138-140]*. Despite enjoying these portrayals, participants also consistently expressed awareness that the lack of conflict was not a reflection of representations of love in reality, with P6 stating:

“The person wants everything that you want at the same time, it's always perfect. That's not how it works in the real life [laughs].” [P6, 71-72]

Pixelated Partners: Preservation of Beliefs Through the Symbolic Core

As demonstrated by the previous theme, when one's concrete reality contradicts elements within the central core, despite the added difficulty in realising them, participants choose not to abandon these values. Instead, Love and Deepspace is used, not as a replacement for romantic connection, but rather as a buffer zone or 'symbolic core': where idealised romantic tropes allow participants to emotionally engage with and pseudo-fulfil core desires through fiction. This in turn protects core beliefs from the erosive frustrations of reality. The following theme explores how despite acknowledging that the tropes may not be 'real', the emotional experience they evoke is, helping them hold onto deeper values within the central core without disturbance. Across the coming subthemes, it is demonstrated that LADS protects the core in three symbolic ways: satisfying unmet emotional needs, buffering

social harm such as misogyny, and fulfilling a need for companionship when other avenues are limited.

Reinforcing the core through romantic fiction

Unlike the stable and essential core of representational beliefs, where elements are seen as “*certain standards that they have to meet.*” [P10, 118-121], the symbolic core’s function is more emblematic. As well as providing entertainment through the gacha system, combat gameplay, mini games such as the ‘claw machine’, and “*the fact that um, new events come like every week or two weeks*” [P9, 254], LADS also serves to indirectly reinforce the central core through fantasy, where “[...] *they speak to our, like, peoples like actual like underlying feel- feelings and stuff*” [P3, 168-169] whilst contradicting representations of reality.

Knowledge encountered within the periphery where love is regarded as uncertain or fleeting directly contrasts participants’ engagement with Love and Deepspace. Here, central themes revolve around fated love and destiny, each love interest intrinsically connected to the main character across multiple lifetimes. As such, the characters show an unwavering dedication towards the MC; their passion everlasting, love seemingly undying, and despite an innocuous level of angst, encompassing an eternal “*honeymoon phase*”, where “*all these wonderful, beautiful things are happening*” [P4, age 35, married, 636]. Despite participants’ inner reasoning informing beliefs that this type of love is largely unactualizable, their enjoyment of this fated love symbolically aligns with representations within the core: reaffirming the idea that love is something secure and long-lasting, but in a way that is more sensationalized than reality. Common across many participants, P5 details this juxtaposition when discussing the lack of realism in fated love tropes, stating “*I don't believe in soulmate theory, but I, I do enjoy reading about it. It appeals to me emotionally*” [P5, 490-491]

Moreover, contrasting realities of liquid love, character tropes such as the ‘*boy-next-door*’ also reflect core beliefs of loyalty and commitment where love is slow and full of depth. On the opposite end of this spectrum, the ‘*yandere*’ - or ‘obsessive love’ - trope serves the same function. Despite the latter being regarded toxic to some, P11 admits “*I do like gra- I do like that. The security I guess behind it.*” [P11, 360]. Although tamer within LADS, characters such as *Caleb* fulfil both elements simultaneously, with P9 stating “*He has the slight possessiveness part that I really want in a partner. Um, and he's also... Golden retriever [laughs] he's very devoted.*” [P9, 319-321].

Similarly, P8 acknowledges how recurrent themes of ‘self-sacrifice’ and passion embedded within the symbolic core can live on through their interactions with LADS character *Rafayel*. Despite having a relationship that encapsulates elements of her central beliefs surrounding love, dynamics with her boyfriend caused a ‘*whiplash*’ between media representations of love and reality, revealing “*This person has their own feelings, they're never gonna be able to prioritize you all the time, they have their own commitments [...].*” [P8, 182-185]. Despite this, and noting repeatedly throughout that “*it's fiction, so I understand how unrealistic it is as compared to real life*” [P8, 382-383], P8 never completely abandons the idea of this ‘*Lemurian*’ [P8, 102] kind of love embodied by *Rafayel*. Instead, these beliefs are symbolically fulfilled and maintained by playing LADS, where amongst being closer to the ‘adventurous’ personality ideal that she craves, “*Rafayel gave up his whole civilization for MC*” [P8, 362]. Whilst noting that a 1-to-1 mapping of these traits in reality is unrealistic (and unwanted), many participants stated the game was a “*good and healthy reminder to not lower your standards, definitely*” with P2 imploring people to not settle for “*something that's not at least like, 10% of what they offer in the game.*” [P2, Age 32, *Situationship*, 327-334]

Shedding the social demands of reality

It is not solely the fantastical elements that separate reality from fiction in representations of love for players. Here, deemed unattainable were not only the levels of physical attractiveness displayed by the love interests, but also the levels of emotional availability they continually showcase. Participants noted the maturity, responsibility and emotional intelligence within their characterisations were a desired rarity in the concrete world, with P5 stating: “[...] *in emotional depth, I would say only 30% realistic. Because I think usually men don't try to dive that deep into their emotions.*” [P5, 412-413].

Amongst the reasons cited for this reality, the most prevalent were an overwhelming rise in misogyny, toxic masculinity and ‘incel culture’. Here, unrealistic (and heavily gendered) standards disseminating across social media were perceived to create exaggerated narratives of “*he has to be 6 foot and make 6 figures. Or the woman, the chick has to like, go to the gym and like, never had sex.*” [P3, 386-387], misrepresenting beliefs and instigating a “*divide between us that doesn't really quite exist in the game.*” [P7, 457-458]. Participants also mentioned how beliefs surrounding beauty and relationship standards contributed to these representations; and that for members of the LGBTQIA+ community particularly, navigating love is even harder when “*They're rooted in so many different like isms and like phobias and misogyny and all this, [laughs] all this like, awful stuff just rolled into one.*” [P11, 421-423]. Alongside this, “*the rise of like, homophobia [...] especially transphobia*” [P11, 374-375] has even led to the omission of these communities from normative narratives of love completely. Here, the pressing issue that many acknowledge and P11 verbalizes is that despite knowing societal change must happen to correct these problems, many participants perceive that it “*definitely won't happen for a while, I think unfortunately.*” [P11, 435].

Owing to this, participants recall the slowing down in people's pursuits of romantic relationships, staying single, or seeking alternatives such as LADS. Some even decentre romantic love altogether, prioritising platonic connection which they deemed just as fulfilling. To this, P7 states *"if they can't treat me right, but the characters in the game can treat me right, then it's like [...] I guess I'm just not in a rush, I suppose, to like, find a real relationship."* [P7, 480-486], lending possible explanation for the current downturn in marriage intentions and long-term romantic relationships (Kulathunga & Abeysinghe, 2024). Further, for P3, all their knowledge structures (central core, symbolic core, and periphery) were used to conclude *"romantic relationships don't-, aren't that important to me or they're not that... necessary, or even... like, magical or as common as I guess like Disney movies make it seem like."* [P3, 97-100].

Within the safety of LADS however, the symbolic core appeals to core beliefs that love is emotionally intimate and somewhere you feel safe and secure, with P7 stating about character Zayne, *"it makes me feel like I can shut my brain off around him and I don't have to think for myself for once."* [P7, 335-336]. However, unlike with CDT where withdrawing completely from either belief may resolve this disconnect, participants remained steadfast in their ideas that despite the validation of this escape, holding onto knowledge from reality is just as important as protecting the core. P4 states:

"[...] what I'm trying to get at is just that you have to come back. You have to handle reality at some point. And maybe even take some of the interactions with you forward into, into your future interactions." [P4, 869-871]

Filling the void but not the whole: the lost science of socialising

Participants recurrently expressed that the pursuit of love in postnormal society is increasingly motivated by “*the fact that people are afraid to be alone.*” [P3, 390] rather than the desire for mutual connection that exists within their core beliefs. Participants also noted that regardless of either motivation, factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of physical third spaces, and the counterintuitively isolating environment of the digital world all contributed to an inability to achieve these goals. As a result, socialising has become almost a lost science amongst current generations who crave connection but ultimately remain “*stuck in this solitude*” [P1, 378].

Owing to this, many turned to games like LADS to fill the void, satisfying “*the little part that is missing, that connect your life and the dream world*” [P6, 408], not as a replacement for relationships within reality, but as a means for cultivating companionship in a society where intimacy and connection has become increasingly elusive. Interacting with the emotionally attentive and reliably present characters and their stories reflected attributes within participants’ core beliefs of what romantic love should be. Moreover, despite the limited nature of pre-coded interactions breaking some of this depth, this symbolic companionship helped buffer against the isolation of post-normal reality by affirming these core beliefs, with P7 remarking of Zayne “*he's like my virtual emotional support boy in that sense. [...] when you're down, they can say some nice words to lift you up*” [P7, 368-379].

However, multiple participants expressed a discomfort or shame surrounding the stigma attached to their gameplay, noting “*you open up Love and Deepspace and people are like, ‘Oh, so they want to be in a relationship, but they just can't get into a relationship’. [...] which I do feel like is not the, the biggest reason people play the game.*” [P12, 1021-1025]. Here, assumptions from society mislabel otome game interaction as romantic failure when

participants' motivations were more complex. As the themes have revealed, the desire for safety, entertainment, and symbolic emotional regulation through fiction were among the main driving forces. Through cognitive polyphasia, participants were able to maintain use of the game as something emotionally valid whilst acknowledging potential social judgement. Here, the game again protects the integrity of their core beliefs surrounding romantic love.

General Discussion

For players, three co-existing representational layers of love are held: the central core, the symbolic core, and the periphery. Within the central core, love is objectified as authenticity, emotional security, depth, and longevity. In line with Abric's (1993) approach, the core is stable across all contexts; both within day-to-day reality and when engaging with romantic fiction such as LADS. The formation of these beliefs supports prior research where culturally bound values, teachings from parents, and personal experience work in tandem with hegemonic representations spread across media to create stable narratives of what love should be (Pilishvili & Koyanongo, 2016).

Contrastingly, the periphery reflects postnormal realities of liquid love; characterised as fleeting, shallow, risky, and lonely (Bauman, 2003). With the periphery increasingly contradicting the central core and threatening its salience instead of bolstering it as past findings suggest (Pilishvili & Koyanongo, 2016), leverage is given to arguments that a 'true love' - the way it '*should*' be based on core representations - is seemingly unachievable. It also may explain why current generations show decreasing marriage intentions and the prioritising of alternatives such as platonic connection (Kulathunga & Abeysinghe, 2024).

However, from this misalignment comes a shift: players do not simply adjust core beliefs to correspond with reality; instead, alternative domains - such as LADS - are sought to sustain them. With this, fiction does not just offer escape from misogyny and societal

pressures, companionship when socialising seems a lost science, and entertainment as past research also supports (Hidayat & Gietty Tambunan, 2025); it also works to reinforce the central core through interactions with idealised narratives, like undying love and *yuanfen* or soulmates (Li & Chi, 2020).

Moreover, the central core is further strengthened via engagement with beliefs held at the ‘symbolic core’ – a semi-stable zone of inessential yet emotionally resonant beliefs taken from media representations that symbolically align with key aspects of the core. Through this, culturally specific otome tropes such as *yandere* or obsessive love displaying unyielding devotion (Randazzo, 2016) map onto core beliefs of security, reinforcing them. First-hand experience and familial observation were used to determine the plausible application of these narratives within reality, where achievable narratives formed the core and unachievable idealised narratives formed the symbolic core of love representations. This corroborates past research suggesting real-world experiences may mediate unrealistic expectations (Moss, 2019). Despite participants acknowledging symbolic core beliefs are unrealistic and not reflective of representations within the periphery, they still reinforce ideas of romanticism and relationship ideals. This provides context for findings from study 1, explaining how players can uphold these beliefs, expressing optimism despite the disheartening cycle of jagged love within reality (Portolan & McAlister, 2021).

Despite this, participants highlight an element of human reciprocity and understanding is lost within romantic fiction, meaning the game is by no means a replacement for real world connections, but rather a comfort in its absence. They also reiterate throughout the importance of holding onto knowledge of love in the periphery and returning to face reality, no matter how bad it may seem. Cognitive polyphasia explains how these contrasting beliefs can co-exist, becoming salient within different contexts

(Jovchelovitch, 2008): the core guiding representations in all domains, the symbolic core within fiction, and the periphery in postnormal reality. As such, implications of the study include a possible extension of SRT, where the ‘symbolic’ representational layer suggests fictional narratives may have a protective function over the core rather than a transformative one. Further, fictional engagement, such as Otomes, are not always escapism, but may also be a coping strategy for value reinforcement and management.

This study, however, is not without limitations. Owing to the focus on otome gaming communities, despite players reflecting a diverse range of gender identities as shown within study 1, the current research showcases a predominantly female perspective. Past research suggests that as well as cultural differences, gender differences in love representations are also prevalent (Karandashev, 2019). As such, future studies should seek to examine the construction of core and peripheral love representations during post-normal times for other gender identities (such as males) and if any forms of symbolic coping are fostered. Due to the small sample size, evidence for the ‘symbolic core’ is currently tenuous; more research is needed to establish whether other communities show a similar trend.

Conclusion

The addition of postnormal love and its liquidity marks not the death of romantic love, but instead – for better or worse – its evolution beyond the previously dominant representations of what love should be. For players whose core beliefs centre security and deep connection rather than the riskier superficial of reality, romantic fiction such as LADS perhaps offers a splash of hope against the bleak backdrop painted of the current periphery.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A – scales

Romantic Belief Scale (ROMBEL)

TABLE 1
Items on the Romantic Beliefs Scale

Item name	Question
Needknow*	I need to know someone for a period of time before I fall in love with him or her.
Evenif	If I were in love with someone, I would commit myself to him or her even if my parents and friends disapproved of the relationship.
Neveragn	Once I experience ‘true love,’ I could never experience it again, to the same degree, with another person.
Forever	I believe that to be truly in love is to be in love forever.
Makework	If I love someone, I know I can make the relationship work, despite any obstacles.
Knowsoon	When I find my ‘true love’ I will probably know it soon after we meet.
Everynew	I’m sure that every new thing I learn about the person I choose for a long-term commitment will please me.
Nearperf	The relationship I have with my ‘true love’ will be nearly perfect.
Barrier	If I love someone, I will find a way for us to be together regardless of the opposition to the relationship, physical distance between us, or any other barrier.
Onelove	There will be only one real love for me.
Obstacle	If a relationship I have was meant to be, any obstacle (e.g., lack of money, physical distance, career conflicts) can be overcome.
Immed	I am likely to fall in love almost immediately if I meet the right person.
Longlast	I expect that in my relationship, romantic love will really last; it won’t fade with time.
Perfect	The person I love will make a perfect romantic partner; for example, he/she will be completely accepting, loving, and understanding.
Overcome	I believe if another person and I love each other we can overcome any differences and problems that may arise.

Note. *Item is reverse coded so that higher scores reflect greater romanticism by the respondent.

Ideal Partner and Relationship Scale (IPR) (Next page)

NOTES

- **Scaling – wording was changed to clarify**
 - **1 = extremely unimportant**
 - **2 = unimportant**
 - **3 = slightly unimportant**
 - **4 = moderately important**
 - **5 = slightly important**
 - **6 = important**
 - **7 = extremely important**

**Rate each item below in terms of the importance it has in describing your
IDEAL PARTNER in a close relationship (dating, living together, or married). Circle
ONE number for each scale.**

Partner Vitality/Attractiveness

Sexy Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Nice body Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Attractive appearance Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Good lover Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Outgoing Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Adventurous Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Partner Warmth/Trustworthiness

Kind Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Supportive Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Understanding	Very unimportant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very important
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Considerate	Very unimportant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very important
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Sensitive	Very unimportant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very important
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A good listener	Very unimportant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very important
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Partner Status/Resources

Successful	Very unimportant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very important
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Nice house or apartment	Very unimportant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very important
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Financially secure	Very unimportant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very important
--------------------	------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

Dresses well	Very unimportant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very important
--------------	------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

Good job	Very unimportant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very important
----------	------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

Appropriate ethnicity	Very unimportant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very important
-----------------------	------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

Rate each item below in terms of the importance it has in We have used the short forms of these scales, and they work well, with good reliability and predictive validity.
describing your IDEAL CLOSE RELATIONSHIP (dating, living together, or married).
Circle ONE number in each scale.

Relationship Passion

Exciting Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very
important

Challenging Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very
important

Humorous Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very
important

Fun Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very
important

Independence Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very
important

Passionate Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very
important

Relationship Intimacy/Loyalty

Honest Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Commitment Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Caring Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

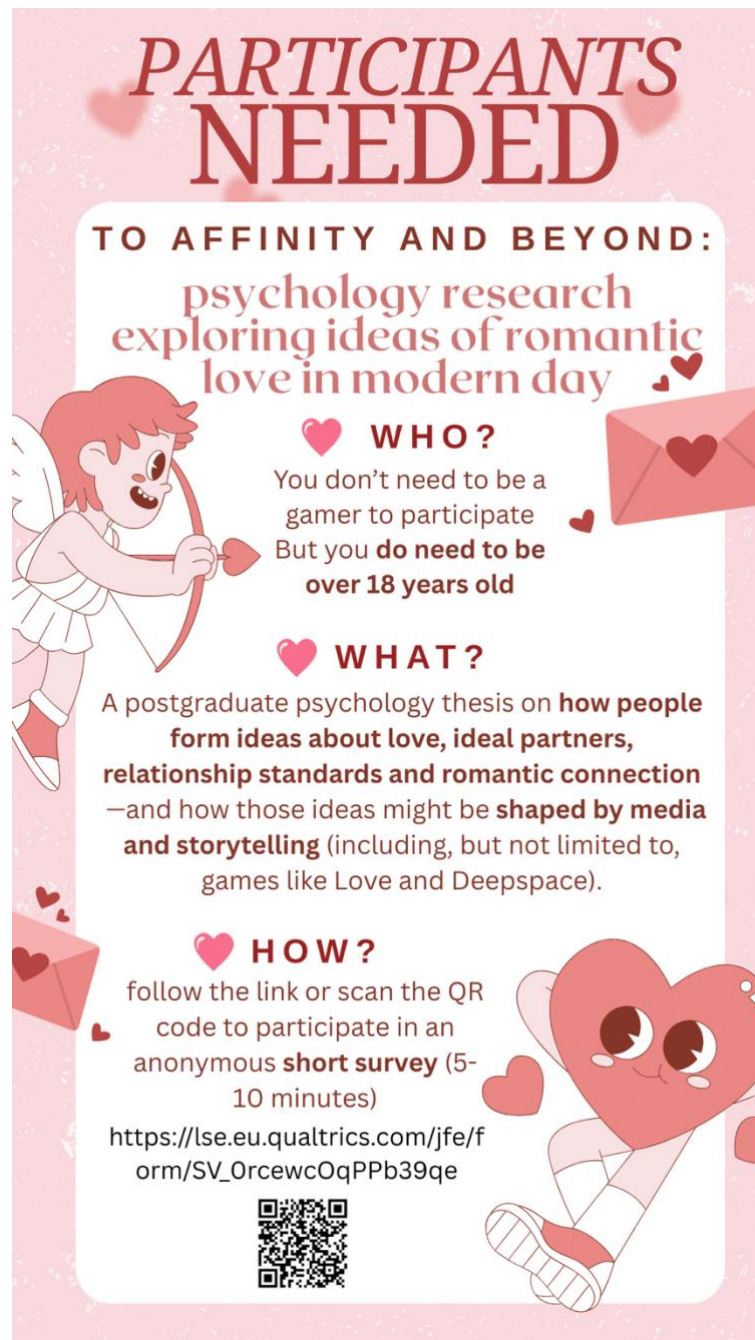
Trusting Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Support Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

Respect Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

APPENDIX B – recruitment material

NOTE: *alongside recruitment material, text specifying the research aims, institution, ethical clearance, anonymity, and procedure were posted to inform participants clearly*




PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

TO AFFINITY AND BEYOND:
psychology research
exploring ideas of romantic
love in modern day

♥ **WHO?**
You don't need to be a
gamer to participate
But you **do need to be**
over 18 years old

♥ **WHAT?**
A postgraduate psychology thesis on **how people**
form ideas about love, ideal partners,
relationship standards and romantic connection
—and how those ideas might be **shaped by media**
and storytelling (including, but not limited to,
games like Love and Deepspace).

♥ **HOW?**
follow the link or scan the QR
code to participate in an
anonymous **short survey** (5-
10 minutes)
https://lse.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_OrcewcOqPPb39qe

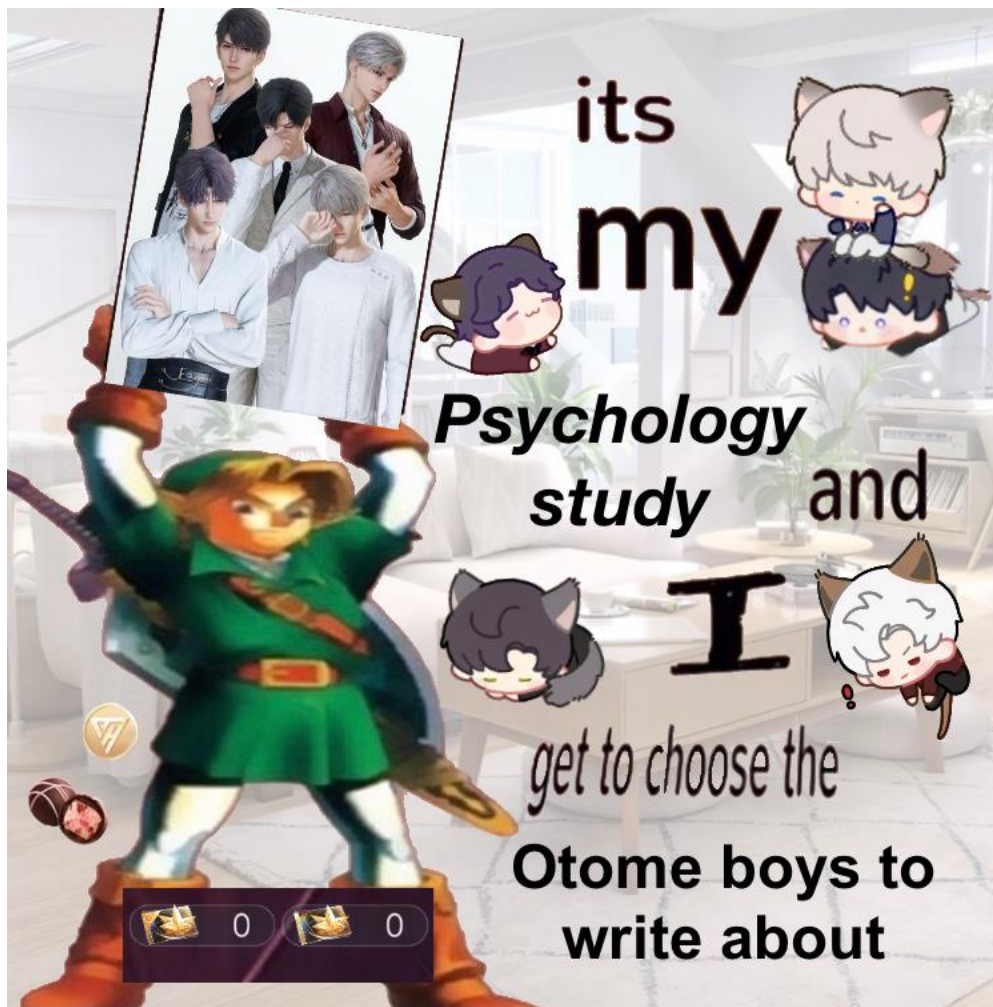


**To Affinity and Beyond:
How Otome communities are
reconstructing romantic
expectations through engagement
with the game 'Love and
Deepspace'**



Link to the
survey





APPENDIX C – information and consent sheets

Study 1

NOTE: *Displayed digitally on Qualtrics which needed to be completed before partaking*

To Affinity and Beyond: How Otome communities are re-constructing romantic expectations through engagement with the game 'Love and Deepspace'

[REDACTED]

MSc Social and Cultural Psychology, Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science, LSE

Thank you for your interest in this study. Considering the growing popularity of 'otome' games across the globe, the purpose of this study is to explore how engagement with otome games can shape and reflect the changing narratives of what romantic love should be in modern times, as well as what this means for partner preferences and relationship standards. The study will explore whether engagement with these games is tied to these changing ideals

What will my involvement be?

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to complete two surveys
These surveys should take approximately 5 minutes of your time.
Participation is voluntary. You do not need to answer any questions you don't want to, and you can stop completing the survey at any point if you wish to. Since the data collection is anonymous, it will not be possible to withdraw the information you have provided once you have completed and submitted the survey.

Will I be compensated for taking part?

No monetary compensation will be provided for taking part. Benefits to taking part include contributing to a wider scientific knowledge in the area.

What will my information be used for?

Your responses will be used in my Masters' dissertation and any possible future publications.
Your IP address will not be collected during this survey/task.
Your participation will be anonymous - your name will not be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. The [LSE Research Privacy Policy](#) can be found online.

Please read and select the following statements if you agree with them:

- | | |
|---|--------|
| - I have read and understood the explanations above | YES/NO |
| - I am 18 or over | YES/NO |
| - I agree to take part | YES/NO |

Study 2

To Affinity and Beyond: How Otome communities are re-constructing romantic expectations through engagement with the game 'Love and Deepspace'

Thank you for your interest in this project about the otome game 'Love and Deepspace'! In this email, I give you information about the project and ask for your consent to participate. If you agree, please reply to this email, stating your name and that you agree to the statements in the table below to give your consent.

What is the study about?

Considering the growing popularity of 'otome' games across the globe, the purpose of this study is to explore how engagement with otome games can shape and reflect the changing narratives of what romantic love should be in modern times, as well as what this means for partner preferences and relationship standards. The study will explore whether engagement with these games is tied to these changing ideals

What will my involvement be?

The study involves taking part in an individual interview, where you will be asked about your thoughts, opinions and experiences playing the game 'Love and Deepspace' as well as how these tie into your expectations for/representations of romantic love and potential love interests beyond the game. This interview will be recorded for transcription purposes and should take around 40 minutes.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is **voluntary**. There are no negative consequences for you if you decide not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part but then later you change your mind, you can let me know by 25/06/25 (June 25th, 2025) - you will not have to give any explanation why. It is also absolutely fine if you feel that you don't want to answer any specific questions – you can just tell me, and we will move on.

What will my information be used for?

This information will be used in a Dissertation report in partial fulfilment of a master's degree (MSc) in Social and Cultural Psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The research may also be used or developed for a future academic publication.

Will my information be anonymous?

Your participation will be anonymous - your name will not be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study.

If you agree to take part in the research, please complete the section below

Participant's name: (type first name and surname here)

Please read these three statements. If you agree with them, put a X in the boxes below	
I have read this message and had the opportunity to ask questions.	
I agree to participate in the interview	
I understand that my responses will be kept confidential and anonymous and that my personal information will be kept securely and destroyed at the end of the study	

Once completed please email this back to me. Thank you!

Researcher name: [REDACTED]

Email address: [REDACTED]

The LSE Research Privacy Policy can be found here: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Secretarys-Division/Assets/Documents/Information-Records-Management/Privacy-Notice-for-Research-v1.2.pdf>

APPENDIX D – Debrief forms

Study 1

Survey Debrief Form

We would like to take this opportunity to say **thank you** for taking the time to answer our survey.

Please be assured, all data collected will be treated in the strictest confidence. The completed research will help to gain an understanding of the changing narratives of what romantic love should be in modern times. It is hoped that the findings may contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the topic.

You were chosen to take part in the study because **you play/do not play the otome game ‘Love and Deepspace’**. *[NOTE: changed depending on which option was selected by participant]*

If you were unduly or unexpectedly affected by taking part in the study, please feel free to feed it back to the researcher. If you feel unable for whatever reason what-so-ever to talk with the researcher, then please contact their supervisor (S.Jovchelovitch@lse.ac.uk).

In the unlikely event that you feel affected by any aspect of this study or wish to talk to someone, the following support services may be of interest to you:

Researcher: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

Study 2

Interview Debrief Form

We would like to take this opportunity to say **thank you** for taking the time to participate in this interview.

Please be assured, all data collected will be treated in the strictest confidence. The completed research will help to gain an understanding of the changing narratives of what romantic love should be in modern times. It is hoped that the findings may contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the topic.

If you were unduly or unexpectedly affected by taking part in the study, please feel free to feed it back to the researcher. If you feel unable for whatever reason what-so-ever to talk with the researcher, then please contact their supervisor (S.Jovchelovitch@lse.ac.uk).

In the unlikely event that you feel affected by any aspect of this study or wish to talk to someone, the following support services may be of interest to you:

The Cybersmile Foundation
<https://www.cybersmile.org/advice-help>
3 London Bridge Street
3rd Floor
London
SE1 9SG

United for Global Mental Health
<https://unitedgmh.org/mental-health-support>

Researcher: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

Supervisor: Sandra Jovchelovitch
Email: S.Jovchelovitch@lse.ac.uk

APPENDIX E – Ethics approval

NOTE: *researcher name redacted to uphold anonymity during marking – ethical approval for the entirety of the research project was obtained*

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To Affinity and Beyond : How Otome communities are

Project Title	To Affinity and Beyond : How Otome communities are	Ethics Review Status	Approved
Researcher Name	[REDACTED]		
Principle Investigator Contact	[REDACTED]		
Department	Psychological and Behavioural Science		
Degree Programme	MSc in Social and Cultural Psychology		
Latest Request Name	530887		
First Request Submission Date	26/03/2025		

▼ Research Details

Dissertation? Yes

Created By [REDACTED], 26/03/2025, 14:05

Last Modified By Sandra Jovchelovitch, 26/03/2025, 20:16

Owner [REDACTED]

Requests 530887

Record Type	Ethics Review
Research Project Title	To Affinity and Beyond : How Otome communities are
Type	Departmental review

APPENDIX F – R-Scripts

```
#STEP 1 - DATA CLEANING data <- CleanData
```

```
library(tidyverse)
```

```
#changing column type
```

```
datagender <- as.factor(datagender) dataQ20 <- as.factor(dataQ20) dataQ4 <- as.factor(dataQ4) dataage  
<- as.numeric(dataage) dataQ22 <- as.factor(dataQ22)
```

```
#renaming columns
```

```
data <- data %>% rename(LADS = 'LADS?')
```

```
#simplifying factor names / transforming character names into factors # == means two things are the  
same
```

```
data <- data %>% mutate( LADS = case_when( LADS == "YES I play Love and Deepspace" ~ "player", LADS  
== "NO I do not play Love and Deepspace" ~ "non-player" ), LADS = factor(LADS,levels = c("player", "non-  
player"))) )
```

transforming character variables to their associated numerical value working on the Ideal partner and relationships scale

```
data <- data %>% mutate_at( c("Q8_1", "Q8_2", "Q8_3", "Q8_4", "Q8_5", "Q8_6", "Q9_1", "Q9_2", "Q9_3",  
"Q9_4", "Q9_5", "Q9_6", "Q10_1", "Q10_2", "Q10_3", "Q10_4", "Q10_5", "Q10_6", "Q11_1", "Q11_2", "Q11_3",  
"Q11_4", "Q11_5", "Q11_6", "Q7_1", "Q7_2", "Q7_3", "Q7_4", "Q7_5", "Q7_6"),  
funs(dplyr::recode(., "extremely unimportant" = 1, "unimportant" = 2, "slightly unimportant" = 3,  
"moderately important" = 4, "slightly important" = 5, "important" = 6, "extremely important" = 7))) )
```

working on the Romantic belief scale

```
data <- data %>% mutate_at( c("Q12_1", "Q12_2", "Q12_3", "Q12_4", "Q12_5", "Q12_6", "Q12_7", "Q12_8",  
"Q12_9", "Q12_10", "Q12_11", "Q12_12", "Q12_13", "Q12_14", "Q12_15"), funs(dplyr::recode(., "Strongly  
disagree" = 1, "Disagree" = 2, "Somewhat disagree" = 3, "Neither agree nor disagree" = 4, "Somewhat  
agree" = 5, "Agree" = 6, "Strongly agree" = 7))) )
```

Reverse scoring

```
#install.packages("misty") library(misty) dataQ12_1 <- item.reverse(dataQ12_1, min = 1, max = 7)
```

```
#Cleaning data - removing participants who did not agree to participate data <- data %>% filter(Q4 ==
```

```
"Yes")
```

```
data_for_analysis <- data %>% mutate(ideal_partner_relationship = rowMeans(select(., Q8_1, Q8_2, Q8_3,  
Q8_4, Q8_5, Q8_6, Q9_1, Q9_2, Q9_3, Q9_4, Q9_5, Q9_6, Q10_1, Q10_2, Q10_3, Q10_4, Q10_5, Q10_6, Q11_1,  
Q11_2, Q11_3, Q11_4, Q11_5, Q11_6, Q7_1, Q7_2, Q7_3, Q7_4, Q7_5, Q7_6), na.rm = TRUE), romantic_beliefs  
= rowMeans(select(., Q12_1, Q12_2, Q12_3, Q12_4, Q12_5, Q12_6, Q12_7, Q12_8, Q12_9, Q12_10, Q12_11,  
Q12_12, Q12_13, Q12_14, Q12_15), na.rm = TRUE))
```

)

#STEP 2 - DATA ANALYSIS 1

#Assumption checks # Checking for normality

```
shapiro.test(data_for_analysis$ideal_partner_relationship[data_for_analysis$LAD == "player"])
```

```
shapiro.test(data_for_analysis$ideal_partner_relationship[data_for_analysis$LADS == "non-player"])
```

Checking for variance

install.packages("car")

```
library(car) leveneTest(ideal_partner_relationship ~ LADS, data = data_for_analysis)
```

```
t.test(ideal_partner_relationship ~ LADS, data = data_for_analysis, var.equal = FALSE)
```

```
install.packages("rstatix") library(rstatix)
```

```
cohens_d(data_for_analysis, ideal_partner_relationship ~ LADS, var.equal = FALSE) #STEP 3 - DATA ANALYSIS 2
```

```
#Assumption checks # Checking for normality shapiro.test(data_for_analysis$romantic_beliefs[data_for_analysis$LADS == "player"]) shapiro.test(data_for_analysis$romantic_beliefs[data_for_analysis$LADS == "non-player"])
```

Checking for variance

install.packages("car")

t.test(DV ~ IV, data = [your data], var.equal = TRUE)

Format for formula - substituting in the variables

if variance is sig - remember to change to FALSE

```
library(car) leveneTest(romantic_beliefs ~ LADS, data = data_for_analysis) t.test(romantic_beliefs ~ LADS, data = data_for_analysis, var.equal = FALSE) cohens_d(data_for_analysis, romantic_beliefs ~ LADS, var.equal = FALSE) #STEP 3 - DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS
```

```
#install.packages("psych") library(psych) colnames(data_for_analysis)
```

gender, age, ideal_partner_relationship, romantic_beliefs, Q22, LADS

```
data_for_descriptive <- data_for_analysis %>% select(gender, age, ideal_partner_relationship, romantic_beliefs, Q22, LADS)
```

```
summary(data_for_descriptive)
```

```
descriptive_results <- describeBy(data_for_descriptive %>% select(-LADS, -age, -gender, -Q22), group = data_for_descriptive$LADS)
```

```
print(descriptive_results)
```

#Finding Cronbach alpha for ideal partner and relationship scale

```
scaleitem <- data_for_analysis[,c("Q8_1", "Q8_2", "Q8_3", "Q8_4", "Q8_5", "Q8_6", "Q9_1", "Q9_2", "Q9_3",  
"Q9_4", "Q9_5", "Q9_6", "Q10_1", "Q10_2", "Q10_3", "Q10_4", "Q10_5", "Q10_6", "Q11_1", "Q11_2", "Q11_3",  
"Q11_4", "Q11_5", "Q11_6", "Q7_1", "Q7_2", "Q7_3", "Q7_4", "Q7_5", "Q7_6")]
```

```
alpha(scaleitem)
```

```
#Finding Cronbach alpha for romantic belief scale
```

```
scaleitem2 <- data_for_analysis[,c("Q12_1", "Q12_2", "Q12_3", "Q12_4", "Q12_5", "Q12_6", "Q12_7",  
"Q12_8", "Q12_9", "Q12_10", "Q12_11", "Q12_12", "Q12_13", "Q12_14", "Q12_15")]
```

```
alpha(scaleitem2)
```

APPENDIX G – Interview Transcript

Interviewer: [Redacted]

Date of Interview: 16/04/25

Time of Interview: 20:07 [BST]

Place of Interview: Microsoft Teams

Length of Interview: 00:45:50

Interviewee: P1

Age: 29

Gender: Female

Nationality: Dominican

Ethnic Identity:

Relationship Status:

Key

... = pause

[Pause] = longer pause

Interviewer: Okay! Um, so [pause] uh thank you for volunteering to take part. The purpose of this interview is to explore how engagement with otome games can shape and reflect the changing narratives of what romantic love should be in modern times, as well as what this means for partner preferences and relationship standards. So um, please feel free to say whatever comes to mind when answering these questions as all of the experiences you share will be valuable and there are no right or wrong answers. So, our conversation will be recorded but everything you say is confidential. Your data will be anonymised and its all of research purposes.

Participant 1: Perfect

Interviewer: Do you have any questions?

P1: No, I have no questions for...

I: Okay. Um, so [pause]. For introduction questions, how old are you?

P1: I'm 29

I: And what gender do you identify as?

P1: Female

I: Uh, what is your nationality?

P1: Dominican

I: What is your ethnic identity?

P1: Uh, Latina

I: Uh, and what is your relationship status?

P1: Single [laughs]

I: [Laughs] Okay, so for our first question, um, in your own words, how would you personally describe and define romantic love?

P1: Well, romantic love is... a deep connection that goes beyond reason. Um, I think that when you are in love many of the things that you often think that are, are normal or that you wouldn't do, you often skip over them because you are- you feel that you are so in love. So that's what I think romantic love will be like.

I: OK, So like how do you think it differs to kind of do you like a more platonic love? So between friends, would you say like romantic love is deeper or?

P1: I will say that romantic love, well, it has many of the things that are in common with relationship like platonic love because you are- you perform acts of service when you are in a, in a platonic relationship with your friends. Um, Romantic love goes a little bit beyond because it's more in a sacrificial type of love because you can do things that you might not feel. Uh, maybe I will say to a friend, no, I don't want to go and help you with math because, you know, I'm very bad at math, but I have taken math classes to help an Ex, so yeah, like romantic goes a little bit above, above the way because you want to help that person and you want to help them to feel secure. So I, I see that as estab- like a deeper type of companionship.

I: OK, yeah. Um, so what would you say are the must haves of a romantic relationship?

P1: Um, respect, commitment, and... affection.

I: So those are like the top three things?

P1: Yeah. Because if you don't have a respectful relationship, um, I think that is going to fall off pretty quickly. And when it comes to commitment, um, if I don't see my partner to be

committed, I- I don't think that I could stay in the relationship because there, there was, there will be no point to it. And also, affection because uh it's after all; it's a romantic relationship. So, I'm not going to be with a person that I don't think is affectionate to me or that doesn't want to reciprocate my feelings. So I think that's, uh, are the three pillars of a relationship. When it comes to commitment, to make commitment and faithfulness are on the same level. So it's not like I'm not saying no faithfulness, it's not, Yeah. It's just that I see commitment as faithfulness, if that makes sense.

I: Yeah, yeah definitely. So, if you could create an ideal partner, what would that be for you?

P1: Oh, Lord [laughs]

I: [Laughs]

P1: Well, [laughs] well, uh, I think that the ideal partner will be currently what I am seeing on LADS when it comes to my mains. Uh, my mains are Sylus, Zayne and Caleb. So as you can see, like I do like the commitment, commitment part. I like someone that is, that is serious and responsible. Um, that I also like someone that is very devoted to me, uh, which is what I can see from those love interests. So I will combine that. Because I think that, um, that's very important for a relationship, so. It would be just that, like appearance is not that important to me. Um, but I do like a more traditional, um, traditional roles in relationships. Like you can feel protected in in a relationship. So that's important.

I: Yeah, Okay. So, So it's kind of like a combination of like traits from Zayne, Sylus and Caleb in one person. [laughs]

P1: Yeah [Laughs], In one person. Um, not taking some of the bad parts, because I think that one of the things that make more round the characters is the fact that they have bad traits.

I: Yeah

P1: So I do like that because it makes them feel more real. Um, so- but my most similar experience to a par- a partner, a real partner, um one of the games is Zayne, like Zayne is basically one of my exes in the way he behaves. And the way-

I: Woah

P1: Yeah! So I was like, OK, this is so... natural for me? to like him. Um, because he's very responsible, has a very like, dry sense of humour, but he's very committed in a in a chill way. Like he's not all over your face or all over lovey-dovey, which is which is nice. But I do like the lovey-doveyness of Caleb and Sylus a little bit more.

I: So, what would you say kind of contributed to your understanding of what love is, and what you would want from a romantic relationship?

P1: I think that something that contributed to it is my upbringing- upbringing. Um, when I mentioned that companionship that is in a way sacrificial is what I've been seeing with my, my grandparents, my own mother, and my family. Because I've been shown that when you love someone, you do things for them. Not things that are going to put you in harm's way or something like that, but things that mean that you are tak- taking that person um, seriously, like you are caring for them, especially caring for them. I see my mum and my grandma care for their husbands when they're sick. I see my dad, my stepdad, my grandpa care for me as their daughter, granddaughter, stepdaughter. Um, I've seen them care for their partners and I think that's something very important when it comes also to the traditional geared roles. I think it's because of my upbringing and also because of the culture because we are from a very traditional country, so, it's something that affects. I do like it. It's not like I am like, oh, I- I never had any kind of exposure to other cultures. I am very happy with- with the culture we have and I am very happy with tho- those more traditional roles when it comes to relationships.

I: OK, so like family is one of the main influences.

P1: Yes, family and culture. And I also, I could add, um, literature because I do like romance novels. I am a very, very, very, very huge Austen fan. So yeah, it's not surprising. I mean, like, I like romance, I like Otomes. So of course, I- I do like Romance in general. But my first, the most impactful book I ever read about romance. for me it was a... a- Ody- Odysseus it will be in- in English? Um, the one with Penelope and Odysseus that she was waiting for him. It's a classic, story from Homer. I don't know if it's, I don't know if it's the Iliad or is the Odyssey? Odyssey. I think it's the Odyssey. So yeah, it was the Odyssey, It was one of my first big girl books. And also Rome- Romeo and Juliet. Uh, which are like very tragic. But yeah, I think that in a way they shape what I think about romance.

I: Okay, yeah. So, I was also gonna ask actually, like linking to that, I know you already mentioned that you watch anime, or you watched anime. Um, so I was gonna say, do you consume like other media, like Webtoons, um anime, um maybe like Idol culture, stuff like that?

P1: Actually, I only consume anime because I've, I've been, I've been watching anime a- all of my life [laughs], um but for, for the most part, I don't participate in that kind of online culture. Um, lately I've just been very into the fandom of LADS and also into the fandom of Jujutsu Kaisen because I do like Gojo quite a lot, but um, I've never been like into participating in those spaces... in- on the Internet. Like I've been doing it like more recently. But here locally, ah- it's just been like with my friends ah with our local conventions that are super, super, super, super tiny that I've been attending since I was a teenager when they started to be created. Um, but it's it hasn't been like something so, so big. For me it's mostly anime. Um, when it comes to TV shows, I do watch TV shows, but I am I, I for the most part, I do like to watch anime and I do like to watch K-dramas as well.

I: Ah okay, K-dramas.

P1: Yeah.

I: Would you say like K dramas and anime, or like even Gojo or something, would you say they like contributed as well to like your understanding of what you think is like an ideal partner or-

P1: Actually, I think that, um, the only anime I could say that maybe shape, you know, in a way that kind of romantic love, um was 'Blood+' when I was way younger. I don't know if you know about 'Blood+' which, which anime it is.

I: No, no. I haven't seen it.

P1: It is a little bit older now. I think you're a little bit younger than me, but [laughs] a few years younger than me. Yeah, uh, but it was very good. It was like more a gory vampirish anime. Um, but there was this relationship with the main character and his love in- her love interest, and it was more like a servant master relationship. Not in a creepy way, not in like, you know, we- weird way, um, but it was really good, and I really like it. I also I've seen everything from that universe. Um, I read the manga. I am very lazy to read manga. I read the manga, and I also read the [inaudible]. So I read everything that there was available about it and it's a very good story. It's not focused on romance, but the sideline that- that has it is very nice, very good.

I: Okay. Yeah, 'cos I think I've heard of like, a kind of similar like trope, I guess, like kind of is it- is there one called like 'Black Butler' or something? I think there's one like that-

P1: Oh, I- I've seen it! It's pretty good

I: Yeah. But uhm, I don't know if they're similar or not.

P1: Um, it will be kind of similar because he was supposed to be her servant. Now that I think about it, I do like quite a lot [inaudible] [laughs]. Yeah, that al- Van Helsing. I do like Helsing. I like that type of anime. I am not very much like a- a romance anime girl. I do like Sailor Moon. I mean, I grew up on 'Sailor Moon' and 'Sakura Cardcaptor'. Like my first, uh there was a discussion on the forum the other day about fictional characters that you like it-

like the first one you like, and it was Yue from- Yue and Yukita from Sakura Cardcaptor- Cardcaptor Sakura. In Spanish it's Sakura Cardcaptor. Um, so it was that um, so yeah. But I- I am not watching like romance anime per se, but I saw one this year, earlier this year that is called 'a sign of affection', and it's very, very nice. It's super, super sweet. I highly recommend and it's beautiful. It's so beautiful.

I: I was gonna- yeah, I think that sounds familiar. I think I've seen it before, but-

P1: The main character, um she's deaf and she, she also is not able to, to speak. So, the relationship he has to learn like sign language, um, it's very natural, like the progression of the relationship and the things that happen are super natural. There's nothing, there's no like, a fantastic element or ele- elements or anything like that. It's just a sweet story. So I highly recommend that if you are like, tired of like, tragic stories or stuff like that it's pretty good.

I: Okay, I might check it out then [laughs]. Um, so what is the main reason you play a Love and Deep Space?

P1: Well, um, I've been playing Otome Games since two thousand- 2014, Yeah, when I started, I started university. Um, I do like stories, I do like romance stories. I, I tend to consume more like written content when it comes to romance. For me, an Otome is just like a romance novel in a, in a more graphic novel type of form. So I, just see it like that. So for me, it was a no brainer. But the reason why I got into 'Love and Deepspace' was because I was like, I was like... I was still healing over Gojo, and one of my favourite cosplayers, she's from France, she is always cosplaying Gojo. She's a super fan of LADs and she's been cosplaying Sylus. And I was like, OK, I like this man.

I: [laughs]

P1: So I [laughs] I had to check out this game because he looks so similar. And I asked her about her- I, I mean, I sent her a DM, I don't DM strangers. I was like, OK, I need to know more about the game. And she told me to, to download it. And she more or less give m-

gave me a brief summary. And that was in February, early February and I have been hooked. hooked. I've been- I end up a 'pay to play' um... uh, gamer and I never spent more than, I don't know like, \$5 on Otome before. And, I've been spending, I had spent almost \$100, which is ridiculous in my country, a ridiculous amount. Yeah, I don't- I don't earn in dollars. I earn in pesos, so it's a very, very ridiculous amount for of money. It will be like around 800, no 8000 pesos. Uh, so it's, I- I can't say that to, to anyone in my family [laughs], they will think I'm crazy. Which is- I know it's like a very conservative amount when it comes like in the spans of a few like months. Um, but yeah, like for me it's been, it's been like that because I do like... animate- animated film uh films. I do like 3D- 3D animation. So, I do like anime as well, obviously. So there is like a- a good story. It's like a very original story because I never read anything like it. And also the characters are beautiful and something that I really, really appreciate about them is that the tropes for an Otome love interest are very well defined. And they are so, so stunning to look at. So I really like- like the game because of that. And I think it's an, an overall great game.

I: Mm

P1: And even if my friends, none of them play the game, um since all of us like our majors are very similar to, to an art major in here, they've been loving seeing me just post about the game because they think they are beautiful. Like I been talking to one of my friends that he's an animator and he's like, "Oh my God, you are so crazy" when I tell him about the game, "but everything is so beautiful.". And he was like, OK, I understand that you like it because it reminds him of when I used to draw, when I, when we were in college, because now I don't have time to draw him- to dra- to draw. But it's, it's beautiful. So I will say that all of these things make the game so appealing to me.

I: Mhm, I know, the graphics are like really crazy.

P1: Yes, I mean like the skin te- texture is absolutely insane. Like I never wanted a- an iPad, but I am like, Oh my God, I'm- I'm- I'm ready to throw this phone and like get in an iPad because it's so so good [laughs]. Um, you can see so many details like the veins, the pores

I: [laughs] Yeah

P1: the- It's beautiful! Like I- I, I'm like sometimes just staring at the pictures you can take and I'm like, wow, this is, this is great. This is great, um, when it comes from a perspective, uh, of someone like related to that um media. I don't do any any of that, but some of my friends do because here advertisement, that's my, my degree, Advertisement is an art degree, and you have to learn how to animate, like very basic stuff. You had to learn how to draw pretty well, you had to learn how to draw, I do paint, so yeah. So those are some of the things that you had to know how to do to study that in here, which is related. Makes sense that I do like stuff like that.

I: Yeah. So um, how would you say romance and love are portrayed in the game?

P1: I think romance is portrayed in a very twisted way in if- if I could say that. Because um, I feel like the love interests are always doing so much for, for MC, and MC can- can be seen as a little bit cold when it comes to that. I understand that her memories are not back, um, but in a way, she can be a little bit dismissive, um sometimes with certain, certain love interests. Um, which irks me a little bit the wrong way. But um, it's just that the sacrifice element that I explained and I said that I do like about romantic relationships is taken up to an unhealthy notch on which for, um, a story is great, like it makes great fictional stories, but when it comes to a real romantic relationship is just like a lot of red flags, like waving like.

I: [laughs]

P1: But, but yeah, like, I mean, everything is great, but I do think that it's... taking sacrificial love to a whole notch in, which is great for fiction, awful for a real life.

I: Mm. Yeah, I was going to ask you about that, actually. I was going to say, like, um, do you think this kind of love is something that's attainable, like in the real world? And is it something that you would want or? Yeah.

P1: In a way I could say that there's elements of it. Like for example, I am so surprised that I like Caleb the way I, I can't- I didn't expect that [laughs].

I: [laughs]

P1: I mean, like Zayne, Zayne was like the man I fell in love while I was waiting for Sylus. Sylus was everything I wanted and more. But Caleb has been like, you little home wrecker!

I: [laughs]

P1: [laughs] Like I I didn't have any plans on falling for you, but I I spent a pretty- a pretty penny on his myth because one, it was worth it. It was so good. And he's the best companion for battle and he's been helping me quite a lot. But um, his manipulateness and his... um, cunning ways are appealing as a character, but I cannot even- even imagine like a partner like that. And I I don't know if I'll if, if I comply to what it is he wants, I don't know if he will stop asking. Because that's the thing with real, real people. When you have a distortion, you, you always want more, because you don't know how much you're taking. So I don't think that it will be like a good relationship.

I: Mm

P1: The only, only good character that I could say it could lead to a very healthy and [inaudible] relationship is um, Zayne. Because there's nothing questionable in Zayne so far, at all, at all.

I: Mm [laughs]

P1: [Laughs] yeah! I mean, like the guy has a good life to work balance. He's very responsible. Um, he clearly cares about MC, but he's not obsessive. He's not like watching over her, he's not like following- like looking up- that- that, all that crazy stuff. None of it. If I could choose, it would be Sylus, but Sylus is a criminal and I cannot be dating a criminal,

even if I know my grandma wouldn't criticise me for it. She wouldn't say anything because she wants grandkids. But no, um, that that's not-

I: [laughs]

P1: Yeah, my, my grandparents are pressed for me to have kids.

I: Wow

P1: Yeah, yeah. For them, I'm like, so old now. Like I'm super old for them.

I: So, they would accept Sylus if he could give grandkids [laughs]

P1: Yeah! Like, he's charming. Like, will I also tell my mum that he's, he's a criminal? Maybe because I I don't know how to keep things from my mum, but like, my mum will be like, "oh...that's not smart." That's it. Like my parents won't say anything else.

I: [laughs] I mean, he's got money, and he's got a lot of businesses, so [laughs]

P1: [laughs]. I mean, I I only have to say like the- the good part and I- I really have to say like this guy, my friend, the fruit vendor and they will be cool with that. But yeah, like when it comes to the to the love interests, um I think that most of them that have great traits for a partner. But um, in my opinion, the one with the- I haven't read all the myths, so I don't know like everything about all the love interests, the most red flags I can see is, is you know, Sylus being a wanted- a wanted criminal. That's not good- a good way to start a relationship. That's not good- a good way to start a relationship.

I: [laughs]

P1: [laughs]. Um, the other one will be like, Caleb. We all- we know everything that is bad about Caleb. And the other one will be Xavier, because um, Xavier um he's so cute but that

jealousy in a real-life partner, it will be something that will end up in violence if he was a real-life partner, yeah.

I: Mm. Do you think that, like, um, the good traits that are in the characters, do you think they're easy to find in people in the offline world?

P1: Well... Yeah, yeah. I mean like, many people have bad- bad experience with previous partners. I had ba- bad experience too. But I have found people that are committed, that are romantic, that are interested in you, that are supportive. So even if I had bad experiences, I don't think that, you know, those traits come out of thin air.

I: Mm.

P1: Like those traits exists and are like something that was put on the game because those are the things that people crave in a relationship. And those things are things that have been provided by partners to their partners in relationships. So, I don't think that they come out of thin air. The only thing that I do think is unrealistic when it comes to expect- expectations is to be expecting like, your partner to be this rich, extremely young, like, having lots of free time and having all of this, like as your partner, that's not realistic. That's not like... that's- that's not attainable. But like, their positive traits, yeah, they- they can be found. They can be found just not to that extent because perfection is-... it doesn't exist.

I: Yeah. So then like continuing on from that, what do you think like um, makes these characters so appealing to people?

P1: I think that what makes them so appealing to people is because, um, in a way maybe as... it's a phenomenon I notice within my generation, I don't know if I'm a millennial or, or a Zillennial because I'm 20- I'm 29 and some millennials say I'm too young the Zillennial, the- the Z- Gen Z say I'm too old, so I don't know, like I'm stuck in the middle.

I: Mm.

P1: But this generation is like stuck in this solitude, and people want to find love, and people is so desperate to find affection. So I do think that that's the main, main appeal for that. And it's also a game for women, like women love romance, and the game is extremely beautiful. The game has been done um... in a- in a very interesting way, because I don't know if- if it's the first 3D Otome game um of- of its type. I don't think it is the first, but it's the first one to be this, like...immersive, and attractive

I: Yeah

P1: Because it does, it does have like many, many features. So I do think that the- I think that the game has a little bit of everything for everyone. But when it comes to the part about like, relationships and about the psychological part about it, I think it's because some people is lonely. I mean, like, I'm single, I will play the game if I was in a relationship, I will. Like it wouldn't affect me in that way.

I: Mm.

P1: Because I've been playing Otomes-, Ot- Otomes for over... over 10 years now. Um, but when it comes to that, I will say that it's solitude and also that these characters are like... perfection. Like it's always nice to see something so... so nice! So- so great, like, the things that you strive for. Um, so I think that's what make- makes it more appealing. Also, because the online community is, is huge. Some people just see the videos,

I: Mm.

P1: Um, especially if you like anime, the eh- and eh- the videos can- can appear on your FUI page. Um, some people get interested just, just because of that.

I: I know I also wanted to ask as well because like I know there's a lot of debate, and I always see on Reddit there's a lot of debate about like, whether you see your MC as like, a character that you made or whether you like, self-insert when you play the game. So, do you see like

your MC as just like, a separate character? Or do you say like, "oh, this is like me and Sylus" when you do a like, glint photo booth?

P1: I, I prefer to see that as me and, and the character, because that's the fun thing about playing an Otome game. Even if you don't share traits like, um, the MC. Um, for me, it's just to have like a little story and make up, make up scenarios in your head. I mean like, I was an avid Twilight fan when I was a teenager because it was in those years, and I used to think "Bella? no, no, Bella. It's [participant name]".

I: [laughs]

P1: So it's pretty cool, like that's one of the main things that make um this kind of tropes cool, is that you can self-insert- insert. And something I do like about MC is that MC- MC, although she's a little bit selfish in my opinion, she can be very witty, very funny, and she's very playful. I do like her when she's teasing Zayne for example, for example, like when she was telling him- he he was complaining about his fridge, like um, getting, getting bad, like not working, And she was like, "do you need a fridge...?"

I: [laughs]

P1: That's the kind of stuff like I will say [laughs] like, that's a no brainer, I would say that, like I was- when I read that interaction, I was like, "Oh my God, this sounds a lot like me".

I: [laughs]

P1: That's I was even showing that to a friend and I explained her, because she doesn't play the game, I was explaining her like why she say that and she was "yeah, it does sound like one of your shenanigans". So I do think about- I do think about that. But MC, and as well as them like they are... I have, I think I have a very balanced um, headsp- headspace when it comes to roman- romance. So I do self-insert when I'm playing because it's fun. but I do see them as characters because, it's fiction. It's fun.

I: Yeah. So, I know as well, you also already mentioned some tropes. So, I wanted to like go through some tropes and like see if you like them or if you don't like them. Um, so some tropes that come up or I've noticed in the game are, so, fated love or destiny. Um, there's childhood sweethearts, there's tragic love, so self-sacrifice like you said, um and then there's a Yandere kind of love. But like some other tropes are love triangles, cold versus warm personalities, and um indirect confessions sometimes. So, are those any like, tropes that you find appealing or?

P1: I think that one of the um main tropes that I do find appealing is the fated love, because you can make it- you can go nuts with it. Like, you can make it as insane, as creative as you want, and that's what I've been seeing with LADS. Because they, the-the backgrounds are like really, really crazy. So I do think that they have used that trope in a great way. The childhood friend, I think that I like that trope quite a lot. But with Caleb, it's- it's like in a little- little bit of a slippery way, because for example, even if I do love Caleb, I try to be like, OK, Zayne sounds more like the childhood friend than Caleb.

I: Mm

P1: Caleb sounds like- like her, her adopted brother. And here, that- people will be like freak out if that was like a, an actual relationship, and you say like, OK, I'm dating this person who I was brought up- brought up with, people will be like, "...you need therapy".

I: [laughs]

P1: No one will be cool with that. Yeah, no one will be cool with that. Even if people knows, you know, you are not blood related, people will not be cool with it. Um, so I will say that the childhood uh trope can be a little bit tricky because of the way they have done Caleb.

I: Yeah

P1: And the other one is the Yandere. I think the Yandere, since Caleb hasn't done, in my opinion, like I had read about Yanderes as well, but since he hasn't done like any actual

physical harm to MC, um I am OK with it. Because there's tropes that are like, so extreme and like, do things that are, you know, pretty much illegal in- not in the illegal sense of I am watching you, like all of them are doing, but like, stuff that is disgusting, which has not happened in the game.

I: Mm

P1: So, so far, the way they have managed tropes has been tastefully done, in my opinion.

I: Yeah. So, would you say like, any of those tropes, so like the fated kind of love um... that you mentioned, do you think that fits into your definition of love and what romantic love should be?

P1: Um... in- when it comes to personally? No. Because I, I think that real love is not that straightforward. Like, you met someone and... and that's it, like you, you are destined to be together. I think love is something you work on every day. That's why I do feel so much for the sacrificial love part. Because love is shown, it's not just to say, "oh, I love you". No. You show people that you care for them every day, which is something that is consistent even in the game. Because they, they show that- the MC that they care about her with the things they do for her

I: Mm

P1: Even if like, the little things like, I like Sylus a lot because he's very affectionate, like thinking about things she needs. And also, I do like, like Caleb because Caleb likes to cook for MC, and likes to do things for her that is really cute. And that will be pretty much in sync for- for what I've seen personally with- with my family and the things that I had done myself and partners had done for me as well.

I: Mm, okay. So, um... what are your views of- I think you've already kind of touched upon it, but what are your views of like romantic love in modern day, like um, having a romantic relationship, making connections and stuff?

P1: I think that making a connection is a little bit more difficult now, because we have this false sense of availability, um with social media. Um, social media makes you think in a very distorted way that there's always someone waiting for you, someone better waiting for you, which is something I had discussed with some friends uh when it comes to my generation. Um, I, it even happened to me with someone I dated in- in university, that he said that he was ready to commit, he wanted to commit to me, he wanted to be with me. But then, he was like, I don't know what is... what is outside. I wants- I want- I want, yeah! He wanted to, to date more people to be sure that he wanted to be with me, and I was like, "okay, bye".

I: Wow...

P1: And then he came back to me like [pause] 7 times, he came back to me. And the last time he came back to try to contact me, he was already married. That was last year.

I: Woah?

P1: So there is this false sense of availability that is awful. And the thing with that person is that we were in love, we were crazy in love about each other. So, as you can see, it can... change your perception. And also when it comes to meeting people, to getting to meet people, um, most people my age work from home.

I: Mm

P1: You cannot meet people this way. Like, like the social elements of going to work on commute, on going outside helps a lot to, to meet other people. You, you don't have to date people from your work, you have to, you can meet people through their friends or anything like it.

I: Mm

P1: So I think that it's a little bit harder for people now to connect and to find, to find love. 'Cause you, you are not as sociable, social um as you used to be previously. And also when it comes to dating apps, many people have met their partners through dating apps, but again- [muted mic]

I: Oh! I think you're muted.

P1: Oh, now I notice. Can you hear me?

I: Yeah!

P1: Okay. Well, when it comes to those dating apps, I think that they give also a, se- a sal- a false sense of over availability, of people to- to go around with. So I think those are some of the things that are, are making finding a connection a little bit harder for people that is my age. Um, but other than that, I do think that, that relationships will always- will always be the same.

I: Yeah. I think yeah, with technological advancements, it's like it's a blessing and a curse sometimes. Because I feel like, yeah, socially we suffer a bit.

P1: Yeah, we are so awkward now!

I: Yeah

P1: Like, remember when you used to contact people, like, for example, I know that it will be a little bit awkward for you now to, to talk with strangers like we are doing right now. Um, but before that, when people didn't have the options to, you know, like, have to do things through their phone, you had to go and talk to people every day.

I: Yeah

P1: So, it was less awkward, and you were- it was easy- easier for you to, to talk to a stranger. I think that's something that is lacking. Also the- also that something that can count, this is my personal experience, Since I don't go to- to bars or to uh, nightclubs, there's no way for me to meet someone like that. Because that's not the type of environment I go to. Because I know that's an environment where is alcohol and people is a little bit able to let loose and flirt. But since I, I don't participate in- in that, it's a little bit harder.

I: Yeah. It's a bit like, limited. So now it's kind of like you have to use the dating apps like yeah.

P1: Yeah, you have to use them and using them... is actually a lot different than what it was before. I don't know if it comes with the age like my age because I use- I started using dating apps when I was... 21, I'm 29, and it's not the same at all. Because most people maybe my age bracket, probably it's because I live in a very tiny island, um they are either married or there's not as many people available. Um, the-dating foreigners, I am not opposed to dating foreigners. I mean, like my ex-boyfriend, um he was a Scandinavian, and I met him through a dating app. But foreigners here sometimes think that just because they are, like, on vacation, that you are looking for a fling.

I: Ahhh

P1: So, it is a little bit- yeah. It's a- sexual tourism is, something huge in here. Um, even if you tell people "Hey, I, I am not that kind of person", some people you know have not the same intentions as you have, so that's something to be aware of. I know it can change from country to country, but that's something that happens in here. And also, here is so so small, that it's in a way makes, makes things a little bit difficult. Because your social circle is so, so tiny because you know, people usually from the same, if you went to- to college from the same university. Um, like my circle of people, it's people I know from school and from college. That's it.

I: Mmm

P1: Like that's- those are my friends. The people from work that I can count as friends, are like 3. It's rough here.

I: Ahh. So, um I was going to say I have like one last question unless you have another question afterwards. but um, my last question is uh what would you say then about relationship standards now like, that people have?

P1: I think that relationship standards, um, it depends so much on who you ask... about that because when it comes to, to people in DR, and in many Latin countries, the gender roles are very traditional still. So there- I mean, like I have a master's degree, I work and if I was asked, "What do you want to do when you get a partner?", I want to get married, I want kids, and if, if it's possible, I will like to stop working to take care of the house. And I have a master degree! I- I pursued my master. I won a scholarship to pursue my master. It- it was something I always wanted to do, but I do want to have a family. That's not as common in other countries. I- I seen that in- on Reddit, that it's not as... the goal for many people outside, so maybe um, that can change.

I: Mm

P1: But in my opinion on what people want from a relationship will always be companionship. That's what- that's the end goal. Like even if you don't want to have the kids, the wedding, um all of that, people want a sense of companionship and also certain security that you have someone there for you.

I: Mm. So it's that sense of kind of like belonging and being with someone?

P1: Yeah, it's like that, I- and i- and often it's a little bit even not- not like belonging, but a little bit more simpler. Like someone to share, to share your day.

I: Ahh, okay.

P1: Like because I hear um, people saying "I just miss having someone to... say hi when I come back home" or to watch a TV show with me. It's like sharing like, the little things that make your everyday. So, I think that's what most people will want, even if they don't recognise it. But that's what makes um... a, a life like a partnership, like little, the little things you do on the day-to-day basis.

I: Mm, so it really is just like that basic need for companionship.

P1: Yes, it is! Like, that's why um, even the apps here provide that because when it comes to the period tracker, because it's, it's, it's something I've been using this week, um, I was like, Oh my God, this is so sweet!

I: [laughs]

P1: Like the messages are so sweet. I was even thinking Oh my God, I- I, I miss having a partner that will care about me because I- I get pretty sick. For example, I had to take a- a medical leave on Friday because it was the first day and I do have primary dysmenorrhea and it makes, makes it hell for the first days. So, reading like a stupid sweet little messages from like a fictional man, I was chilling. People do need, do need that. People need companionship. People need someone to- to tell little things that are uh, I don't know, like commonplace like having your period.

I: Yeah, I understand that, yeah. So, that's all my questions actually, so if you have any other questions or anything else you want to say?

P1: This was very fun, um actually, As I told you, I didn't know anything about like the game when I was doing my Masters, but something that I love, I've been loving to see is the way that um, in Asia they live fandom culture, like the fact that they pay for billboards, that they do all of that, that's absolutely crazy. And they are better than some marketing experiences that I had seen and even that I had thought about-. I am, I am an advertiser. My master's degree was in, in digital advertisement in a Spanish university. When I- when I, when I was

able to do my master's, and I've been blown away by it. So I'm really, really happy to see someone um using the game to do their, their studies, their thesis.

I: Oh, thanks! [laughs]

P1: So, yeah! this is very cool. This is very cool, and I was excited to participate.

I: Oh! Well, thank you for participating!

P1: Thank you for having me.

I: I'm just going to end the recording.

P1: Okay!

APPENDIX H – Interview topic guide

different topics/themes: Defining love, LADS and Love, The reality of romance

Welcome: Hi, thank you for volunteering to take part in the study. The purpose of this interview is to explore how engagement with otome games can shape and reflect the changing narratives of what romantic love should be in modern times, as well as what this means for partner preferences and relationship standards. Please feel free to say whatever comes to mind when answering these questions, as all of the experiences you share will be valuable and there are no right or wrong answers. Our conversation will be recorded, but everything you say is confidential, your data will be anonymised and will only be used for research purposes.”

Introduction questions - How old are you? What gender do you identify as? What is your nationality? What is your ethnic identity? Relationship status?

TOPIC 1 - INTRO - Background & Defining Love

- In your own words, how would you personally describe or define ‘romantic love’?
 - What does it consist of? How does it feel? What makes it different from more platonic forms of love?
- What would you say are the ‘must-haves’ of a romantic relationship?
 - What would you not want?
- If you could create an ideal partner, what would that be for you? Please describe.
 - Traits & characteristics, aesthetics/ appearance etc., whatever you would deem as your ideal standard for a partner.
- Would you say your idea of what romantic love should be fits in with how society portrays romantic love? Why/why not?
- What would you say contributed to your understanding of what love is and what you would want in a romantic relationship?
 - Friends, family, Tv shows/ movies and other forms of media
 - Do you consume other media such as Webtoons, K-dramas, idol culture, anime?
 - Would you say these have had an impact on forming these definitions and preferences? How?

TOPIC 2 - LADS and Love

- How long have you been playing Love and Deepspace?
- What is the main reason you play Love and Deepspace?
- How would you say ‘romance’ and ‘love’ are portrayed in the game?
 - Do you like the way it is portrayed? Why? What elements do you like? Are there any elements you dislike?
 - Would you say this kind of love is attainable in the real world beyond the game?
 - Why/ Why not?
- Regarding the game companions, who are you most drawn to/ who are your favourites? Why?
 - What makes the character(s) appealing?

- Do you feel a emotional connection to these characters? Why?
 - Would you say your MC is an extension of yourself / a self-insert or do you see her as separate character
- How would you say this character compares to potential love interests in the real world?
 - Differences? Similarities?
- Have your romantic standards, your definition of love or what you want for yourself or in a relationship changed since playing the game?
- If this character were real, would they be someone you would pursue romantically?
 - Why/Why not?
- Are you a fan of any particular romantic tropes in the game?
 - (Give example above if needed)
 - Ask about SEA tropes and ask if they like any of these
 - Do these fit into your definition of love? Why/why not?
- Why do you think the game is so appealing to people?
- What kind of person would you recommend love and Deepspace to?

TOPIC 3 - The Reality of Romance

- What are your views of romantic love and having a romantic relationship in modern day? (Could be about dating, forming connections, how love is defined/ viewed in society/ romantic expectations)
 - Do you think love in the world right now is good, bad, maybe both etc., and why?
- Would you say that playing Love and Deepspace is a good alternative to forming connections / having romantic interactions offline?
- What would you say about the standards for relationships today?

APPENDIX I – Thematic codebook

Global Theme: Representational homeostasis – interactions with idealised narratives of love (within Love and Deepspace) are used to reinforce the central core, maintaining core representations of love and preventing them from eroding or changing in the face of a juxtaposing periphery (liquid love, jagged love, etc.,)				
Organising Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Description	Examples
Two Voices of Love: cognitive polyphasia in romantic narratives	Familial templates of reality	Positive observations of family	Positive social representations participants hold surrounding romantic love obtained through the direct observation of their family members (or close others)	<p>“When I mentioned that companionship that is in a way sacrificial, is what I've been seeing with my, my grandparents, my own mother, and my family. Because I've been shown that when you love someone, you do things for them. Not things that are going to put you in harm's way or something like that, but things that mean that you are tak- taking that person um, seriously, like you are caring for them, especially caring for them” [P1, age 29, single, 110-115]</p> <p>“[...] my brother's relationship with his now wife and seeing kind of the way that their relationship was, the way they interacted, like the way that they could even solve some, some problems some issu- some of the issues. It made me realise that I needed that. That I wanted more than what I was being given at the time.” [P4, age 35, married, 275-278]</p> <p>“I would say, first my parents. My dad has been an active caregiver. Like, he isn't really an affectionate dad, but he does a lot of the chores, and that really set the standards for how I wanted my future partners to be like.” [P5, age 33, single, 206-208]</p> <p>“[...] in seeing it with my parents and like their relationship, that uh thankfully they're very happy together and uh have been very happily married for a while. And yeah, I just kind of like learned</p>

				<p>from them. And then uh, after that, basically, I just kind of learned from like media basically [laughs]. Like uh TV, movies and like uh manga and stuff.” [P11, age 25, married, 114-118]</p>
		Negative observations from family	<p>Social representations participants hold surrounding romantic love being imperfect obtained through the direct observation of their family members (or close others)</p>	<p>“[...] a lot of them had um... tumultuous, like ki- a lot of turmoil in their relationships, I would say. So, they- it wasn't all sort of rainbows and sunshine.” [P9, age 22, single, 171-173]</p> <p>“I think growing up, I really didn't have much of healthy examples of good romantic relationship. [...] But I think a big, um... disconnect there for me was that I was seeing some- one thing in real life and in like uh, films and TV shows and books, I was seeing a completely different thing. So, my, I guess initial understanding was a mix of both. Like I was sort of torn between I see it like that, but others showing it like that, and it's a mix of both, I guess.” [P2, Age 32, Situationship, 110-120]</p> <p>“my parents aren't really, like, the lovey-dovey type. They fight a lot. Um, so that really contributed to how I perceive marriage. So... I don't think I wanna get married [laughs] because of that. But I want to be together with someone I love.” [P8, age 25, in a relationship, 204-206]</p> <p>“I think when I see all of these things, it made me think like hm... reality is not so nice. So, I guess that's what made me turn to like, define media- love through media, I suppose” [P7, age 21, single, 170-172]</p>

	Media scripts of love: forming the central and symbolic core	Romantic media / anime / manga / k-drama / classic literature	Social representations of love gathered from media	<p>“Um, the one with Penelope and Odysseus that she was waiting for him. It's a classic, story from Homer. I don't know if it's, I don't know if it's the Iliad or is the Odyssey? Odyssey. I think it's the Odyssey. So yeah, it was the Odyssey, It was one of my first big girl books. And also Rome- Romeo and Juliet. Uh, which are like very tragic. But yeah, I think that in a way they shape what I think about romance.” [P1, age 29, single, 163-167]</p> <p>“[...] another series that helped to really shape my understanding of the many different types of love and how love can form in the many different, even the many different ways that romantic love can be just for different people, was the anime “Fruits Basket”. I read the entirety of that manga. [...] I don't I- I'm not gonna put it as worship, but I [laughs] I, in so many ways idolized Tohru. I wanna be, I wanna be like her so much. I wanna have that patience, that understanding, that empathy, that- that willingness to just like, OK, I realise that, you know, they did hurt me, but I feel like there's something more. And be able to reach out when somebody is just at their lowest just to be able to help.” [P4, age 35, married, 339-356]</p> <p>“I watched a lot of romantic movies, um mangas, K-dramas, um, basically all of it. So, I was really like [pause] like that [laughs]. And I guess that really contributed to how I perceive love. That you need to sacrifice everything for the ones you love. And I think that you need to give them all the time in the world because not- it's not every time that</p>
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				<p>you're going to be able to live like this. And yeah, basically that. And what contributed to that, is that- is the media I've been intaking as I was growing up.” [P8, age 25, in a relationship, 195-200]</p>
		<p>Personal experience / love changing with experience / Disillusioning love</p>	<p>Personal experience with love (through current or past relationships as well as vicariously through close others) helps participants to determine which aspects of media representations of love are plausible within reality (which are added to the central core) and which are too idealised and unachievable (yet still emotionally resonant, so are added to the symbolic core)</p>	<p>“So, I was seeing them together, like it made me realise that like, oh, romantic love is like a bit more- it can be like, like more mellow. It doesn't have to always be so... dramatic and so all over the place.” [P12, age 20, single, 213-215]</p> <p>“When I met my boyfriend, I think I- it was like such a whiplash [laughs] that it's not like how it was portrayed in media.” [P8, age 25, in a relationship, 127-128]</p> <p>“I had this belief wherein um, people should sacrifice themselves. Just for love. And the thing is, being in a relationship now, I realize that... that's not really the case. This person has their own feelings, they're never gonna be able to prioritize you all the time, they have their own commitments, and stuff like that. And sometimes I just wonder... what if... it wasn't that way? And if this person can give up everything for me. But that's such a- I realise that's such a naive perspective on love.” [P8, age 25, in a relationship, 366-374]</p> <p>“When it comes down to teenagers, young ones, most people are gonna kind of follow their hearts and the- uh hearts and... possibly even lower places to just kind of propel them into this like, intense whirlwind of passion,</p>

				<p>and we're just gonna go. And like, I wholly expect that this is going to lead me to, you know, my marriage and my happily ever after. And there are other people that are a little bit more logical and a little bit more reasonable, where they're going to be like, you know what, I-I, I'm not quite there when it comes to romance, but I am looking for this kind of a partner. Or I'm looking for these kinds of situations.” [P4, age 35, married, 915-926]</p> <p><i>(When talking about lessons learnt from past relationships)</i> “ [...] but I think [laughs] material-materialistically, there are some important things, because love isn't- love alone isn't enough. there, there has to be other things as well.” [P5, age 33, single, 71-73] “[...] financial stability, uhm... mental health. Mental Wellness is very important as I've learned. Yeah [pause], um sometimes culture as well” [P5, age 33, single, 77-78]</p>
Romantic Depth in Shallow Waters: ideal love in the age of liquidity	The vulnerability paradox	Valuing Authenticity / Honesty / Trust / Communication /	Participants highlight authenticity as a key aspect within the central core of love representations (including honesty, love, trust, communication and remaining true to oneself)	<p>“Trust is a big one because I'm a very untrusting person kind of naturally. So, if I trust someone and like, and I really like, really romantically love someone that much, then I have to have trust as a baseline.” [P12, age 20, single, 64-66]</p> <p><i>(when discussing dealbreakers for romantic love and relationships)</i> “Infidelity [laughs] for sure. But even more simply than that, I think lies in general. I-I, I think good communication is a must have in, in a goo-, in a relationship. And it's not that a lack of communication would be a dealbreaker, but if it turns into like, lying to cover the</p>

				<p>truth, then that's an absolute no for me, no matter how small it is" [P9, age 22, single, 78-81]</p> <p>"I just want to confess and be honest about my feelings. [...] I don't like fooling around and waiting for something to happen. And I just give it a go and then show them my love. And I think that can be overwhelming. That's why they never really liked me [laughs]." [P8, age 25, in a relationship, 226-233]</p>
		<p>Fear of vulnerability / Uncertainty avoidance / Dishonesty / hidden intentions</p>	<p>Participants report (within the periphery of love representations) that love is characterised by a lack of certainty, fear of risk or harm and dishonesty, directly contradicting core beliefs of what love should be</p>	<p>"And I think... the hardest part, no matter kind of what relationship you're looking for short term, long term, if you're wanting that excitement and passion, is being truly honest about it. Being honest with where you are and what you're looking for because you're worried it's gonna possibly scare away somebody. But it's only through that honesty are you going to be able to find that somebody. And, and I'm going to say that whether it be, unfortunately, via games like Deep- Love and Deepspace, or whether it be just a lot of the other media that we consume, we feel like we can't be." [P4, age 35, married, 926-936]</p> <p>"There's a lot of toxic relationships these days and... questionable relationships these days [laughs] in a way that um, you don't know where you stand in the relationship." [P8, age 25, in a relationship, 726-728]</p> <p>"There was one time on Hinge where I literally got five matches in a row, and all of them just wanted sex. And I was literally like, no, stop this. And they all had like, long term li- relationship on</p>

				<p>their profile. And I'm like, [sigh] so anyway, I'm a hater of dating culture. Especially, I would like talk to my parents about it, and they're like, "it's just your age group. Just wait". And I'm like, but then I hear from other women who are like, a bit older and it, it doesn't change. It's like, it's like a this generation thing. And I'm like, I just want happiness.” [P10, age 21, single, 595-605]</p>
		<p>Low-risk environment in LADS (vulnerability) / Clear intentions / Certainty</p>	<p>LADS offers a low-risk environment with no hidden intentions. Here, there is an authenticity within the predictability of familiar tropes and the characterisation if the in-game love interests that speaks to core representations</p>	<p>“it's a safer environment to experiment in, uh, rather than figuring it out um like with a real person sometimes because you never know who you get. But again, it depends on the person, how they're mentally prepared to like, separate that from reality.” [P2, Age 32, Situationship, 382-385]</p> <p>“But I think it's, I think it's the kind of thing where it's like love interests in the real world, there comes a lot of like... danger, right? Like for yourself, you, like, if you're like, if you're going out, like get into a relationship or you have a crush on someone you like someone, you're inevitably going to have to sacrifice something. Either it's your time, your like, your like emotional investment, you have to like, become vulnerable to a person and like kind of open yourself up to getting hurt. There's... like, that's the one thing where I feel like... like, like real go- real love interests is like the biggest factor. Like, oh, there's, there's like danger here for me personally.” [P12, age 20, single, 596-606]</p> <p>“I feel like with the other love interests, their communication is more open, I think. Especially with</p>

				<p>Zayne. I think that's why I like him so much" [P7, age 21, single, 283-284]</p> <p>"So, when you're different, when you're neurodivergent, you live with that difference. And you need to, to fit in the mould, to fit in society. It's exhausting because you have to analyse everything. Nothing is free, nothing comes to you naturally. So, when you're in the game... the work is done! [laughs] You don't have to, don't have to stress." [P6, age 62, single, 505-509]</p> <p><i>(also playing the game while neurodivergent)</i> "I feel like I'm always reading into like what people mean and try to... decode what they're trying to, if they're trying to imply something. Um so, with them, it's... I get what I see, and there's no unexpected surprises that would negatively impact me." [P3, age 25, single, 249-251]</p>
	Liquid love and the need for meaningful connection	Love is depth / longevity / long-term goals / future / connection / partnership	Central core of love representations see love as depth and longevity	<p>"[...] a strong, like, bond between like two, or I guess sometimes more, [laughs] individuals and just like sharing like a deep connection with them [...] and just kind of feeling like a sense of like safety and security with them" [P11, age 25, married, 38-41]</p> <p>"I think it's about... knowing and understanding the other person, like to the point where you don't even need to like, speak. I mean, I think communication is still important in all these relationships, but it's s- most of- like, spending the time to get to know somebody to the point where it's like, you guys know each other so well. And it's like you... you both are just so deeply connected in that sense." [P7, age 21, single, 45-49]</p>

				<p>“[...] you feel comfortable, or you want to spend the rest of your life together with this person, yeah” [P3, age 25, single, 51-52]</p>
		<p>Fast-paced love / Trivialisation of romantic relationships / Social symbol / Dating culture / Lack of commitment / social media</p>	<p>Periphery of love representations characterise love as fleeting, emphasising a liquidity that is incompatible with the desired depth and commitment within the core</p>	<p>“[...] we have this false sense of availability, um with social media. Um, social media makes you think in a very distort- distorted way that there's always someone waiting for you, someone better waiting for you, which is something I had discussed with some friends uh when it comes to my generation. Um, I, it even happened to me with someone I dated in- in university [...] He wanted to, to date more people to be sure that he wanted to be with me, and I was like, ‘okay, bye’.” [P1, age 29, single, 505-513]</p> <p><i>(After speaking about long-term relationship rates slowing down in the west)</i> “[...] in Korea, basically what happens is people get into relationships actually the opposite. You'll get into relationship's pretty fast, but not, not because they like the person, not because they love the person, but just because of like the, the image of being in a relationship. like a lot of holidays in Korea like Christmas and stuff like that, um are like couple holidays. So, it's like, if you don't have, if you don't have a date on that, you're kind of seen as, I don't know a loser, I guess in Korean society” [P12, age 20, single, 786-795]</p> <p>“[...] they told me that Filipinos love differently. Like, they give their everything. And [pause] it's just overwhelming for them. Because in Korea, like, how they do it is like if you feel romantic</p>

				<p>feelings for the person, you confess right away, even without it being deep [...] But like in the Philippines, you let it simmer, and you let it, like, yearn for a bit,”</p> <p>[P8, age 25, in a relationship, 644-651]</p>
		LADS Depth	<p>LADS characters show depth through heavy levels of characterisation and connection with the MC that reflect participants core love representations</p>	<p>“Through the cards and the story, I think that's where the emotional bond mostly comes from. 'Cause that's where you get to know them. And it's like, um, you know, you get to know their likes, their dislikes, their quirks and whatnot. Like what makes them who they are. Especially through the myths where you see, like, their past lives and whatnot and how they've suffered. I think that really, like, makes you... root for them in that sense. Makes you on their side.”</p> <p>[P7, age 21, single, 398-403]</p> <p>“think personality's obviously number one, right? And how they kind of each embody like these different, these different tropes and stuff. Where it can appeal to basically anyone at this point [...]the way like they do, they-they, they interact with you in the cards, the way they like they talk, the, the way that they show their little, like, snippets of personality. It's very, it's very, it's very like inviting.” [P12, age 20, single, 442-448]</p> <p>“that's like the foundation of the game is like the guys, the mai- the characters, or their characterisation. I made like a Reddit post recently about it, I was like, I was so floored by it. Even though like they're not all my favourites, but I could, I could totally understand why someone would like them.” [P10, age 21, single, 221-224]</p>

	Labour of love	Love is conscious effort/ Persistence / Perseverance / conflict resolution / compromise	The central core sees love characterised as something that is laborious and effortful which requires a good level of engagement and commitment from all parties. This is also reflected in engagement with LADS, where the Love interests go above and beyond for the MC	<p>“I think it's a choice that people choose to make. Like um, you have to choose to love someone every single day. Actively make the effort to show them that you love them, be it through words or actions or the like.” [P7, age 21, single, 34-36]</p> <p>“Uh, being able to compromise for me is another big one. Because of course not everybody's going to always be happy, but at the very least both sides should be able and willing to at least shift a little.” [P4, age 35, married, 86-88]</p> <p>“And I learned that romantic feelings and romantic love are different. [...] if the other person wants to improve the relationship, and the other person doesn't want to, that's not really romantic love, that's just romantic feelings at work.” [P8, age 25, in a relationship, 41-55]</p> <p>“This is one of the things that I kind of, I wish they would show more in Otome games, like Love and Deepspace [...] I wish they would show more... arguments. Because those are just as important as those like, wonderfully sweet times that I was talking about. [...] or if... the way they handle those rough times is... wrong for you, then you shouldn't stay.” [P4, age 35, married, 190-198]</p> <p><i>[when asked if the fated love tropes they praised in the game fit into their representations of what love should be]</i> “No. Because I, I think that real love is not that straightforward. Like, you met someone and... and that's it, like you, you are destined to be</p>

			<p>together. I think love is something you work on every day. That's why I do feel so much for the sacrificial love part. Because love is shown” [P1, age 29, single, 486-489]</p> <p>“You never fight at all, you never have arguments [...] in real life, it's like, well, we have to do taxes together. Like, we have to do laundry. It's like, it's a different kind of argument than ‘when is he going to return from his space expedition?’” [P10, age 21, single, 319-329]</p> <p>“The part that... the person never fights back. The person wants everything that you want at the same time, it’s always perfect. That's not how it works in the real life [laughs].” [P6, age 62, single, 71-72]</p> <p><i>[contrasts to western portrayals of love]</i> “...both partners in a relationship need to overcome a shared struggle. Whereas I guess the dedication or like the, the lengths that the guys will go for, go to for the MC is very different.” [P3, age 25, single, 138-140]</p>
	<p>Low-effort love / commodification of love / one-sided / selfish / self-servitude</p>	<p>Love in the periphery is characterised as low-effort and more of a means to an end than a long-term commitment</p>	<p>“[...] on Reddit again, you know, to check on Tinder there, the subreddit Tinder and all that, people are crazy and selfish. They don't search to, to share with someone, they search for people to give them stuff. [...] they don't seem to want to give and to, to build something. And as I was saying at the beginning of this, uh for me, love is giving, is taking care of people. And my definition of love doesn't fit at all. That's why I say I don't believe in love anymore. [laughs]” [P6, age 62, single, 369-377]</p>

				<p>“But then there's also like, the kind of like rise of like, just like casual like, sex stuff, which isn't like the worst thing in the world, I guess, but it's, it's definitely, I think like kinda [pause] impacted like uh the prevalence of like romantic love within like society as a whole, that uh it's more a connection based on, like, hedonism, I would say [laughs].” [P11, age 25, married, 376-380]</p> <p>“I think we should all like hold each other to a high standard. Like, you should not be- I think there's a lot of people who think relationships are all about taking, and you just take for yourself and it's like, no, that's toxic, actually. Um... please do not do that.” [P10, age 21, single, 691-694]</p>
Pixelated Partners: preservation of beliefs through the symbolic core	Reinforcing the core through romantic fiction	LADS honeymoon period / idealised / emotional appeal / motivation / optimism	By bolstering central core beliefs through the idealised symbolic core of romantic fiction, LADS provides motivation in real-world romantic relationships, increases romanticism, and allows participants to maintain core beliefs and optimism in spite of contradictions within the periphery	<p>“[...] so, love here is... it's like a flame. It burns and it- and it, it's very nice to see [...] this kind of love in real life, just, it doesn't really happen, it's... it's refreshing, and it's, it's a nice form of escapism [laughs]” [P9, age 22, single, 283-286]</p> <p>“I feel like it's like a romance book or a romance movie or whatever, but it's so much more real. Like as real as it can get. Just because, like, as soon as you open up the game, he's right there. You can have interactions with him right on the home screen. There's so much content in the game.” [P10, age 21, single, 564-567]</p> <p>“I feel like I know more like, what I want for myself. Like, I think the reason that I'm actually like I'm, I wouldn't say I'm more attracted to</p>

				<p>men, like, offline, um... but I've been like, more active on Hinge. I've been trying to get more dates [...] the men in the game go so far above and beyond my standards. Um, but I don't think it's necessarily- if anything, I feel like the game may have... lowered my standards funny enough. I don't know why, but like, I feel like I've been more open minded when on hinge. And I've been like, people I probably wouldn't have done in the past, I would swipe right on now.”</p> <p>[P10, age 21, single, 423-425, 449-456]</p> <p>“I mean, it's already given me ideas of like, other dates that I could possibly even plan with my husband. [...] But like it-it's kind of inspired me to, you know, try that kind of a multi-step again. To actually try and plan that kind of a thing out.” [P4, age 35, married, 875-876, 894-896]</p>
		<p>LADS tropes / self-sacrifice / wholesome / devotion / security / symbolic / emotional fulfilment</p>	<p>Fictional romantic narratives (which are sometimes culturally specific) of love within LADS form the symbolic core, mapping onto central core aspects and reinforcing them.</p>	<p><i>(When talking about indulging in romantic tropes in media and in real life)</i> “it's so hard for me because it's like, a part of me, I'm like, "oh, but it was so fun when I did it." But it, it was like it was fun in retrospect. Like, thinking back to it [laughs] Oh my God, that was so fun [laughs]. But in that I was like, oh, oh no, no, no, no, no [...], it's like my, my heart yearns for it, but my head is like, no, let's not do that again [laughs]” [P12, age 20, single, 302-314]</p> <p>“I would consider myself very independent actually, because I think I can't rely on anyone else, so the Yandere trope speaks to that. [...] they'll go to like, any length for me, which... is appealing because in real life, I feel like... a majority of interactions are very</p>

				<p>transactional, or I guess like a friendship can slip very easily.” [P3, age 25, single, 279-287]</p> <p>“I like being focused on and in return, I will try to give it back to you. I like having that kind of balance. And I guess that's why I'm really passionate about liking Rafayel. Because it's something that I'm able to appreciate and try to give back.” [P8, age 25, in a relationship, 426-428]</p> <p>“Now that I'm a bit older and now that my, um, consumption of media has sort of varied over time, I have shifted towards liking more like golden retriever kind of boyfriends. Somebody who's very devoted, um who's... affectionate.” <i>(later)</i> “he does fit the golden retriever [laughs] image the most among all the uh companions right now. But more than that, like, Caleb right now hits all the spots for me. He has the slight possessiveness part that I really want in a partner. Um, and he's also... Golden retriever [laughs] he's very devoted.” [P9, age 22, single, 101-104, 318-321]</p> <p>“Like I do, unfortunately, uh toxically enough, I do like the yandere like fucking possessive, like controlling type, like [laughs] of love interest depicted in like games at times. I do like gra- I do like that. The security I guess behind it.” [P11, age 25, married, 358-360]</p> <p>“like the little caring messages, it just feels nice. You know, it's just like, I think it's like a nice... it's just like a nice way to see like, oh, like this is what it could be. So, don't lower your standards. I feel like every day, like when I log on, I'm</p>
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				<p>like, "[sighs] I'm not lowering my standards today. It's not happening. My standards are staying high" [laughs]" [P12, age 20, single, 402-406]</p> <p>"I think it's, it's- it's not like they changed anything, but it's actually I think a good and healthy reminder to not lower your standards, definitely. It's not like I want something like 1 to 1 to what's happening in the game, but I really, like, advise myself and other players, I would advise other players to- to like, not settle for something that's not at least like, 10% of what they offer in the game." [P2, Age 32, Situationship, 327-334]</p>
	Shedding the social demands of reality	LADS emotional depth / maturity / safety / security / remaining true to oneself / alternatives / platonic relationships	Within fictional domains of LADS, there is a sense of security and emotional support (that reflects the central core) that players cannot find reflected within the periphery. Participants also express the move towards alternatives such as platonic love	<p>"that's exactly why I don't think somebody like Caleb, or any of the companions for that matter, can really manifest in real life. None of them have the kind of like, emo- or not, maybe not none of them, but very few men in real life have that level of emotional intelligence and maturity, and also that level of devotion towards their romantic partner." [P9, age 22, single, 483-486]</p> <p>"[...] in emotional depth, I would say only 30% realistic. Because I think usually men don't try to dive that deep into their emotions. And, and even if they do, it's usually the artists, the people who work on art because they have to plumb the depths of their emotional state in order to create art, right. Yeah." [P5, age 33, single, 412-415]</p> <p><i>(when asked if they feel an emotional connection to their favourite character, Zayne)</i> "Hm,</p>

				<p>yes, I do. Hm, I think he's like my virtual emotional support boy in that sense. [...] like, you know there's the little talk feature [...] I think I really like that feature a lot. I don't use it often, but it's like, great for comfort when like you're sad. You know, when you're down, they can say some nice words to lift you up" [P7, age 21, single, 368-379]</p> <p>"I read a bit of Julia Fox's like, autobiography and the way she described... her feelings and stuff and how she kind of more... focused or valued the found family she has. Um, and she seemed like really fulfilled. That kind of also influenced me in that romantic relationships don't-, aren't that important to me or they're not that... necessary or even... like, magical or as common as I guess like Disney movies make it seem like." [P3, age 25, single, 92-100]</p> <p>"I guess I do technically believe in the male loneliness epidemic. I don't think it's because of women though, like I- or like a woke left or whatever. I think it's 'cos... I don't know, men are not like organising or like, adapting, whereas women are. And I think it's goes to show like women- I guess I've read like, some sort of report or a news article that said a report found that women are actually happier single, And I would agree with that." [P3, age 25, single, 349-354]</p>
		Reality - misogyny / incel culture / beauty standards / social demands / gendered divide	The periphery of love is characterised by a number of obstacles including misogyny, incel	<p>"but just from interacting with the men in my life, maybe I'm unlucky or something, but I think they just can't... compare. Like, I don't know, even if they were nice, I think the way Zayne interacts with the MC, the way he's nice to her, I</p>

			<p>culture, homophobia, racism and gendered misunderstandings</p>	<p>think it's just different. [...] I think there's a lot of work to be done in how the men in real life treat women. Like, I think there's still a lot of misogyny. There's still a lot of like, this divide between us that doesn't really quite exist in the game.” [P7, age 21, single, 447-458]</p> <p>“Yeah, I think most people's relationship standards, or the relationship standards that are like, impossible to attain that I see people talking about, like "manosphere" figures, or even to some extent some women content creators, A normal level headed person is not going to actually have those super-duper high criterias of like, he has to be 6 foot and make 6 figures. Or the woman, the chick has to like, go to the gym and like, never had sex. I think [pause] those aren't actually as... prevalent as probably online discourse makes it seems like.” [P3, age 25, single, 383-388]</p> <p>“there is this... prominence of the 'incel' culture that is spreading around in, you know, particularly these times. It seems like men have been increasingly... shifting towards a kind of thinking that they are... underprivileged, and that women are...- that there's something wrong with women.” [P9, age 22, single, 461-464]</p> <p><i>(When discussing ‘Andrew Tate’ and the rise in far-right misogyny)</i></p> <p>“there's this term that I learned online from someone, it's called social infertility. Or basically, like um, the original meaning of what it means to be an incel. As a woman, you are infertile because you just haven't met the right man yet, right. Like that kind of idea.</p>
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				Speaking for myself, I'm still trying to find the right man, even though I keep asking man out and they reject me. It's- so it's like, it's- I am doing my best. It's- it's, it's not really my fault that I am this 'infertile'" [P5, age 33, single, 519-513]
	Filling the void but not the whole: the lost science of socialising	Fear of loneliness / loneliness / alone / COVID / loss of third spaces / dating apps	Within the periphery, representations of love are characterised by not 'love' itself, but the fear of being alone. There is also the idea that loneliness and isolation are increasing within the current generation	<p>"I would say relationship standards in real life, from what I've seen, are pretty... low and primarily based on the fact that people are afraid to be alone." [P3, age 25, single, 388-390]</p> <p>"But this generation is like stuck in this solitude, and people want to find love, and people is so desperate to find affection. So, I do think that that's the main, main appeal for that" [P1, age 29, single, 378-379]</p> <p>"And I think another reason for that is also because of COVID. I think it shut down like, a lot of places. Before that, I'm sure socialising was easier. But yeah, I think now it's just really hard to, like, meet people and, yeah, just date. Most of it has gone online." [P7, age 21, single, 580-582]</p> <p>"I'm honestly really sad about it because I hate the fact that nowadays, the main way that we connect is through dating apps. Um, we've lost that, you know, natural spark of meeting each other at the bookstore [laughs] if that makes sense." [P9, age 22, single, 660-662]</p>
		LADS companionship / shame	LADS love interests offer companionship through continued	"What people want from a relationship will always be companionship. That's what- that's the end goal [...] people want a

			<p>mini games, features, and interactions. However, there is also an element of shame associated with playing the game, attached to the stigma of 'failing' at love in reality</p>	<p>sense of companionship and also certain security that you have someone there for you. [...] I hear um, people saying 'I just miss having someone to... say hi when I come back home' or to watch a TV show with me. It's like sharing like, the little things that make your everyday." [P1, age 29, single, 619-633]</p> <p><i>(When discussing 'Andrew Tate' and the rise in far-right misogyny)</i> "there's this term that I learned online from someone, it's called social infertility. Or basically, like um, the original meaning of what it means to be an incel. As a woman, you are infertile because you just haven't met the right man yet, right. Like that kind of idea. Speaking for myself, I'm still trying to find the right man, even though I keep asking man out and they reject me. It's- so it's like, it's- I am doing my best. It's- it's, it's not really my fault that I am this 'infertile'" [P5, age 33, single, 519-513]</p> <p>"I live alone, like in Korea, like I have my friends, but like I'm living on my, my family's way back home and I live alone here. So, it's like a nice thing like in the m- like, just have like a little, like '[sigh] ah! I'm loved! I am cared for!'" [laughs]" [P12, age 20, single, 919-921]</p>
		Return to reality	<p>Participants place repeated emphasis on the fact that, although LADS and the symbolic core 'fill a hole', they cannot act as a complete</p>	<p>"there's a lot of aspects of like all the guys' personalities that can be something that you want in someone.[...] seeing the different aspects of their personalities that you can pull from and uh... realise, okay, I actually would really like this in a partner, can help you on your journey, So long as you let it</p>

			<p>replacement for love in reality</p>	<p>be a help instead of a hindrance.[...] Let it help to... be there and comfort you in your moment of need. But don't let it... consume you." [P4, age 35, married, 971-972, 983-992]</p> <p>"[...] you cannot beat like, like the reality of having like oh, like a real friend or eve- or a real partner. [...] those guys, they will never know you. They are programmed to say these, like, compliments, these beautiful things." [P10, age 21, single, 649-654]</p> <p>"I think they are very well fleshed out characters, it's just that they- they are... I-I wish they had more autonomy. I wish they have um, they have more chances to say no [...] yeah, I-I just wish that... that things were a bit more difficult for the MC [laughs] in a way." [P5, age 33, single, 358-362]</p> <p>"He is like, he literally paints the MC. He will describe her like a painting, a model, like a song. And it's absolutely gorgeous what he's saying, but he's... programmed to say that. He doesn't know me. And I think, like, you have to know each other if you're going to love each other." [P10, age 21, single, 623-633]</p> <p>"And it's not a replacement because um, you wouldn't be able to appreciate this game without comparing it to the real." [P8, age 25, in a relationship, 691-692]</p> <p>"[...] what I'm trying to get at is just that you have to come back. You have to handle reality at some point. And maybe even take some of the interactions with you forward into, into your future</p>
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				<p>interactions.” [P4, age 35, married, 869-871]</p> <p>“it doesn't have to be, you know, replacing the relationships you have in real life. It should definitely not replace real life. It's, it's just a game, you know. Whatever you get from consuming media, it should be for your own betterment and your own health.” [P5, age 33, single, 601-604]</p> <p>“Yes, because it filled the hole, it filled the gap, it filled the little part that is missing, that connect your life and the dream world. So, it's-but don't make it becoming a very large part. It's just a link, just to a little corner of happiness. [laughs]” [P6, age 62, single, 408-410]</p>
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APPENDIX J – Thematic analysis coding diary

Defining love

How participants view love (their social representation of love)

- Love is compromise / reciprocal / a partnership
 - P4 – both sides communicate, listen and compromise (finding middle ground) (56, 119) – must have willingness to shift as not everyone can always be happy (87) **BUT stick to moral / ethical standards – no compromise (92)**
 - P5 – BOTH sides should put in work – reciprocal (45)
 - P6 – you have to compromise (doing things you may not want to do for the sake of your partner) (76)
 - P7 - Some things cannot be compromised on - like big things such as future children (82)
 - P8 – Realised she doesn't just like her boyfriend because of the validation that comes from having someone love you, but instead **knows she likes him because she is willing to compromise** for him (accept that he won't have the 'Lemurian' traits she longs for in a partner) (110)
 - **Proactiveness** needed – if P8 doesn't make first move, the other person needs to as well (246) – **mutual effort**
 - Balance and reciprocity of love language needed (426)
 - P9 – relationship being like a **joint project** where you both work in a **partnership** towards a goal (47) – must compromise (54)
 - P12 – willing to participate in the give and take (sacrificing some things) (54)
- Love is sacrifice?...
- Love is work / effortful
 - P1 – idea of love being something consistent you constantly “work on every day” (488)
 - P2 – love in modern day is complicated (because of more choice/options) (349)
 - P2 - Just because we have access to more dating pools, it doesn't mean that the quantity and quality of relationships will increase (in a similar way to how we have access to more knowledge, but many don't use it so our education hasn't increased in quality/quantity) – you have to actively pursue, work on it, and want it (356)
 - P3 – Western emphasis on **perseverance** in face of adversity / having to overcome shared struggle for love (138) whereas LADS shows different dedication to MC
 - P4 – thought communication would be easy (as it was made out to be) but not (80) – love is not as easy or as natural as we are sold in fairytales and movies

- P4 – emphasises **perseverance** – always willing to be there through thick and thin (95) and work through things (102)
- P4 – there will be **conflict** - arguments, conflict and not seeing eye-to-eye is all a part of the relationship experience **and it is how you handle them (or if you can handle them together) that is important** BUT is often airbrushed out of the pristine image of love presented in the game (190)
- Being able to avoid conflict is unimportant/unrealistic, it is the ability to resolve it that is a testament to relationship strength/compatibility (206)
- **BUT the good moments should outweigh/outshine the negative (456)**
- P5 – love comes with responsibilities (39)
- P7 – love is a constant effort and a conscious choice - there is agency there (34)
 - Love is imperfect – not the polished image the media sells you (149) but also not as dramatic as dramas (155)
- P8 - Having good **conflict resolution** (same as P4 said) – willing to not just listen but to **hear one another (117, 121)**
- P9 – emphasis on **conflict resolution** (same as P4 & P8) - Idea that conflict is inevitable, but it is the ability to resolve it and move forward that is important (55)
 - This + investment and willingness to work on relationship with partner is what separates romantic relationships from sexual relationships or romantic attraction
- P10 – **Love is a process** - Though basic standards must be met, connection is something that takes time to come into fruition and build upon - don't have to be met right away (118-121) – start from forming basic foundation (126)
- P12 – Problems that don't go against key 'must haves'/ **romantic principles** can be worked through together (117)
- Love is evolution
 - P4 – Finding someone who encourages you to become best version of yourself (49) – not for them, but for you
 - P5 – **Love is a mirror** – opportunity for self-reflection & growth w/ a spiritual component (38, 46, 586)
 - P6 – Real love is a **partnership** where your goal is to **encourage growth/ happiness** in someone (which is why their reference point is between parents and their children) (86, 415)
 - P6 – Wanting what's best for someone and being willing to hold them accountable so that they grow (92)
 - P11 – add/improve each other's lives – growth (56)
- Love is a learning process
 - P2 – Ideas of love also evolve over time (e.g., with age) (44)
 - P4 – Ideas of love have changed over time (41, 63, 69, 282)
 - Used to think it was pure devotion BUT experience and years has shown there are many ways to love

- ‘Honeymoon phase’ of constant passion doesn’t (need to) last forever (the mundane things are just as important (289)
- P6 - Emphasises how their age impacts their view point many times regarding game and opinions of love etc (422)
- P9 – not ideas of love, but ideal type has changed over time as they got older (95)
- Love is permanence
 - P2 – planning for a future with a person (commitment) differentiates from platonic (53) – also putting a name to it (65)
 - P3 – envisioning/ wanting to spend the rest of your life with them – not just temporary (51)
 - P6 – idea of building something together (long-term) (415)
 - P7 - If you want it to last a long time, your future goals should align – dealbreaker – (like wanting/not wanting children) (71, 77, 89)
 - P8 - Romantic love - seeing one’s positive traits, liking them, and having the same goals for the future of the relationship; Romantic feelings - not interested in growth of relationship - seems **the thing that differentiates them is the level of commitment involved** (50, 59)
- Love is Deep
 - P3 – Knows / taught that love is a deep feeling beyond friendship despite not experiencing it (35) – a ‘partnership’ that includes trust (50)
 - P6 – the only deep kind of love is familial (43)
 - P7 - Love is a deep connection of unspoken understanding of one another (45)
 - P8 – always give **devotion/ commitment** when showing their love (221)
 - P9 - Further than friendship (affection that has sexual or romantic component) (37)
 - P10 – emotional connection so deep it can bring pain (50-53) or happiness (59) - characterised by complete trustworthiness, intimacy and devotion (39-41)
 - P11 – Love strong bond / deep connection (38-40) – a **secure safe-space** (41) – **intimacy** separates romantic from platonic love (46, 48)
 - P12 – feels platonic more but romantic is a level above – mentally / physically **gravitate towards them** (46-49)
- Love is preservation of the self and acceptance of that from your partner
 - P3 – Strong emphasis on not wanting to change themselves just to accommodate a LI (79)
 - P3 – spending life devoted to one person and not living for self is seen as bad IRL (176)
 - P4 – Being comfortable in being yourself unapologetically and not changing self (125, 176)
 - P5 – Love gives self-validation (39)
 - P8 – wanting to be **honest** about feelings and commitment to relationship (226, 553)
 - Despite ‘Yandere’ trope matching depth of devotion/ commitment they like, the trope is too intense and the **yandere loses**

themselves in the process – want it to be honest part of them / come from the heart (545)

- Love is finding joy in the mundane
 - P1 - a difference between; not the joy of 'being with someone' but instead the joy of just '**being, with someone**' (626) – sharing the little things is what is wanted
 - P4 – the mundane moments are the most memorable /special (292, 454)
 - P11 – exchanging/sharing hobbies and knowledge (40)
- Love is unattainable
 - P6 – true romantic love doesn't exist and makes people feel bad when they can't achieve it (50)
- Love is subjective
 - P7 – Different conflicting definitions of love in society (134)
 - P12 – difficult to describe (44)

Standards for romantic love/relationships

- Key must-haves and desired elements of romantic relationships
 - P1 - **Respect, commitment, affection** (looks don't matter), **acts of service**
 - P2 – **Respect, 'romantic feelings'** (45), **Loyalty, mutual understanding of relationship direction** (71) – being on same wavelength is a must for long-term success (say looks don't matter – just a bonus - 88) –
 - **someone who holds you accountable** (92),
 - Sense of humour (101)
 - acts of service (230)
 - P3 – **Easily adding to their life rather than being disruptive** – feel happier with them than they already feel on their own as they enjoy solitude (59, 65),
 - being independent/self-sufficient (67, 73)
 - P4 – **Communication** (also heard in society growing up - 78), **Compromise** (86), **Empathy/perseverance** (95), **Intimacy** (emotional, physical, intellectual) (103)
 - Holding accountable again / being an anchor / complementary (146)
 - Matching energy (158)
 - Understanding & acceptance of who you are (175, 947, 962)
 - The little things (180)
 - P5 – **Emotional support** (40), **Self-knowledge, Autonomy** (56), **Balance/egalitarianism** (57), **Respect** (underpins all relationships (63), **Emotional availability** (65) (idea that you need a healthy 'romantic inventory' or cognitive resources for a good relationship)
 - There is a practicality to relationships too – 'love alone isn't enough'

- **Financial stability, mental wellness, and sometimes culture** are practical things (and potential barriers/hurdles to love) that must be considered as well (77)
- **Ideal – Communication, taking initiative (95,132** - Not just recognising flaws but also wanting to grow/overcome them) - **Confidence** to communicate what you want - comes back to what P4 said about having the ability to be honest (119) - Need someone on **same income level** (as past has shown those who earn below feel some insecurity because of that) (125)
- **P6 – Autonomy & Trust (100)** - Idea again that you need to be ‘self-sufficient’ and have the correct tools in the ‘romantic inventory’ before having a romantic relationship (104)
 - **Ideal** – not having relationship – doesn’t want to share life with anyone (110)
- **P7 – Showing love language (55) and Quality time (63)** are must haves
 - **Beliefs, values and morals must align (91, 101)** – must be a good person (97, 127)
- **P8 – Compatibility (70)** - You must have some compatibility/common ground & like something about them
 - **Ideal** – adventurous, playful, funny, childlike wonder, matches energy (88) – opposite of current boyfriend and closer to Rafayel (84)
- **P9 – Honesty/communication (78)** – don’t have to be a perfect communicator, but dishonesty is a dealbreaker (80) - **Being a priority to your partner (82)**
 - **Ideal** - changed from colder/older/mature in teens (96) to ‘**golden retriever boyfriend**’ – devoted, affectionate, respecting boundaries, emotional intelligence (103, 105, 111)
- **P10 – Loyalty & trust (72, 82), being valued (77), holding conversation (95)**
 - **Ideal** - smart, good looking, funny (88-90) - seen as added perks (94, 127)
- **P11 – Trust & Chemistry (53-56) Consent (70)** –
 - **Ideal** - wife ticks all of boxes for ideal partner - caring, intelligent, good chemistry, trust & security (91-96)
- **P12 – Trust (64-66), Understanding (70), Setting boundaries (72, 76)** – and respecting them (not meddling with friendships which is a dealbreaker leans into trust and boundaries– 86-88) – links to P3 wanting them to add to life rather than taking away/ completely disrupting it - Cares more about the foundation of the romantic (emotional fulfilment) aspect before the sexual aspect of love (193-199)
 - **Ideal** – idealised type isn’t exactly what they would need IRL (123) – what they would need – someone who holds them accountable (125) and is self-sufficient/not over-reliant (126, 139-142) – P12 has **unstable attachment (130)** - **needs someone that compliments them rather than being the same as them**
 - Funny, childish (146-148)

How standards/representations for romantic love are formed

- **Representations of love formed/refined through observing family and friends (P1)**
 - P1 – watching **parents/ grandparents** care for/ do things for one another
 - P2 – watching **family didn't provide healthy examples** – upbringing set bad standards that they are now trying to change (110)
 - P3 – **observing friends** also shaped what they know about love (49, 68) – understood what they liked / didn't like through observing friends' relationship dynamics (e.g., having to perform parental role wouldn't work for them) – vicarious exploration that mirrors the game
 - P3 – high school cohorts had lower standards (just being Christian) which they didn't agree with (378)
 - P4 – **Observing brother's relationship** (and comparing to the one they had at the time) showed them what was missing or wrong in theirs – having a healthy comparison helped ()
 - P5 – **parents** – watching dad do chores set standards for future partner (206) and representations of love being source of emotional validation and self-esteem (576)
 - P7 – **Parents** – bad representation – shaped what they **don't** want (162) – made them not want a relationship (177) – planted seed that consuming romantic media easier than the reality of a relationship - Reality (parents) and Ideal (media) have 50/50 influence on social reps of romantic love (185)
 - P8 – **Parents** – showcased **imperfections** of romantic relationships – p8 then associated arguments/tension with marriage rather than 'love' itself (which they still desire) (204)
 - P9 – **Parents** - are the first models for what love/a romantic relationship should be (167)
 - **Observing brother's relationship & other adults** also contributed (169) - Observing real relationships being effortful/imperfect disillusioned ideal love (171, 177)
 - Observing/ living vicariously through **friends' relationships** informs romantic expectations (201) – friends ask for advice as the romantic media they have consumed has actually made them knowledgeable about navigating relationships
 - P11 – **Parents – happy marriage (114-116)**
 - P12 – **Siblings** – older sisters (187) – eldest made her realise love doesn't always have to be full-on 24/7 or operating at maximum capacity/ dramatic all the time (231-215) – Second sister showed that love is about compromise and finding a happy middle ground (219-225) – Third sister taught her love takes time and its okay to wait (229, 236, 247)
 - **Parents** – taught them small arguments/ **conflicts** show you care – **conflict resolution (256-257)** – and participant wants this too (261, 263) - Not the arguments themselves but how you deal with them/persist shows you care/strengthens relationship
- **Representations of love formed through culture**

- P1 - **traditional gender roles** (valuing protection, commitment, acts of service)
- P12 – idea that romantic portrayals vary depending on sociocultural context (**184**)
- **Representations of love formed through media**
 - P1 – **Romantic literature** – Homer the odyssey & Romeo and Juliet (media outside of sociocultural settings – including otome – extends representations of love beyond one’s immediate sociocultural context) – solidifies idea that love is sacrificial – **anime** (‘Blood+’ – master/servant dynamic – him ‘serving’/ acts of service type of love again – ‘a sign of affection’ – doing something / evolving out of love for partner again) & K-dramas also – exposure to romantic tropes when younger through diff media
 - P2 – **Films, Tv shows, Books** - Warring representations growing up between reality (negative representations) and media (positive/idealistic representations) (**117**) – so became mixed – but stopped liking romantic media after teen years (**127**)
 - P3 – **Anime & Manga / Queer women celebs** – helped to define depth of feeling in regard to the line between romantic and platonic (**87**) and being fulfilled with platonic love (**92**) – prefer eastern portrayals of romance, not as an ideal, but because they seem more engaging/enjoyable (**148**)
 - P4 – **Anime & Manga** – ‘Fruits Basket’ (**309**) - Wanted to model/ embody character ‘Tohru’ in the anime (**318**) All the traits the character embodies can be seen reflected in the participant’s current standards for romantic love and relationships (**323**)
 - P5 – used to enjoy **K-dramas** (**251**) - **YouTube therapists / social media** - giving information on attachment theories and ideas of healthy love (**252**)
 - P6 – loves **K-dramas** (**277**) – watches them most evenings – admits the aesthetic/idea of this kind of love is appealing (**323**)
 - P7 – **Media** - Has a varied ideal type that has been discovered through the media they have explored/consumed (**118**) – there’s no ‘one fits all’
 - Although media idealised/dramatized, parents being negative reps of love made them look for representations of love elsewhere – media (**171**) - Consume various media (including LADS) - gacha games, tv shows, K-pop (**196**)
 - P8 – **Media** – taught them love should be full devotion / sacrifice (**184, 197**) – romantic movies, manga, k-dramas growing up informed social reps of love (**195**), mystic messenger (**292**) and that’s how they therefore expressed love before relationship (**493**)
 - P9 - **Media** consumed has heightened romantic expectations to unattainable levels, making them avoidant of potential relationships IRL (**125**) – searched for ideal in media because they knew it wasn’t available IRL (**178**) through **anime, webtoons, manga, visual novel/roleplaying games** (**184**)
 - P10 - **Media** has differing portrayals of love, but trust, loyalty and devotion are what is universal (**143-146**) – desired but seen as ‘fictional’ (**150-152**)

- **Books & Movies (167, 176)** – can’t learn from friends as they haven’t had deep romantic relationships and if they do its private
- P11 – **Media – Tv, moves, manga, anime (117-118, 128)** – romantic media consumed a lot w/ slice of life romance animes (**141-145**)
- P12 – **Webtoons/otome games/visual novel games** since they were 9 (**274, 369, 376**) **K-dramas, K-pop** and **anime** but not much anime anymore (**279-281**) - Enjoys hurt and comfort romance K-dramas as well as action (**291-295**)
- **Representations of love formed through knowledgeable others**
 - P5 – **YouTube therapists** - giving information on attachment theories and ideas of healthy love (**252**)
 - P8 – **Work** - had a workshop on love & learned difference between romantic feelings and romantic love (**40**) – BUT for fiction book writing (does this really reflect reality?)
- **First-hand experience**
 - P4 – Knew intimacy was a must-have as sharing knowledge with husband was how she grew attached to him (**109**)
 - P4 – relationship with husband showed them they need someone who compliments their personality (emotionally) (**143**) and showed which personality traits they enjoyed (**161**) added to knowledge (**168, 267**)
 - P5 – **first relationship** – showed that love isn’t easy – got bored (**208**) – showed growth was needed and couldn’t do it at that age (**215**) - Idea again that you have to develop this healthy ‘romantic inventory’ before you can pursue a relationship fully or be happy in a relationship
 - **Limerent object** experience (**221**)- This experience clearly shaped their views and emphasis on the importance of this ‘romantic inventory’ (especially mental health and self-esteem) being in a healthy condition before you can form even a basic relationship
 - P8 – **Relationship with boyfriend** - Met boyfriend in a way that reflected the classic ‘meet-cute’ whirlwind romance storyline portrayed in media and romanticised start of relationship (**152, 167, 172, 177**) - BUT eventually, reality of the practical world caught up - work, not having time (**182**) – **learnt honeymoon period doesn’t last forever like in media (374)** – exposure to this reality / experience changes your perspective (**485, 485**)
 - P11 – Experiences formed understanding (**113**) **discovered polyamory doesn’t work for them** and that cheating was a dealbreaker (**75-78**) – romantic preferences/boundaries tested
- **Non-dominant perspectives (non-heteronormative & neurodivergent lens)**
 - P3 – Has ASD (& is bisexual) which has influenced opinions on love (**57**)
 - P3 – Hard to pinpoint what that connection feels like / when to know when it is experienced (**219**)
 - P3 – More emphasis placed on physical attraction connection / aesthetics of characters in game (**228**)

- P6 – has ASD and is asexual – has tried to understand what it is people are searching for with love, what it is, and why they want this deep connection (322, 333)
- P7 – Is panromantic – views don't fit in with heteronormative ideas of love society/media pushes (141)

LADS romance

○ Love in the game

- P1 – The game aligns with their views of love - reflects love being something you put effort into & work on every day (490) however it is more extreme in the sacrificial sense
- P2 – idea that love is exaggerated or 'cranked up' to give an emotional connection – game relies on this to generate revenue (164) BUT – basics like respect, loyalty and being supportive are not unrealistic (168)
- P3 – Different to western portrayals (135) – emphasis on **dedication** rather than **emotional labour** of overcoming shared struggle (137, 139)
- P4 – '**Love takes time**' – idea that love is a process (405)
- P5 – portrayed in '**idealistic manner**' that is intense/even scary (338)
- P6 - Love in the game is **idealistic** - everything is intentional and has meaning - real love is not that perfect (149)
- P7 – **Soulmate** love – idealistic
- P8 – Complete **Self-sacrifice – unrealistic** (339)
- P9 – **Self-sacrificing, all-consuming – unrealistic** (266,267) but nice to see (like a flame - 283)
- P10 – **intense** (232)
- P11 – portrayed 'interestingly' – **toxic elements** (180-182, 194) but also wholesome elements (195) – **Intense/passionate** (188) - a lot of elements are exaggerated (204)
- P12 – believe that love (as they define it) is absent in the main story (389-392) whilst the softer romance cards have more semblance of realism (369-398)
 - Offers 'extreme' version of love (902-903)

○ The Good, the bad and the ugly (good traits appeal, bad traits humanise but not desirable irl)

the game must compromise between fantasy/entertainment and reflecting reality

- P1 - The self-sacrificing that P1 stated they liked in romantic reps is said to be unhealthy in LADS (red flags IRL, only good in fiction) – maybe as they feel as though MC is not reciprocating enough, so too one-sided
- P2 – possessive nature of Caleb not as appealing irl and not accompanied with the positive attributes he has either (255)
- P3 – Levels of self-sacrifice in the game would be uncomfortable/unhealthy/off-putting IRL (175)
- P4 – actions of the MC feel toxic in reality (573,580)
 - Yandere trope is toxic IRL (698)

- P5 – Caleb obsession is scary (343)
- P10 – Caleb obsession/manipulation red flag – bad IRL (488, 492, 496, 539)
- P11 – Caleb loved but problematic/toxic (181-182)

○ **Mundane realism / humanisation**

- P1 - Also talks about **Voice element**
- P2 – other than the fantasy elements, it is the realism of the **childhood friends to lovers / slow burn** romance that is appealing with Caleb (214)
- P3 – liking the characters **personalities** – seeing themselves reflected in them (210)
 - P3 – complex nature of the characters is appealing (213) – makes players invested / empathise (229)
- P4 – imperfect moments – Zayne date going wrong (237)
 - P4 - **The mundane moments** in the game are what the participant is drawn to (which echoes what they state they enjoy about their own relationship with husband) (480, 492, 607) –
 - The mundane of letting you be you (that participant stated was one of the core indicators of ideal for love/ romantic relationships) is more powerful / appreciated more than the unrealistic ‘destiny’ trope (758)
 - P4 – Depth of **personalities** (604) – insecurities humanise them (521) - Characters are crafted in a way that makes them easy to love / become attached to (555, 971)
- P5 – **Voice** aspect adds to appeal of the characters (participant 1 also spoke about this) (285, 292) - Idea that the character would be replaced by AI less appealing - loses the human aspect (in every sense) that people love
 - Emotional attachment to Raf because of emotional depth (317)
- P7 – Dynamic between Zayne/ MC seems more realistic – takes time (284) – Zayne has less fantastical elements (299)
 - **Voice** - The voice acting adds to the appeal and characterisation - fleshes out the character and makes them more attractive (314, 349)
 - **Personality** – depth of character seen through emotional backstories – made them admire him (323) – root for them (398)
- P8 – **likeable characters** make you invest in them (316, 322) – Rafayel personality sets him apart – depth of character (413, 421, 442, 448, 449)
- P9 – **3D graphics** increase realism (and increases immersion along with first-person POV) (608)
- P10 - **Characterisation** is very strong and enjoyable (221-224) - Rafayel main - fun personality - aligns with what they like in an ideal partner (264, 269)
- P11 – the more realistic relationship and mundane/wholesome aspect with Caleb makes him appealing - normalcy (222, 227, 230, 236, 243)
- P12 – interactions in card, convos and snippets of personalities draw people in (446-448)

- **Voice & Mocap actors** add to appeal & emotional connection (484-485, 489, 494-495, 508)

○ **Ways of loving - something for everyone (different otome tropes)**

- P2 – Stability of main characters – acting as an anchor/supportive nature is appealing (227) – Sylus’ acts of service appealing and speak to participant’s love language (229)
- P4 – Zayne’s communication – represents healthy relationship - ticks pps most important box (communication) which may be why he is their favourite (253)
 - Zayne represents slowburn romance (470)
 - All lean into certain tropes (499)
 - Rafayel represents Tsundere trope (709)
 - Equilibrium between intense / sweet moments (772)
- P5 – Zayne being ‘realistic’ or mundane than the other intense tropes makes him feel safer (343)
- P7 – Zayne seems more realistic/normal and has good communication (in comparison to Caleb who they don’t like) (278, 283) – love taking time is more real
- P10 – different types of love (232, 253) Zayne – colder slow-burn (233, 238), Sylus – fast paced, intense, dark romance (239) (is a Raf main w/ Zayne second - 264)
- P11 - LADS love interests cater to different audiences through romantic tropes (304-308) - Sylus - extreme love (306, 312), Caleb - more realistic ‘boy next door’ love (313-315)
- P12 – personalities linked to different tropes and appeal to anyone (442-444)

○ **Entertainment value (good story, good aesthetics, content, etc.,)**

- P1 – emphasises good story and the beauty of the game (as an art major) that even her friends can appreciate
- P3 – emphasis on being ‘enjoyable’ & having tasks/ battles over the fact the characters are attractive (118, 124)
- P3 – due to lack of romantic connection, less invested in the game and the individual characters - just something enjoyable (221)
- P4 – Engaging/diverse content – ‘always something to do’ (370) - Idea of collecting things (780), achieving things/ working towards a goal (377) & battles/combat (392)
 - P4 – Engaging with the characters adds another layer of enjoyment (385)
 - P4 – Even characters they didn’t like at first written well enough that they liked them in the end (511)
- P6 – main reason they play is the aesthetics (130) – good graphics/realism
 - Used to play Genshin but got bored of repetitive nature - Doesn’t like grinding for gems or reading the story in LADS, but **enjoys buying the interactive POV cards/memories (265) Collecting aspect**

- P7 – game provides entertainment when bored (but also suggested it requires some investment) (227) – also enjoy battle aspect (246) would recommend to others for entertainment (653)
- P8 – **invested in story** (272, 313) – started playing out of boredom initially – filled void left by MM (292, 298)
 - Good content/ fun (563) even impressive to non-players (575)
- P9 - Liked these types of games before but got bored of them - Love and Deepspace filled a void and scratched an itch when it was needed (232, 233, 236)
 - High engagement due to **diversity and novelty of the game** - something for everyone (251, 594-597)
 - Would recommend to everyone due to entertainment value (765)
- P10 – **engaging** – fun to write fanfiction about (207-212)
 - Most immersive and realistic form of romantic fiction – can always interact with characters and there is something for everyone (564 – 567, 573)
 - fantasy element is appealing (579-581)
- P11 – **Combat & Gacha** systems are fun (171-175, 275-278)
 - **Realistic style/graphics** and fantasy elements are appealing to players (362)
- P12 – **Combats boredom** - a way to pass the time (358-359) Main cycle of the game is entertainment - other elements besides the romance (709-712, 716-719)

○ Element of shame / taboo

- P1 - There is a shame that comes with spending money / investing in the game (don't want others to know)
 - P1 – Caleb and MC dynamic acknowledged to be frowned upon in own sociocultural context, but can explore this in game instead (459)
- P4 – player themselves was first sceptical - preconceptions of it being cliché - 'catered to the female gaze' (345)
- P8 – initial **distaste** due to the ads – misunderstanding of the way it was presented (282)
- P10 – element of shame/being **perceived as failing at love**/being unlovable **for women** (771, 777)
 - Emotionally cheating if you have a boyfriend (772)
 - Game has reputation of being sexually charged (779 - 780)
- P12 – **stigma – game looked down upon by others** so don't want to be seen playing it (1014-1017)
 - Links to idea of romantic love/relationships being a social symbol, so playing LADS gives image that you are unlovable/ **have failed** in some way (1021-1024)

○ Self-discovery / exploration

Game should add to your life rather than completely replace elements of reality

- P1 – didn't think they would like Caleb, but did – exposure to diff experiences and types of romantic partners can lead to self-discovery
 - P2 – has never had opportunity to explore any of the romantic tropes they enjoy IRL, so explore through media (317)
 - P2 – offers safe environment to find out what you like which is less risky (382)
 - P4 – Idea **that love changes over time** is echoed in the game - what you want/ what you are attracted to changes through trial & error and experience- pps changing their main (556)
 - P4 – tropes like 'doomed romance' won't work IRL so can only experience them here (689)
 - P4 – You have to know yourself / find out which type of love works for you to know what would be transferrable to the outside world (717), and also what personality traits you would want in a partner (971, 983)
 - P4 – the game has given ideas for dates with husband (870, 875)
 - P5 - Game **provided new perspective** - masculinity and emotional intelligence can in fact co-exist without compromising one another (410) – no toxicity – reinforces ideas of what they like in a partner (417, 423)
 - P6 – has ASD and is asexual – has tried to understand what it is people are searching for with love (322) – game and other media has helped explore
 - P9 - Provides low-risk romantic experimentation to find partner preferences w/out need for trial & error irl (147)
 - Playing LADS has helped guide/solidify what their ideal romantic partner/type is – switching from Zayne to Caleb (496, 499, 505) - Different priorities within partner preferences now (510-514)
 - P10 - Gaining more understanding of what you actually want from a relationship/ what you like from playing LADS (423)
- **Addresses inner desires / unfulfilled needs**
- P1 – state that those traits are in the game because they are what people crave in real life relationships
 - P1 – The characters represent perfection in relationships (396)
 - P1 – The characters fulfil traits/ elements they want in an ideal romantic relationship (496)
 - P1 – fulfils companionship needs
 - P2 – characters have desirable yet attainable qualities they would want in an ideal partner (144)
 - P2 – fulfil acts of service love language / need to be cared for (229) even if fictional (237,242)
 - P3 – Caleb ticks all physical attractiveness boxes (195)
 - Wouldn't pursue Caleb IRL – but would want him around to look at (speaks to desire without causing dissonance with independence/disinterest in romance IRL) (334)

- P4 – Gives players something to hope for in potential romantic encounters (627)
- P5 – Raf reflects qualities they want in a romantic partner (embody most important traits) (317, 344)
 - Getting to be yourself (324)
 - Would date Zayne IRL (437)
- P6 - LADS companions are not as effortful or demanding as a real relationship, so it works for them (117) (don't want to share life with someone)
 - Game appeals to people as it **offers dream life** that is unattainable offline (339)
 - **Fills a hole** from real world BUT make sure it doesn't consume you (408)
- P7 - 'Tete-a-tete' feature offers **comfort and emotional support** in times of need (368, 377)
 - 'Quality time' feature also helps with **productivity** - kind of loops into the cornerstone definitions of love participants brought up - about wanting growth for your partner / helping them get there - this feature fits into that need
 - Game appealing to people as it fills gap left by men IRL (545, 557)
 - 'Remedy, but not a replacement' - Can help feel less lonely and keep you occupied but can't replace that physical human element in these relationships (600, 654) – there's a level of reciprocity that is lost (610)
- P8 – Rafayel ticks all boxes for ideal partner (more so than current boyfriend) (88) – fulfils 'adventurous' and 'self-sacrificing' trait they crave in a partner that can't get in reality (96, 102, 369, 390, 391) - Reluctance to give up 'ideal' love despite knowing it can't be fulfilled in reality - game fulfils it instead (395, 493, 502)
- P9 - Caleb satisfies all the traits the stated were **ideal for a romantic partner** - 'golden retriever boyfriend' type - devoted, slightly possessive (318,319,320, 325, 326, 327)
 - **unconditional love cannot exist IRL** so 'self-sacrificing' tropes and media appeal to need to be cared for no matter what – sense of security (530, 537, 542, 552) – **fulfils innate cardinal psychological desire** - Love that addresses cardinal desires rather than surface level needs is what people are seeking to be fulfilled (555)
 - Appeals to those who are attracted to men who want to fill the void left by the promise of an ideal romance in reality (572, 574) – caters to female gaze in a world that caters to the male gaze (583, 587, 594)
- P10 – Rafayel dramatic, funny, physically attractive, charming (343, 348, 360, 365) – hard to find IRL (415, 416) – Zayne's humour (380)
 - Angsty tropes don't translate well IRL, so game is only place to explore this (555)

- P11 – idea that most players haven’t gotten to experience the type of love in the game IRL (**188-190**)
 - Yandere is the extreme/fantasy, the underlying need it addresses is the need for security that they like IRL (**328, 339-341**)
- P12 – firsthand experience has shown romantic tropes (rollercoaster type romances and love triangles) don’t translate well IRL (**301-303**) - but “heart yearns for it” (**313**) - can indulge in them through media instead (**452-454, 726-729**)
 - Caleb fulfils this need (**331-333, 344**) - Raf close to ideal IRL, but Caleb indulges fantasy desires (**338-340**)
 - **BUT mitigates risk (364-365, 425)**
 - “Quality time” feature fulfils the **holding accountable** side that they look for in a relationship – helps them study (**349-352, 357**)
 - Little words of affirmation and care boost mood/dopamine/serotonin (**402, 478-479, 704-708**)
 - Provides a small sense of companionship/ love/ reassurance when alone (**917-921**)
- **Makes player feel SEEN (validating)**
 - P2 – Game didn’t add to/shape their views of love but instead validated their beliefs (**139**)
 - P2 – Playing the game has validated and reinforced idea not to lower standards (**327**) – they don’t want an exact copy of what’s portrayed in the game as it isn’t realistic, but it reinforces ideas of not settling for less than you deserve (**332**)
 - P3 – sees herself reflected in the characters (**210**)
 - P5 – sees herself reflected in Raf – anxious attachment
 - P7 – sees themselves reflected in Zayne – little traits – compatibility (**327**) makes them endearing
 - Seeing characters in game treating MC right is enough - but not seeing this emulated IRL makes them not want to rush into a relationship (**481,492**)
 - P8 – sees **compatibility** with Rafayel – views on love and ways of being loved (**418, 426, 427**)
 - Has allowed them to keep **both perceptions of love (493)** without changing it
 - P10 – Zayne cardio surgeon and P10 shared knowledge of what he spoke about – connection (**270, 275-277, 285, 290**)
 - P12 – reinforces idea of **what love could be** & not to lower standards (**403-406, 625-629**) – it’s okay to take your time (**633-635**)
- **Low-risk romance**
 - P1 – in the game, players are given the ability to indulge in an unapologetic pursuit of love (which is often with the most impractical option that would fit their standards IRL) – going with their heart and not their head in ways that seem inconsequential to the sake of their overall wellbeing – Zayne most practical option IRL – no red flags – but Sylus is the one should

would actually want to choose (but can't because risk/impractical – he's a criminal)

- P1 – Xavier jealousy – could result in violence irl
- P2 – red flags in the game can be looked past as it is a 'safe space' – but IRL would avoid (263)
 - P2 – Mental damage of pursuing some romantic tropes IRL outweigh any positive in the long run (310)
- P3 – No risk of misunderstandings and hidden meanings (249)
- P4 – Red flags aren't that bad (260)
- P12 - you must **open yourself up to vulnerability** with the risk of getting hurt to pursue romantic love IRL – a risk that isn't there in the otome game (566-575, 579, 599-602) – can just replay cards (585-586)
 - **Less risk of emotional resources lost** when investing in the game (590-592, 606)
 - **Less risk of physical harm** (607-610)
- **Escape from societal pressures (the performance of romantic love)**
 - P1 – Grandparents would accept her being with anyone now as she is older, and they just want her to have children - Pressure to perform to established representation of love in that society (traditional gender roles - women have children)
 - P2 – offers escapism from work (158)
 - P2 – escape burden of having to do everything / take care of everything alone (242)
 - P3 - Western portrayals of love come with heavy sociocultural/political context (e.g., gender politics) that participant is immersed in which makes them more taxing in comparison to eastern portrayals (159)
 - **No having to decode meaning** due to ASD as it is all written out and you can do-over (249)
 - P4 – acknowledges game is (best) used for **escapism** (644, 658, 852) – **as long as you come back to reality** (867, 991)
 - P5 – escape from '**adult**' demands and pressures (324)
 - **BUT**- use in moderation and remember it is just a game - adds to your life rather than taking away or consuming you (601)
 - **Escape from political/ world problems** (616)
 - P6 – Escape reality that there is no 'love' like in the game (50)
 - **BUT** still need to come back to reality and interact in the real world (no matter how harsh it is) (355)
 - Like w/ P3, it is **less exhausting to navigate love** and interactions within the game as someone with ASD than it would be offline (500, 505)
 - P7 - Interacting with the LADS characters offers a temporary escape from the pressures and demands of the real world – having someone to lean on (334)

- P7 – **Misogyny** – feels as though there is a tangible divide between men and women (that doesn't exist in spaces like LADS) (456)
- P8 - It is the **contrast between reality (real relationships) and the ideal (LADS)** that makes the game/alternative appealing - if the ideal was attainable IRL, it wouldn't be as sought after (691)
- P9 – Knew from watching parents/ adults in life that Ideal love didn't exist IRL so went searching for it in media instead (178)
 - Reality of love burns less bright than the flame that is portrayed within the game (283,284) – offers escape from this reality
 - **Escape from social issues** - Emotional intelligence and maturity from the characters directly contrasts what is reflected in the **growing incel culture of the real-world** offering temporary respite (483,485)
- P10 – **escape from real-world pressures** – Whilst similarities in knowledge with Zayne made them feel connected to him, for others, this similarity and connection to them in the real world can ruin the escapism and make them avoid the character who acts as a reminder of reality (285)
 - **Invested in/connected to the fantasy they represent and the escape this offers** rather than being actually romantically attracted to them - “attraction in like the delusional sense maybe” (386-389, 394, 398)
- **Having control/agency over situation**
 - P2 – World is unpredictable (and so are relationships) – but in the game you have control (155)
 - P2 - Would pursue in-game love interests IRL as their positive traits outweigh the negative ones, which isn't seen offline (pp has encountered negative traits before so this alternative is better) – know what they're getting into whereas offline you encounter these negative traits by chance, by which time it's too late (271)
 - P2 – being able to avoid 'angst' or having predictability of a 'good ending' adds to appeal of this media (303) – low stakes too (can always replay/find something else)
 - P4 - Emphasis on **choice and autonomy** even within the dark romance trope (743, 758) – also partner evolving
 - Ability to choose level of intensity of interaction depending on needs for that day (780)
- **What you see is what you get (no hidden agendas)**
 - P3 – Communication/dialogue from characters is clear – no reading between lines – know where you stand (links to ASD) (247) – not forced to read between the lines in a high-stakes setting
- **Unrealistic elements / unrealistic standards / drawbacks**

- P1 - Expecting romantic partner to meet expectations of being rich, young, and having an abundance of free time for you, their partner.
- P2 – appearance-wise – again, personify **‘perfection’** (186)
 - P2 – Caleb possessive tendencies exaggerated (250)
- P3 – portrayals of love dramatized and seen as unattainable (167)
- P3 – **No misogyny** (240)
- P4 – **Lack of conflict** (192, 217, 229) doesn’t give full experience / test compatibility
 - Appearance-wise - personification of **‘perfection’** in the way the characters are made (aesthetically/physically) (411) – sets unrealistic expectations for the real world (415)
 - Red flags masked with good moments (421) which may set people up for failure in the real world (427, 432)
 - Can’t find ‘perfection’ portrayed by the characters in the game - idea that someone ‘can’t have it all’ (594, 628)
 - **‘Honeymoon period’** - Portrays only initial burst of passion in a romance (635)
 - **Problematic** - May become a problem when people use the game as their only standard (646) people need awareness of this (653)
 - **Lack of real-world social standards** – insecurity from society makes them feel as though the characters wouldn’t find them attractive IRL (950) (P7 also alludes to this – 508)
- P5 – **Lack of autonomy** – wishes they had more free-will (359) – characters well fleshed out but lacking this element of human nature/interaction – **Lack of conflict** – no pushback, too easy
 - **Financial stability** - Financial security of the characters is unattainable right now IRL
 - **Emotional depth** – More of a rarity - hard to find IRL (380)
- P6 – **Unattainable** - There is no person who you can rely on unconditionally to fulfil all your needs IRL (50, 53)
 - **Lack of conflict** - Real love and relationships are not ‘easy’ - they take work, mutual effort and require compromise (71, 78)
 - The characters in the game again **personify ‘perfection’** where they are always free to spend time with you and are always agreeable - offers an unrealistic standard for romantic relationships which can result in upset when confronted with reality (176, 238) – links to P5 idea of ‘grief’ in knowing this romance can’t be found
- P7 – **Lack of conflict** (266) – and in moments of conflict, many **red flags are also brushed under the rug**/overlooked rather than being addressed or confronted – idea of ‘rose tinted glasses’ like P4 stated
 - Characters in the game have **maturity and responsibility** that men IRL are perceived to lack (333)
 - Zayne is **‘an unattainable standard of perfection’** compared to those IRL – they can’t compare (443, 447, 555)

- **Lack of real-world social standards** - Insecurity spurred by low self-esteem that the characters (being conventionally attractive) wouldn't be attracted to the players IRL - society obsessed with idea of 'dating in your league' etc., (508)
- **All the time in the world** - Despite being compatible, it is the idea that Zayne **would not be able to fulfil the romantic must** of 'quality time' due to his job that would make the relationship impractical IRL (whereas in the game, he is constantly there) (512)
- There's a level of reciprocity that is lost (610)
- P8 – **Cannot replace real connections** – can only help (676, 680)
- P9 – **Loyal to a fault** – all-consuming love perpetuates idea of being loyal/devoted even when you maybe shouldn't (278)
 - Links to **Lack of conflict** – would like to see more to add to realism (291) - **Need for more mundane realism** - small day-to-day conflicts where the answer isn't immediate self-sacrifice (297, 301)
 - **Lack of autonomy/reciprocity so cannot replace real connections** - coded and not real (358, 674-675, 679-681) can't respond back so can't form connection (359) - Human interaction and feelings cannot be condensed into three pre-programmed responses (366, 692) – awareness that you **can't learn or grow** from the conversations as they are **one-sided** and pre-determined (685-688)
 - **Much like the way in which the love interests are predestined to fall for the MC, conversations with the characters are limited to a set of limited responses which in turn shatter the illusion of agency over their romantic endeavours, and thus connections, with the characters for many players**
 - AI may improve this in future (693, 703, 711, 716)
 - Characters **personify perfection** (personalities, appearance, occupations) - not easy to find IRL – you must compromise on your standards - 'you can't have it all' mindset (435, 436, 441) – show a level of devotion that is hard to come by (448)
 - Emotional intelligence and maturity from the characters directly contrasts what is reflected in the **growing incel culture of the real-world** (483,485)
- P10 – levels of romance in the game appear unattainable and differs from IRL (311-314)
 - **Lack of conflict** – (319) The arguments are more fantastical rather than grounded in reality or the mundane/everyday arguments of the real world (of which the ability to resolve them and persevere is a true test of romance) (327 - 329)
 - **Lack of reciprocity/ understanding so cannot replace real connections** – even a real friendship is better (644-645, 649-650) – pre-programmed (652-654) – **YOU MUST KNOW EACH OTHER IN ORDER TO LOVE EACH OTHER** (658-661, 665, 666-667)

- P11 – **Unrealistic elements** BUT - If you separate the fantasy from reality, there are some layers that are attainable IRL (**209-212**)
 - Knows from experience with virtual romance to alleviate loneliness that **LADS is NOT a good alternative** to forming real connections (**386, 403, 413-414**) – can provide small doses of happiness but not a cure-all that lasts forever – **treats the symptoms but not the cause** (**404-405**)
- P12 - Love in game **tied to angst** so not attainable IRL - would cause more harm than good (**411-413**) idea that love is temporary which contradicts all pps emphasis on **longevity/perseverance being the true measure** (**420-422**) – unlike in the game, in reality, lack of perseverance or perceived longevity and not seeing a future with someone signals a lack of love and end of a relationship (**431-433**)
 - The characters are **not a viable standard to compare to IRL** as they are not real (**559-561**)
 - **Not an alternative/replacement** (**892**) – just form of validation/entertainment (**899-901**) players need **awareness** that it is not a reflection of reality (**907-908**)
- **Finding community**
 - P1 – large online community (**399**) also previously stated they didn't really participate in communities like this before until with LADS (did a little with anime) – it's almost a unifying force
 - P5 – Using LADS to fulfil connection platonically – connecting with community instead (**593, 610**)
- **Investing in the game**
 - P7 - Game requires some level of commitment and **temporal investment** - so can compete with other things that require these resources (**213**)
 - P8 – **temporal investment** – religiously playing – searching for content/ levelling up fast – all consuming (**265, 299, 304**)
 - P10 – Easy to become addicted / cling to the dream/ideals of romance it offers (**436**)
 - P11 – idea of game being addicting (**166**)
 - P12 – game being too “grindy” at first (**328-330**) – requires temporal and financial investment
 - The **regular updates** mean these ‘dopamine hits’ they speak of happen often and can be relied on (not as temperamental and perhaps erratic as an IRL relationship) and can choose what to invest in (e.g., Caleb's birthday) (**738, 748, 757-759**) **BUT** having money to keep up would be hard to get them all (**753**)
- **Financially**

- P1 – financially invests in the game (more than ever before with other games)
- P6 - People sacrificing buying things for themselves IRL to prioritise investing financially in the game – puts pressure on younger people (430, 441)
- P8 – not whale but surprised they bought ‘aurum pass’ (to get content) (565) (**commodification of love**) - Having to pay to maintain this emotional connection or this tie to/ to satisfy the ‘ideal love’ you crave
 - Links to gacha system being for dates/ most desired elements of romantic relationships (585,586,590)
- P10 – some become too invested (671-672, 677-678)
- P11 – enjoys gambling (173-175)
 - Gambling/gacha aspect appeals to ‘whales’ (358-359)
- **Self-inserting**
 - P1 – self-inserts (despite not fully identifying with the MC) because she enjoys the fun in it / witty banter (420)
 - P4 - As the MC has her own personality that doesn’t match one to one with the participant, it is hard for them to self-insert consistently - when the MC does something that perhaps goes against own views/standards (569)
 - P6 – worried people over-invest and identify with the character – too immersed in the escape (199, 210)
 - Trouble identifying with MC (seeing her as her own character) as she has defined personality that contradicts player’s own
 - P7 - Doesn’t self-insert as the MC as the MC is less of a blank slate like with other games and has her own distinct personality and choices that contrast the player (408, 417) – MC has more agency – player has less control (429)
 - P8 – **Relates to MC** in some of her actions but doesn’t identify her (she is her own character) (463)
 - P9 – self-inserts with most media they consume (374) but harder in LADS because MC has **established personality** (379, 381) BUT appearance-wise, she is an ideal version of themselves (409,410)
 - P10 – easy to self-insert and write fanfiction about (210-212)
 - P12 - Does not self-insert - sees MC as separate as she has her own personality and goals unlike other blank slate MC’s (529-533, 537-539) – also invested in the MC/rooting for her in the same way as the love interests (541-545), Gravitate more towards MC and Caleb dynamic as sees herself more in this but still jarring with decisions that go against her own (551-554)
- **Emotional investment**
 - P6 – think younger generation is emotionally invested in the game as **they are lonely** (216) - Fanfiction within the LADS fandom has recurring themes of players being able to have real relationships

with the characters - disconnected from reality - longing for something that doesn't or won't exist (**223**)

- P7 - Although they began playing for just entertainment, they became emotionally invested in one of the characters- Zayne (**240, 368, 389, 398**) – also invested financially (has his merch/cards) and temporally (highest affinity level) – rooting for him
 - The character also offers emotional support (**368**)
 - P8 – investment in Rafayel (**277, 441**) – always on mind (uses him as reference point throughout interview too)
 - P11 – Awareness that they are “just, like, video game characters” and doesn't feel much deeply BUT also acknowledges preference for characters (**248, 268-269**)
 - P12 – rooting for them and invested in them having a good outcome despite still wanting to be entertained (**516-520**)
- **Spurs the pursuit of love**
- P1 – made them miss / long for romantic partner IRL when seeing how the LADs characters cared for them when sick (**645**)
 - P4 – the game has given ideas for dates with husband (**870, 875**)
 - P9 - Can be used as a communicative tool to understand partner & express needs and likes within real relationships (**773, 775, 781, 787**)
 - P10 – LADS has encouraged them in their romantic pursuits (**424-426**) – made them more pragmatic/ forgiving in their approach to love so they can find an ounce of that deep connection they see within the game (**445, 449-451, 455, 460**)
- **Romantic trope appeal**
- P1 – ‘Fated love’, ‘childhood friend’– (**449**)
 - P2 – ‘Childhood friends’, ‘Enemies to lovers’ – (**280**)
 - P3 – ‘Yandere’, ‘Forbidden love’ (**196**), ‘Fated/destined love’ (**288**)– small/independent family & self-reliant IRL, tropes demonstrate deep unwavering dedication that they are not used to (link to unfulfilled needs) – addresses **need to be cared for** / absolves them from the belief that they are ‘difficult’ to love irl **BUT wouldn't want It IRL due to being independent** (**322**)
 - Trope existence shows appeal -but doesn't indicate it is healthy (**321**)
 - P4 – ‘Slow burn’ (**470**), ‘doomed romance/angst’ (**683**) – says each trope serves a different purpose over time (e.g., angst in teen years)
 - P5 – ‘Fated love’ (**473, 486**) theme from k-dramas, appeals emotionally - BUT – most tropes too idealistic for them – open to love in any form (**480**) – fated love too restrictive IRL – reduces agency and autonomy (**496**)
 - P6 – ‘Self-sacrifice’ (**297**) trope interests them the most – maybe why they're most intrigued by Caleb

- P7 – **‘Childhood friends-to-lovers’ (524)** - Taps into idea that love is growth and evolution - watching you blossom into yourself and loving every part of it - complete acceptance of every part of the self (529)
- P8 – **‘Enemies to lovers’** wouldn’t work irl because they perceive common ground as a relationship must (74)
 - enjoy **‘Fated love’, ‘doomed romance’** – like angst/yearning but happy ending despite it (531) – idea of love winning in the end – **love conquers all**
 - **‘Yandere’** - matches views on love being devotion/commitment BUT too extreme for them (535)
- P9 – **‘Forbidden romance’ (333)** with Caleb – slight unattainability, tiptoeing & yearning adds to realism, **‘Star-crossed lovers’ (519)**, **‘Self-sacrificing’ (523)** – appeals to psychological **need to be cared for (530)**
- P10 – **‘Friends to lovers’ (474, 538)** – desired for IRL, **‘Employee/boss’** dynamic – Raf & MC (503, 509) – wouldn’t do it IRL because power dynamic is toxic – prefers **softer love** tropes (515), **‘doomed lovers’ w/ Zayne (527)**
 - Notice tropes introduced often without name - being exposed to them subconsciously (516)
- P11 – **‘Yandere’** – enjoys security of it (326-328) **‘Wholesome’** – appeals to IRL relationships (328-329) – both speak to what they like IRL (but tamer/safer) (333-334, 340, 346) - Want the caring/security side of the trope IRL but not the complete control (351-354)
- P12 – **‘Hurt & Comfort’ (286-287)**, **‘enemies to lovers’ (640-645, 653-654)** – learning to be vulnerable around someone you thought you couldn’t trust and understanding one another– addresses own fears and desires in relationships

The reality of romantic love (experience)

There is a dialogical relationship between the ideal (what is wanted -section 1) vs the reality – dissonance of ideas

- Many expressed strong discontent for the way it is in modern day (see transcript question of – *“views of romantic love and having a relationship in modern day”*)
 - **Love is out there**
 - P1 – idea that you have to ‘kiss a few toads to find a prince’ – has had bad experiences but acknowledges desirable/positive traits are out there and can be found in potential romantic partners irl.
 - P2 – the traits portrayed in the game can and have been experienced IRL (188)
 - P2 – someone loyal, supportive and cute can be found (256)
 - P4 – Current relationship shows ‘easy’ relationships it can be found (didn’t believe it at first) (438)
 - Love interests in the game can be found IRL (587) – broaden horizons (599)

- Even romantic tropes can work IRL (724)
- P5 - Going to offline third spaces where you are likely to find likeminded people can work (142, 172)
 - **BUT** – even in these spaces people can be inconsistent / have ulterior motives (180, 185)
 - **Small traits** from characters are attainable IRL (375, 394)
 - **Opportunity to match w/ same standards** on the same wavelength (652)
- P7 - Love (where both sides reciprocate wholly) is attainable (539)
- P10 – Love with trust, loyalty and devotion must be attainable with effort and dedication (156)
 - Hearing success stories (609, 615) – attainable but hard work
- P11 – Love as they define it (deep intimate connection) is attainable IRL (202-203) and some elements of game can be found IRL (412)
- **Disillusioning love**
 - P1 – Says the idea of ‘perfection’ in a person or in love “doesn’t exist” (366)
 - P1 – Says the idea of tropes like ‘fated love’ do not fit into their definition of what romantic love should be because “real love is not that straightforward” – LADS provides an oversimplified and ‘perfect’ version of love (486)
 - P2 – Idea that you no longer have to ‘settle’ for those in immediate surroundings (340) – dating pool no longer socioculturally tethered/confined like before (342)
 - P2 – must mentally separate LADS love from reality if you use it to experiment – just a game (384/391)
 - P3 – idea that romantic love doesn’t have to be the ‘end game’ as we are spoon fed by media as children (Disney movies etc.,)– can be just as fulfilled with platonic love (98)
 - P3 – Men IRL won’t go to the same lengths as they do in the game (174)
 - P3 – relationships IRL are not unwavering / ‘I’m doing this just because I care’ (selfless), but instead transactional (286)
 - P4 – Experience in relationships has shown they are not simple and can come with **conflict** (190)
 - Can’t find ‘**perfection**’ portrayed by the characters in the game - idea that someone ‘can’t have it all’ (594) – must be **willing to compromise** (596)
 - P5 – Experience has shown that ‘**Love alone is not enough**’ – there are practical elements that must be considered which could act as barriers to this (financial stability, mental wellness, culture) (77)
 - There is a **grief** in accepting meeting someone who ticks these boxes if rare IRL (429)
 - **Soulmates** fun to read about but don’t exist (491)
 - P6 – Says she doesn’t believe in romantic love (only familial) (39, 43)

- Common social reps of romantic love (in the west) are **unattainable and not a reflection of reality** (which makes people feel bad when they can achieve it)
- P7 – Media portrayals of love are idealised/ fictional – **consumerist in nature** – give what ‘sells’ (147)
 - Watching parents also made them realise the ‘reality is not so nice’ (170)
 - Know the ideal love is unattainable and don’t expect people to conform to this IRL **BUT** - Idea that **love IRL isn’t worth it** if it can’t be what you want it to be (481)
- P8 - Reality of their relationship is that their current boyfriend does not possess these ‘Lemurian’ traits they are sold in the game of being adventurous, devoted and self-sacrificing as he prefers ‘safe’ (96, 102, 106)
 - Felt like ‘**whiplash**’ getting into relationship w/ boyfriend as reality did not match media portrayals of love – no unlimited time for one another, no sacrificing everything – must be practical (127, 182, 184, 366, 495, 720) – the reality was disappointing
 - Awareness that games are giving you the romance that ‘sells’ – that people want to see, not reality (381, 385)
- P9 – unconditional love cannot exist IRL so ‘self-sacrificing’ tropes and media appeal to need to be cared for no matter what – sense of security (530, 537, 542)
- P10 - Giving up on their desired/ ideal traits in a romantic partner due to practicality and reality of the situation – hard to find (132)
- **Romantic barriers/hurdles**
 - **Generational (Gen Z)**
 - P1 – say that solitude/loneliness whilst craving affection in this generation makes the game appealing (378)
 - P4 – younger people may be led with their hearts rather than head/experience (915)
 - P10 – dating culture problem for this generation (602-605)
 - **Intentions (can’t read them) and risk**
 - P1 – idea that someone ‘better’ could be around the corner makes people reluctant to be ‘tied down’ which in turn jeopardizes relationships and the level of commitment wanted/ needed for them to work (505) – **TAXICAB THEORY!**
 - P4 – Being able to be **honest with intentions** and what you want is important, but people are scared to do so – risk of losing someone (923)
 - P8 – when being **honest** about feelings, seen as ‘overwhelming’ or too intense (232) – links to current trend of having to be ‘nonchalant’ or risk coming off too strong
 - Having to make the first move because of this (231) – **fear of vulnerability**
 - lack of commitment due to **fear of emotionally investing** in something that may fail (612)

- Reality of relationships forces realisation that you are separate entities - cannot completely rely on/understand one another 100% of the time (619)
 - Not knowing where you stand in a relationship these days (726, 732)
- P10 – **Hypocrisy** - wanting love in midst of generation that claims to want long term relationships but then prioritises fast connections / the aesthetics of a relationship (597, 604, 609)
- P12 – believe you should be with someone because you love/care for them, not for the social symbol of what a relationship represents (185-187)
 - you must **open yourself up to vulnerability** with the risk of getting hurt to pursue romantic love IRL – a risk that isn't there in the otome game (566-575, 579)
- **Isolation/Pandemic**
 - **P1** – Remote working / not being able to meet people/ socialise as often has turned the generation into recluses – less opportunity to find love naturally. (529)
 - **P4** – harder to meet people offline (824) – feel like there's no choice but to go online
 - **P7** – harder to meet people offline & socialise (580)
- **Lack of socialising**
 - P1 – socialising has become a lost science – an art form that this generation has been deprived of mastering by a cocktail of the prevalence of social media and the Covid-19 pandemic (536) (556) (562)
 - P6 – Idea that we have become an isolated society – LADS is one of the products of this (354)
 - P8 – Socialising with others IRL rather than retreating into media/fiction leads to greater understanding of the world and others (685)
- **Dating apps / social media**
 - **P1** – add to false sense of availability, also problem of practicality/logistics (if they are from abroad) (505, 547, 579)
 - **P2** – overloaded with choices and information (339) now crippled with choice (343, 350) - Online dating only good if you have a clear, stable and healthy idea of what you want
 - **P4** – online dating is bad now (793, 799, 806) - Online connection opens up a lot - but also a double-edged sword (808) – pressure to be perfect can affect self-esteem (838)
 - **P5** - Dating apps cause burnout and fatigue (154) – surface level engagement / diluted form of love where people don't even pay attention
 - **P7** - Most dating has been forced online by the other factors (COVID & lack of third spaces) but there is less commitment here (582)

- **P9** - Love now has a very manufactured and impersonal feel - no 'meet cute' scenarios anymore (possibly also linked to COVID and diminishing third spaces and rise of social media) – lost the romance (**628-630, 659**) – **commodification of love**
 - BUT - Dating apps are preferable now though as they speed up the process and reduce risk of incompatibility (**635-638**) – **fear of the unknown, risk, & failed investments (642)** – help with **regaining agency (649)**
- **P10** – Loss of dating etiquette and romance online (**588**) – romantic relationships are no longer something sacred/special – hookup culture (**594, 595-597**)
 - People advertising wanting a long-term relationship but approaching it with emotional detachment and without the romantic inventory for it (**597**)
 - Friends-to-lovers trope - already have a foundation to build upon whereas with a Hinge date, you **must establish a connection from scratch which most people don't seem willing to commit to** – get bored (**622-629**)
- **P12** – Gen Z **trouble finding people they are compatible with** and choosing to stay single (**771**) Gen Z have **ability to move slower and think more** about forming connection rather than previous generations – so despite having access to internet which should facilitate connections and speed up this process, it has slowed down instead (**779-781**) (**western perspective**)
- **Diminishing 'third spaces' (that appeal to this generation)**
 - **P1** – The idea of clubbing etc that used to accommodate or facilitate romantic encounters aren't as appealing to newer generations which decreases chances of meeting new people (**570**)
 - **P7** - Hard to just find people IRL to be in relationships with after university (Singapore) – especially if you don't go partying (**565, 574**)
- **Mixed expectations & social pressures/ standards**
 - **P2** - Games targeted at men promote unrealistic representations of women (**412**)
 - **P3 – Misogyny (240)** from the real world is non-existent in LADS
 - **P3** – Western cisgender heterosexual relationships – expectations of each gender at odds with each other – differ from reality (**348**)
 - **P3** – most people have reasonable standards (**377**) – but there are 'extreme' unrealistic views platformed in media (by manosphere/ female content creators) (**384**)
 - **P4 – Media** – including LADS can over-romanticise and set unrealistic standards (**616, 646, 813**) – now a pressure to be 'perfect' and feels as though all our actions are scrutinised which could lead to dating fatigue/giving up early on (**831, 843**)
 - **fear to be yourself / vulnerable (933)**

- P4 – **standards for ‘attractiveness’** – Made to feel as though love is unachievable in a society where standards can’t be met (947)
- P5 – **Culture & Religion** – in Malaysia, Muslims cannot renounce Islam, so non-Muslims would have to convert (78)
 - **Rise in misandry online (271)** - Rise in misandrist views online in response to far-right ‘manosphere’ views - have to be conscious not to generalise these views
 - **Pressure to say/ do the right thing** – leads to fear of ‘doing something wrong (P4 also mentions) (401) – the **high stakes** nature of love now
 - **Right wing ideas of masculinity** in modern men (508) – ‘social infertility’/incel culture (519) – blame placed on people who can’t get into relationship which adds pressure
 - **Disparities between genders** with relationship expectations (635) like what P3 said - Men having less (or shallower/surface level) romantic hurdles in relationships regarding women (637) – without considering deeper levels of compatibility
- P6 – **heightened expectations** of younger people (that don’t match reality) due to games like LADS’ portrayals of romance (164)
- P7 – **Misogyny** – feels as though there is a tangible divide between men and women (that doesn’t exist in spaces like LADS) (456)
- P8 – **Romantic feelings vs romantic love** - people chasing ideals of ‘romantic feelings’ rather than reality of ‘romantic relationships’ (602, 610, 740)
- P9 - **Media consumed has heightened romantic expectations to unattainable levels**, making them avoidant of potential relationships IRL (125) – **romantic foreclosure** due to comparisons (133)
 - Caught in a cycle - high expectations because of lack of real-life comparisons, but lack of real-life comparisons because of high expectations (139, 154)
 - Fear of risk offline (159)
 - **Incel culture** rise – Makes it difficult to find devoted and affectionate partner/ ‘golden retriever’ type – being fed ideas that wanting needs to be met in relationships is asking too much/high standards – double standard between men and women here (461, 462, 464, 470, 472)
- P11 – **Homophobia/transphobia rising (374-375)**
 - **Beauty standards (419-425)** – deep rooted in society and won’t change anytime soon
 - **Late-stage capitalism** – contributes to commodification of love and many romantic barriers (431, 436, 440-442)
- P12 – family asking about when they are getting into a relationship when they want to take their time (159-161)

▪ **Society restructuring / evolving**

- P3 - **'Male loneliness epidemic'** blamed on women / left (349)
 - Men are not adapting in the same way women are (351, 368)
 - Women (in west) are less reliant on men now so are more content with solitude / no romantic relationship than they might have been decades earlier (351) – romantic relationships seen as a bonus rather than a necessity (351) - (links to going **'boy sober'** trend from 2024/2025)
 - Otome games / other alternative / platonic love can fulfil needs that come with romantic relationships instead (359)
 - Harm outweighs good right now (360)
- P4 – **What we see as romantic is changing** – classics like 'The Notebook' feel different now – not the standard (620)
- P5 – **Women financial stability** – no longer a factor of necessity for relationships (125, 539)
 - Putting romantic energy into **otome games** instead due to lack of options IRL (being declared socially infertile by far-right) (536) - Investing resources in something that brings joy rather than something that makes you feel bad (551) – **greater emotional validation** – greater benefit (557) **BUT it is not a replacement** (593, 601)
 - Can also get contentment from platonic companionship in gaming community (593)
- P6 - Relationships have become something that is **self-serving rather than about partnership** - People no longer want a 'partnership' based on love, equality, and building something together, but instead want **something that only benefits themselves** (370, 375) – focused on what they can get out of it (links to **P8** talking about people chasing ideals of 'romantic love' rather than reality of 'romantic relationships' – 602, 610)
 - **Switch to an almost consumerist mindset – love is a commodity** 'what's in it for me'
 - **There's less social rigidity and less of a 'natural order' or 'clear path' than in the past**, BUT - thus it is difficult to figure out what you want – overwhelming (388, 400)
- P7 – **Alternatives** – if characters in the game can do what men IRL can't (bare minimum), they aren't in a rush to jump into a relationship (484, 499) – **comfortable being alone** as game meets needs
 - People playing otome games more as men IRL not appealing to people (545)
- P10 – as P6 says, many approach relationships as **self-serving rather than about partnership** (692-694, 705-707)
- P11 – rise in **'casual sex'** / hookup culture – not inherently bad, but has change outlook for romantic love - **romantic love now based**

on hedonism rather than emotional bond/connection and wanting that partnership (376-380)

- P12 – There is **not the same sense of urgency** as past generations to marry/settle down (165, 772, 778) – Acceptable relationship standards varying by generation / moving on (171-173)
 - **South Korea** opposite of West romantic stance - **relationships happens fast for the image/social symbol it offers rather than being about genuine connection** as society is geared towards it - most holidays in culture seen as ‘couple events’ – so seen as less-than if you aren’t in a couple (786-789, 793-795)
 - Even have events called ‘meetings’ structured around forming these couples (however shallow the connection may be) (800-802, 820-825, 857-858) low success rate (830-836) but ‘Meetings’ seen as one of the only ways to get into relationship within the society (844-846, 851-852)
 - Different ideas of what a relationship is - no need for deep connection in SK (857-862)
 - Prioritising self-growth? **Too busy** – capitalism/commodification of love (909-913)

▪ Past experiences

- P3 – clashed with social circle growing up due to differing belief systems (religious and political) – the guys in school disliked her because of this so they developed an insecurity or belief that they are ‘difficult’ (306)
- P6 – Because of age – done with that kind of part of their life (so playing game is just fun) (163)
- P12 – Bad experience with ex-boyfriend made them slow down (934) – didn’t like him, **just liked being liked** (941)

○ Relationship standards in general today

All stated they vary immensely depending on who you talk to, but there is some common overlap

- P1 – **Traditional gender roles** in Latin countries – despite ambition/drive, still would like to give this up for a domestic life with romantic partner in future (608)
 - P1 – **Companionship & Security** – (619) – a difference between; not the joy of ‘being with someone’ but instead the joy of just **‘being, with someone’** (626) (P4 also speaks about this - 292)
- P2 – **Societal pressure to settle** – for women to not be deemed undesirable, leading to lower standards (398, 404)
- P3 – **fragmented idea of dating / romance** – (367) – dating standards are low as they are driven by the fear of being alone (388) – ‘anything is better than solitude’ attitude
 - BUT most people have **reasonable standards**, social media just amplifies extreme views

- P4 – Most people have **realistic standards** (904)
- P5 - Seems to demonstrate that wanting more than the bare minimum is perceived as **‘high maintenance’** (627) - Women either perceived as being too high maintenance for asking for more than the bare minimum, or too easy if settling for this (646) – ‘the bar is in hell’
- P6 – **Confusion** - Also trying to understand relationship standards and representations of romantic love today (384)
- P7 – **Traditional gender roles** – less rigid – more freedom to choose
 - **Non-Heteronormative** ideas proliferating too (623)
 - **Increased awareness / knowledge** - Ability to **recognise/confront unhealthy relationships** now for this generation - advocating for healthier relationship standards (630, 637)
- P8 - **Sociocultural differences** - In the Philippines the priority/style is a **slower, deep love and devotion** whereas in South Korea it is more **fast-paced love** (644,645,651)
 - **Relationships trivialised** in the west – hookup culture normalised (social media?), lack of commitment (707)
- P9 – **More pragmatic/realistic** (727) - valuing communication (726), - love is sacrifice, compromise, work, and love burns a little less over time (not as passionate as it initially is at the start - what P4 said too) (733-737, 741, 748) – but still staying despite this is the true romance (755)
 - **The testament of true romantic love in reality is not the ability to maintain permanence over passion, but instead to persevere in its absence**
- P10 – relationships need to be established as a **partnership again** – balanced with give and take (711-713)
- P12 - **2 sides of romance in society** - 1) people slowing down, weighing up costs and benefits, and **deciding the costs outweigh the benefits**. 2) people getting into relationships for the **social symbol** and companionship - **not wanting to be alone** (868 – 876, 877-879, 931-933) – but this lacks depth needed for true romantic connection (883)
 - **Fast-moving relationships more about superficial needs** - more about how they make you feel/what they represent in society than about partnership (941-944, 949-953)

General thoughts

- Game is certainly established not as a replacement, but instead as a supplement for doses of romantic interaction / a mood booster that contrasts the bleak landscape of the current dating scene that was painted vividly by various participants - **perhaps a coping mechanism within the grieving process of an ideal ‘romantic love’**

- The game is a splash of hope against the bleak backdrop of the current dating scene painted so vividly by various participants.
- In world where we are infinitely more 'connected', we also are seemingly more alone (harder to make connection, less socialising, etc.,)
- All acknowledge relationship standards vary but clear core is seen
- LADs address a need to be 'seen' – to be loved is to be seen/acknowledged (even the little things; compliments, checking up on the player, cooking for them, taking care of them, even the controversial period tracker serves a purpose)
- Players are free from the emotional labour of having to change or sacrifice themselves in order to invest in a relationship that might not work out in the end
- Idea that if you shoot for the moon (unreachable perfection/ having high standards) you will land on a star (something close to that) – but must be willing to be happy with this as the 'moon' is unreachable
- **The commodification of love** has transformed an abstract concept into a consumable product – perhaps best reflected in society by paying for dating apps, the normality of hookup culture, events such as valentines or 'white day', and even within the otome game itself by how you must essentially pay to experience the most intimate moments of affection with the characters. – **love has been paywalled!**
- There is the theme of wanting/needing to be perfect that comes with the social media generation – being scrutinised/ fear of doing something wrong leads to fear of being yourself/ being honest which leads to fear of rejection and ultimately links back to the fear of being alone – vicious cycle
 - o It's also linked to the pressure to adhere to a **societal performance of romance** – pressure of trying to be what you think people want you to be rather than who you are – links to ASD pps who feel free of having to read social cues within the game as it is low pressure and low risk – can redo scenes many times
- Playing LADS **Treats the symptoms felt from the postnormal love in modern society but not the cause**

