"It's Just More Complicated!": Experiences of Adults With Intellectual Disabilities When Navigating Digital Sexual Fields

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Abstract

This exploratory qualitative study analyzes narratives to understand how adults with intellectual disabilities navigate the digital sexual fields available to them, given the barriers and constraints in their lives. There is a paucity of research that has looked at the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities when navigating digital sexual fields in their pursuit of romance and partnership. This paper draws on a larger qualitative inquiry with adults with intellectual disabilities (n = 46) in Ontario, Canada, focused on their romantic and sexual lives. In all, 15 participants discussed their views on and participation in a variety of dating websites and mobile applications. Their experiences of digital sexual fields were analyzed. This study uses a sexual fields framework informed by Bourdieusian field theory to explore how participants negotiate these digital spaces, whether and how they choose to disclose their disability status, how they manage their self-presentation, and how they attempt to articulate their sexual capital. For these participants, digital sexual fields have provided a unique opportunity to pursue potential intimate relationships in the face of social isolation and protectionism. At the same time, their experiences also highlight existing barriers to access and forms of ableism within digital sexual fields. Based on these exploratory findings, we contribute to the growing corpus and suggest that more research be conducted and resources allocated to supporting adults with intellectual disabilities to form intimate relationships in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords: intellectual disabilities; sexuality; digital sexual fields; qualitative methods; intimate relationships

Introduction

The digital age has significantly transformed the dating landscape and the ways that sexual actors seek sexual and romantic partners (Ben-Ze'ev, 2021; Green, 2013). A range of mobile phone applications and dating websites provide new opportunities for sexual actors to access a larger pool of potential partners, flirt, mediate their self-presentation in ways previously unimaginable and explore niche fantasies and desires (Ben-Ze'ev, 2021). Previous studies have shown that people with intellectual disabilities also use digital spaces, such as dating phone applications and websites, to pursue intimate relationships and pleasure (e.g., Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008). Digital spaces may be especially important for people with intellectual disabilities who commonly experience social isolation and loneliness in their everyday lives (Sorbring et al., 2017).

People with intellectual disabilities commonly face stereotypes that desexualize and infantilize them (Liddiard & Slater, 2018; Santinele Martino, 2021). However, studies have consistently shown that many individuals with intellectual disabilities are interested in developing intimate relationships and being sexual (e.g., Ignagni et al., 2016; Santinele Martino, 2021). For instance, there is enough evidence showing that people with intellectual disabilities engage in multiple forms of sexual expression, including, but not limited to, masturbation, sex with others, and intimate relationships (Gil-Llario et al., 2018; Retznik et al., 2021; Santinele Martino, 2021). Despite increased access to digital technologies and a desire for intimate relationships, little is known about how people with intellectual disabilities use the Internet and other digital spaces in their search for romance and intimacy (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008).

Digital Sexual Fields

The sexual fields framework (Green, 2013), which derives from the foundational field theory work of Bourdieu (1977), offers a fruitful framework to examine digital sexual fields (Adams-Santos, 2020; Green, 2013). Sexual fields are, in essence, "simultaneously arenas of sexual exploration and systematic stratification" that are "constituted by eroticized schemas related to race, class, gender, age, and nationality, among others" (Green, 2008, p. 25). This particular framework allows us to capture the interplay of interactional and structural processes that shape sexualities and one's chances of partnering and reproduce forms of stratification and inequality (Green, 2015). For example, as studies have shown, online dating can reproduce hierarchies of desirability that privilege certain sexual actors and exacerbate forms of inequality (e.g., Bedi, 2015; Bruch & Newman, 2018). The sexual fields literature, however, has yet to pay attention to the particular experiences of disabled people when navigating sexual fields, how ableism is manifested and experienced in digital sexual fields, and how disabled people navigate forms of sexual stratification within these spaces (as an exception, Santinele Martino, 2020).

Another relevant concept in the sexual fields framework is that of sexual capital. Sexual capital, as Green (2015) explains, refers to field-specific attributes that "confe[r] advantage upon those [who] possess it within a sexual field, including field significance and the ability to obtain an intimate partner of one's choosing" (p. 28). In his work, Bourdieu compared fields with sporting field and battle arenas (Bourdieu, 1977). Sexual capital shapes who is desirable within sexual fields and positions people differently within them (Green, 2008). The broader literature on sexualities in digital spaces has explored self-presentational strategies among sexual actors seeking to attract partners in virtual spaces (Blackwell et al., 2015; Ellison et al., 2006; Hobbs et al., 2017). As Ellison et al. (2006) have noted, digital sexual fields offer sexual actors "greater control over self-presentational behavior," as well as the opportunity to manage their interactions "more strategically" (p. 418). In virtual spaces, sexual actors strategically engage in impression management (Goffman, 1959; Green, 2011), for example, by creating biographical profiles that highlight their most desirable traits while concealing potentially 'less appealing' traits from prospective intimate partners (Green, 2013).

Intellectual Disability and Digital Sexual Fields

To date, most of the existing literature on internet usage among people with intellectual disabilities has focused on questions of sexual risks and safety with less attention paid to the benefits of Internet use (Glencross et al., 2021). It has been suggested that the common social isolation, loneliness, and depression experienced by people with intellectual disabilities can, for example, increase the risk of online sexual solicitation (Normand & Sallafranque-St-Louis, 2016). In addition, digital spaces are sometimes seen as avenues that potentially expose disabled people to risks and harms due to their perceived vulnerability (Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2015; Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2018; Sorbring et al., 2017), as well as forms of bullying (Holmes & O'Loughlin, 2014; Jenaro et al., 2018).

At the same time, disability studies scholars have demonstrated that structural inequalities and everyday restrictions by other social actors (e.g., family members, support workers) often leave people with intellectual disabilities without the sexual knowledge required to make well-informed choices in their intimate lives, thus also making people more vulnerable (Alexander & Gomez, 2017; Hollomotz, 2011). Also, digital spaces have undoubtedly positive aspects, including the opportunity for disabled people to form new connections, find communities, receive information, and build friendships (Chadwick & Fullwood, 2018; Molin & Sorbring, 2017).

Less is known about how people with intellectual disabilities use digital sexual spaces to seek romance, intimate relationships, and sexual pleasure. A paucity of literature has looked at how they navigate digital spaces in their

pursuit for an intimate partnership (e.g., Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008, Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2015; Molin et al., 2017). This literature has shown how people with intellectual disabilities use digital spaces, for example, to find sexuality-related information, watch pornographic films, and access dating websites (Gil-Llario et al., 2021; Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2015; Sorbring et al., 2017). In digital spaces, actors have an opportunity to manage their self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) and navigate disability disclosure in a way that shapes their chances of partnering (Bennett, 2017; Chadwick et al., 2013; Milbrodt, 2019). As Chadwick and colleagues (2013) appropriately articulate, "the Internet affords an opportunity for people with disabilities, including ID [intellectual disability], to present themselves outside of their disability, having the option to disclose, or not, their disabled identity at will" (p. 385). Some disabled people choose not to disclose their disability to mitigate the potential negative effects of dominant constructions of disability on their sexual capital (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008). At times, disability disclosure can lead to ableist responses and rejection from potential intimate partners in digital spaces (Bennett, 2017). Not surprisingly, then, some studies have found that some people with intellectual disabilities viewed the Internet as a place where, by choosing not to disclose their disability, they could be "like everybody else" (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008, p. 125; Molin et al., 2017).

It is worth noting that people with intellectual disabilities often experience limited access to the Internet and other forms of technology. This is partly due to a lack of access to technology, knowledge, and social control from social actors around them. Many individuals with intellectual disabilities are still unable to fully benefit from this current "digital age" due to the furthering of a "digital divide" (Johansson et al., 2021; Lussier-Desrochers et al., 2017). In addition, care providers and family members may, at times, limit disabled people's access to personal devices, the Internet, and other technologies (Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2015; Sorbring et al., 2017). Sometimes digital spaces can serve as "free zones" where people with intellectual disabilities can pursue relationships without the oversight of parents and staff (Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2015; Molin et al., 2015; Sorbring et al., 2017). Some people with intellectual disabilities are participating in these spaces. By thinking about digital sexual fields, we can better understand the barriers and opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to access spaces for sexual exploration and encounters and how they experience and negotiate these spaces.

Study Aims

Drawing on in-depth interviews and employing a sexual fields framework (Green, 2013), our study aims to explore how a small group of adults with intellectual disabilities in Ontario, Canada, articulate their disabled identities and navigate and construct their sexual identities in digital sexual fields. We contribute to sexual fields social theory literature by attending to the experiences of a social group who is often left out of research and is marginalized as sexual actors.

Methods

This research stems from a transformative paradigm, attentive to the operation of power that marginalizes certain people and populations while centering others (Mertens, 2007). It makes space for people with intellectual disabilities—and their often-subjugated knowledge—encouraging them to share their experiences with love and intimacy, challenging the frequent invisibility of their voices and sexualities by contributing to a growing body of literature that is only recently listening to people with intellectual disabilities (Rushbrooke et al., 2014).

Sample and Recruitment

The data presented in this paper derive from a subset of 15 interviews from a qualitative study, including 46 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with adults with intellectual disabilities in Ontario, Canada. Recruitment included putting up posters in public spaces and social media channels. Participants were also recruited through the support of agency workers and self-advocates who passed along information about the study, especially to adults with intellectual disabilities living in more controlled living arrangements. To be eligible, participants had to self-identify as having an intellectual disability, be at least 18 years old, and be interested in sharing their experiences. This research received ethical clearance through McMaster University (#2017 074). All participants provided informed consent to participate in the research. Each participant was given a CAD $20 gift card of their choice in recognition of their time. The combination of a larger sample size and a wide eligibility criterion allowed access to a diverse sample, including men and women across different ages. Participants ranged from

30 to 51 years old, with an average age of 40.5. The sample included thirteen men and two women. More details on participants' demographic information can be found on table 1. Due to research ethics constraints, participants were not asked about their specific disability labels; however, the study's primary recruitment strategy—through self-advocacy groups and disability service providers—ensured that people had received an intellectual disability diagnosis. This project likely included participants identified with a range of intellectual disability labels, but those cannot be specifically connected to individual participants. All participants were all their own legal guardians, and thus, did not require consent from family members. Participants were able to communicate via speech and participate in a semi-structured interview.

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of Participants.*

Name	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status	Race	Education	Employment	Housing Arrangement
Aaron	42	Cis Man	Heterosexual	Separated	White	College	Unemployed	Group Home
Alejandro	42	Cis Man	Heterosexual	In a Relationship	Latino	Grade 12	Unemployed	Group Home
Christopher	39	Cis Man	Heterosexual	Single	White	High School	Part-Time	Living with Family
Clayton	34	Cis Man	Bisexual	In a Relationship	Mixed	High School	Part-Time	Independently
Daniel	34	Cis Man	Heterosexual	Single	White	High School	Unemployed	Assisted Living
Ethan	41	Cis Man	Heterosexual	Single	White	Grade 4	Unemployed	Group Home
Iago	39	Cis Man	Heterosexual	Single	White	Grade 12	Part-Time	Living with Family
Jacob	55	Cis Man	Heterosexual	Single	White	Grade 1	Full-Time	Independently
Joshua	50	Cis Man	Unsure	Single	White	Some college	Temp Jobs	Group Home
Leonard	40	Cis Man	Heterosexual	Single	White	High School	Full-Time	Living with Family
Margaret	51	Cis Woman	Heterosexual	Married	White	University	Full-Time	Living with Partner
Nelson	30	Cis Man	Heterosexual	Single	Latino	Some college	Full-Time	Independently
Ross	38	Cis Man	Heterosexual	In a Relationship	White	High School	Part-Time	Living with Family
Scott	34	Trans Man	Heterosexual	Single	Mixed	High School	Part-Time	Group Home
Virginia	31	Trans Woman	Heterosexual	In a Relationship	White	High School	Part-Time	Group Home

Data Generation and Analysis

Data generation and analysis were completed by the first author who has personal and professional connections to disabled communities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit responses from participants, allowing them to bring up information that they found relevant. As previous studies have shown some evidence of acquiescence bias amongst people with intellectual disabilities when responding to more directive questions (McVilly et al., 2008), interviews focused on eliciting narratives as much as possible (Beail & Williams, 2014; McVilly et al., 2008). The interview guide consisted of questions about participants' intimate lives, including how they had learned about sexuality, the spaces they navigated to meet intimate partners, the barriers and opportunities to having an intimate life, and their strategies for being sexual. Interviews ranged from one to two hours and were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. Considering the sensitivity of the research topic, the interviews were conducted in a mutually agreeable location that allowed participants to feel comfortable and safe sharing their experiences. This included places such as public libraries, a campus office, local agencies, community centers, and participants' residences. Interviews were conducted between 2017 and 2018.

Interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The first author examined the data from a structuralist-constructivist framework by using thematic analysis. ATLAS.ti™, a qualitative analysis software, was used to store and organize data and was where the formal coding of the transcripts and field notes was conducted. Next, the first author conducted open coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), which generated a list of broad codes such as lack of privacy, infantilization, economic capital, and loneliness. Following this, "axial coding" (Charmaz, 2006) was conducted, which involves identifying relationships between codes that emerged in the open coding process. Finally, a thematic analysis of the data was performed by grouping codes and identifying themes (Aurini et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The dynamics of social networking sites (SNSs) challenge the privacy management of users. Specifically, users of SNSs are confronted with multiple and invisible audiences, context collapse and

a merging between public and private sphere (boyd, 2010). Over the years, much research studied boundary coordination and privacy in the context of SNSs (e.g., boyd & Hargittai, 2010; boyd & Marwick, 2011; Litt, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Stutzman & Hartzog, 2012; Wisniewski et al., 2012).

Results

In all, 15 participants reported having used dating websites and mobile applications to find intimate partners, some more successfully than others. Participants reported engaging in various digital sexual fields, such as Plenty of Fish (Canadian-based online dating service), Christian Mingle (online dating service for Christians), OkCupid (US-based online dating service), Tinder (popular online, geosocial networking app), and intimate phone lines. A few also participated in disability-focused digital sexual fields. For participants, online dating provided a unique opportunity to develop relationships in the face of social isolation and protectionism.

Two primary themes were identified, each with particular nuance represented through subthemes.

1. Access to digital sexual fields was required to engage in romantic or sexual conversations. However, several participants reported experiencing barriers, such as parental oversight, not having adequate hardware, not being able/willing to pay membership fees, or not having the knowledge to access platforms.

2. When engaging in online sexual fields, the decision to disclose one's disability was purposeful. Several participants chose to hide their disability status, at least at the beginning. At the same time, others chose disclosure to avoid too much investment in case this was going to present as a barrier down the road. Participants also spoke about how they articulate their sexual capital when using virtual platforms. Some focused on attributes of their physical bodies and hobbies, while others listed facts about themselves that articulate economic capital and other desirable qualities. Illustrative quotes, using pseudonyms for anonymity, have been provided where appropriate for each theme.

Theme 1: Access to Digital Sexual Fields

Access to digital sexual fields came with substantial barriers, limiting access for many. Participants identified three primary obstacles that prevented participation in digital sexual fields: economic capital, lack of technology or freedom to use technology freely, and not having the knowledge or fearing ramifications.

Economic Capital

Participants often noted the challenge of accessing virtual dating platforms that required some form of payment, including subscription fees. Considering the context that many participants were either unemployed and/or living on a low income, their inability or disinterest in paying to access digital platforms is a reasonable response. Participants prioritized other aspects of their everyday needs that required financial access, given their limited budget. This demonstrates how limited economic capital can be an influential engine of inequality that keeps some participants out of certain digital sexual fields. For instance, when asked whether he had tried online dating, Jacob (55 years old) asserted:

> "Not really, because, like, you have to pay a subscription to actually connect with people. I don't want to pay the subscription. It should be free. Yeah. Everything else in the relationship involves money, [sarcastic laughter] so I don't know why I have to pay for them."

Alejandro (42 years old) too talked about choosing not to participate in digital sexual fields due to their financial cost: "I hear about this website Match.com, but it costs money. They're saying its free, but it's not free."

Use of Technology

At other times, the experience of not participating, or having limited participation, in digital platforms was not by choice. It cannot be assumed that all sexual actors have access to the technology often needed to inhabit digital sexual fields, including computers and smartphones. This was the case for several participants in the study who expressed that they did not have their own hardware, did not know how to use applications, or were worried they might find themselves getting into trouble.

In the case of Ross (38 years old), for example, his lack of access to a computer prevented him from accessing digital sexual fields. When asked to explain why he had never used the Internet to pursue intimate partners, he bluntly noted, "No me got computer." Yet, when asked if he would be interested in using online dating websites if he had the money and technology necessary, he enthusiastically asserted: "Yeah. Yeah, me want to."

Leonard (40 years old) was another participant who, despite his interest in participating in digital sexual fields, struggled with limited access to technology. As he asserted, "I don't have a computer. That's the problem. I don't have one." Nonetheless, he was able to borrow a computer from a friend to access digital sexual fields: "It was good. I just borrowed it from a friend. I just borrowed it. They borrowed it. It wasn't mine. But they let me just borrowed it. They let me borrow it." Borrowing a computer, however, did not provide the ability to engage with dating applications regularly and maintain conversations and connections with people consistently.

Having access to the appropriate hardware was not the only barrier around using technology. Others expressed that they did not have the requisite skills to engage in online dating. In Ethan's (41 years old) case, "I've heard about eHarmony... I've heard about that. But I really don't know how to get on that. And I've heard about Match, I've seen it on TV." He was never able to use it despite his desire to do so. As he said, "If it's going to make me meet someone, I wouldn't mind doing it, going on online dating."

In the case of Joshua (50 years old), he experienced multiple barriers of not knowing how to use these technologies, fear of "getting in trouble", and not being willing to spend his money.

> "I have cell phones and things but I don't like really trying to get the pictures projected all over the place because I don't want to get in trouble number one but more importantly, I really don't know how to go about doing it anyway so there's really no point and since I feel like I'll probably pay more money for all the services [...] there's no reason why I should even bother doing it."

In Joshua's case, the Internet only made dating "more complicated". Moreover, online dating only added another stressor for him to navigate:

> "It's just more complicated! I don't want to make the dating too complicated [...] I barely have the social skills to last me and this would just make it even more complicated so I just get frustrated and even give up."

There was a clear desire from participants to engage in virtual platforms to access sexual fields. However, not having access to technology and (paid) digital sexual fields and not having the skills to do so resulted in some participants without access.

Control by Others

Access to digital sexual fields can also be shaped by control and infantilization by others. For example, Joshua used to have a phone given to him by his father, but he no longer has one. In the past, he engaged in phone sex. He shared his experience with this kind of service, stating:

> "They charge you, yeah. Like $3 per minute or 99 cents per minute. If you're calling for other ads like bum sex or hot teenager, that's $3 and 99 cents or $5.99. [...] Yeah. They talk a lot of dirty stuff on the phone with you and stuff like that."

Joshua shares a group home with other people with intellectual disabilities. He seemed to enjoy engaging in phone sex as he spoke in detail about the fetishes and sexual practices articulated in that particular sexual field. Joshua, however, is no longer able to participate in phone sex. When asked what kept him from doing so, Joshua said that he was told by his parents, "I don't want Joshua using that on his phone. It won't be any good for him." Joshua no longer has a cell phone, which has made it extra difficult for him to access these services. As he explained, "Well, I need to buy my own cell phone and pay it out of my own pocket. Pay for my own private lines." In addition to the boundaries set by his parents around phone usage, seeing a sex worker was also out of reach for Joshua, as he indicated, "I don't think we have that kind of money. $124 for a whip? Just whip in the butt and that's it." For Joshua, even the cost of purchasing condoms is out of his reach, as he noted, "I didn't have any rubbers. Condoms they cost." When asked if that had been a barrier, he confirmed, "Yeah, the cost [...] I can't afford it." It is clear in examples like this how some people with intellectual disabilities may be kept out of these sexual arenas, or have limited access to them, due to both a lack of economic capital and control on the part of their families.

As another example of the power exercised by others in the lives of disabled people, Christopher (39 years old) shared that he was not allowed to watch pornography in his computer. As someone who has been told by his parents that he's "not ready" for intimate relationships, and thus, has refrained from meeting potential partners or engaging in sexual expression, pornography could have been one avenue for experiencing sexual pleasure on his own. Yet, in his brief words, he noted: "Mom told me I need to be older to watch that."

Leonard spoke about his experience using a dating phone application: "I had tried that, but that's not gotten me anywhere either, as well. I mean, I've tried Plenty of Fish. I've gotten a few messages here and there, but I haven't really had any luck with it." In his case, digital sexual fields haven't been the most helpful for finding intimate partners. At the same, as he shared, "my parents don't allow me to use the apps anymore anyways. They think it will only bring troubles." It is worth highlighting how participants were all adults and their own legal guardians. It is reasonable to say that, for most non-disabled adults, having their phones confiscated or being unallowed by their parents from using dating applications are not likely to happen.

Despite several barriers, participants managed to use digital sexual fields to engage with others to find intimate partners.

Theme 2: Disclosure

Three subthemes were identified among participants' strategic approaches to managing their self-presentation for online dating: avoiding disability disclosure, disclosing one's disability status, and articulating sexual capital.

Choosing to Hide Disability

Most participants spoke about withholding their disability status to avoid rejection due to ableism. Whether based on previous experience or their own presumption, participants understood their disability label to lower their sexual capital in the eyes of potential partners. Scott (34 years old), for example, talked about how, in a new relationship, he does not disclose his disability status for some time to avoid having potential partners see him as "less of a person":

> "Oh god, I try to hide it. I somewhat tried to hide it. Like I don't let people know until like one or two weeks into the relationship [...] I don't want them to look at me as any less of a person. If that makes sense. So, yeah, I don't really let them know until one or two weeks into the relationship. Yeah, I have a disability."

Scott's statement is not without merit, as similarly, Clayton (34 years old) spoke about his decision to avoid disclosing his disability, as he shared, "I haven't disclosed any disability online. Like if a person would look at me they'd be like, 'You look like you don't have a disability.' But in reality, I do." In addition to being able to "pass" as not having an intellectual disability, when asked to elaborate on his choice not to disclose his disability, Clayton referred to his experiences in school where he was the target of bullying from other students, stating, "Everybody learns in different ways, but I just sometimes feel like having a reminder of how I was treated in school for being different [...] Yup. Back in the '80s and early '90s, there was no way to control bullying." Thus, Clayton is well aware of the stigma still associated with having a disability label, as well as the potential violence that can come from that.

As another example, Margaret (51 years old) shared that the Internet is a particularly promising venue to meet intimate partners because it allows her to strategically manage her self-presentation, concealing her disability, and to pursue relationships safely:

> "Physical [interactions] was always a problem. They could tell that my timing was different and there was something different about me and I always would end up having a problem. Somebody would follow me home or they would get my information and then they would call, you know, and then it was very disorienting."

By using online, and mostly text-based communication, Margaret was able to assert some control over her interactions, setting the time and pace of those communications, being able to articulate her thoughts better, and hiding the fact that her "timing was different". Additionally, digital sexual fields granted Margaret a feeling of safety and control. This was particularly important for Margaret considering that, in addition to experiences of being followed and contacted against her wishes, she had experienced sexual assault as a young cisgender woman.

Virginia (31 years old) also chooses not to disclose her disability: "I usually don't tell people, 'Oh yes, I have an intellectual disability, do you like me for what I am.' Right. I wait until we're basically face to face and I tell them...". On the other hand, Virginia chooses to disclose other aspects of her identity that she feels are important. This is seen in the following example as she decides to be open about her gender identity, "I do tell right away and just in case they think I'm like- my photos look like a real real woman. But I actually tell them, you know, it's a funny way as I'm not saying, oh, I'm a male to female. 'Are you okay with, are you okay with me being a T girl that's not like a girl?'".

Choosing to Disclose Disability Status

Two participants discussed their decision to disclose their disability label early on in interactions with potential intimate partners. For instance, Iago (39 years old) said, "I do that all the time. I'm wide open for that. I don't mind sharing what I have. I'm a human being and that's what I like to do." In his case, Iago not only declares that his disability is not something to hide but he also asserts his humanity in the face of often dehumanizing disability constructions. Iago was, in fact, the most active participant of digital sexual fields in the study sample. This has been his primary strategy for his attempts at finding a girlfriend. At the time of the interview, he had used a series of dating websites and mobile applications, including Mingle2 (online dating site and app), OkCupid, Zoosk (online dating company), and Plenty of Fish.

Iago also tried using dating websites specifically for disabled people, an avenue that assumes disclosure from initiation. According to Iago, in these particular digital sexual fields, disability status was not a topic of attention nor discussion during interactions with other sexual actors. Instead, conversations focused people's physical and personality features. Iago noted, for example, his passion for sports and working out in his profile and describes himself as a "fit man" with an "athletic body". According to Iago, his attempts to navigate digital sexual fields, in general, have been unsuccessful primarily due to his inexperience in forming intimate relationships. Other participants similarly shared that, because they had been single for most of their lives and had received very limited information and support related to sexual expression, they did not know where to find partners and how to approach potential intimate partners appropriately. Lacking that "feel for the game" can lead to forms of disadvantage that shape sexual actors' experiences and opportunities for partnering.

Another participant, Aaron (42 years old), also spoke about being open about his disability label. For Aaron, this was seen as more of a pragmatic decision to avoid spending time with someone who may not accept him because of his disability:

> "I try to disclose it early on because I'm involved with counselling and treatment and if I'm to be with someone then they're gonna become aware that, you know, uh, a few of my days throughout the week are based on that."

In his case, disclosure is seen as being inevitable as, sooner or later, intimate partners will learn about his disability. He believes that his regular visits to a counsellor and disability-specific community programs would reveal his disability status. While Aaron often chooses to disclose his disability status, he also spoke about how that disclosure has often led to rejection by potential intimate partners who see his disability as a "turn off":

> "I think a lot of the women, and I could be uh generalizing as well but, I think they...I think they're somewhat taken aback by that [his disability status], and I... I'm of the belief that the more honest I am about it then the more it's out there and the more it can be discussed but I think definitely in beginning your relationship it- it- uh, it's a barrier."

It is noteworthy how Aaron attempts to make his disability visible. Aaron and a few other participants spoke about needing to educate intimate partners about their intellectual and mental health disabilities. As another example, Jacob who also lives with schizophrenia, discussed his trepidation around disclosing his condition to potential intimate partners:

> "It like sets off red flags when they hear you have schizophrenia. It's hard for them to overcome that in their mind. I have my down days, like when I have the mania, you know? They don't understand what's wrong with me. I barely understand myself. It's just a part of who I am. They're, you know, not really understanding of that [...] If in the first date you're telling them you have schizophrenia, there probably won't be a second date. "

He then talked about his efforts to educate potential partners: "It is exhausting having to explain this [schizophrenia] to people all the time, you know. But can what I do? I try to tell them what it means, what it's like."

Articulating Sexual Capital

Participants were asked how they construct their online profiles to learn about how they "sell" themselves in interactions with others, and thus, articulate their sexual capital to increase their chances of partnering. An important aspect of competitively participating in digital sexual fields is the ability for sexual actors to present themselves in ways that highlight their erotic capital.

Participants highlighted what they believed to be their favorable assets when sharing information about themselves to others, whether through dating application profiles or initial conversations. For example, when first getting to know someone online, Nelson (30 years old) shared, "I talk about more qualities I have just, for example, I might say, you know, I'm creative, I like to play sports, I like going to the gym."

Another participant, Iago, elaborated:

> "So, if it's a profile, just write that and just write down fit and 39 guy, almost 40, and fit. Running, working out, playing hockey, playing golf. Like, just playing sports and watching sports, and then biographies, so that's what it all boils down to is ... If it's doing a profile, that's what I'll put it down."

Others provided more pragmatic information to begin answering the inevitable questions they knew were coming when engaging with someone new online. For example, Daniel (34 years old), explains:

> "Well, I say basically how old I am. Where I'm living, say that I'm working, whatever else. What I'm looking for and hopefully somebody will like that and get back to me because they've all been tons of questions like what are your hobbies, what do you do? Do you like this, do you like that?"

Disability is generally socially constructed as something negative. One could then argue that being labelled with a disability may decrease one's erotic capital. Thus, participants were asked if they disclosed their disability status in their interactions within digital sexual fields. This is primarily represented throughout the second theme where responses varied. Participants carefully considered their decision of whether to disclose their disability. Most opted to avoid disclosing their disability status, at least right away, while others decided disclosure in the first interactions was the best approach. This insight demonstrates disabled people's strategic approach to managing their self-presentation to succeed in these sexual fields.

Discussion

Participants experienced several challenges in accessing digital sexual fields, including the lack of access to technology, ableism in digital spaces, and a lack of economic capital. However, most participants had an interest in, and all participated in, these spaces.

While digital spaces can be "easy" and "inexpensive" tools for finding intimate partners (Ben'Ze'ev, 2021, p. 85), it is crucial to provide the means of overcoming barriers for disabled people when it comes to accessing digital sexual fields. As seen in this study, some participants may lack access to digital devices and the Internet. Other challenges discussed above are around not having the technical knowledge to operate digital technologies or social skills to navigate online dating (Santinele Martino, 2020). Economic resources to own adequate hardware, gaining the social skills to engage with others online, and having information about how to participate in these spaces safely are just a few areas to consider supporting this population to connect with others and reduce isolation. In addition, family members may sometimes control disabled people's access to technology and curtail opportunities for disabled people to participate in digital sexual fields (Darragh et al., 2017).

As evident from participants' accounts, not knowing how to engage, talk, or where to begin, when engaging with others online was commonplace (Santinele Martino, in press); many reported not having the requisite skills. People with intellectual disabilities are often socialized as vulnerable and shielded from sexual or romantic experiences, limiting opportunities to learn how to engage in intimate social interactions in person or online (Santinele Martino, 2020). Similar to scholars in other disciplines employing a sexual fields framework, there is socialization and learning that takes place when people traditionally from outside the dominant group engage in these spaces, as seen with transgender men who were socialized with feminine norms when on Grindr, a social

networking app for gay, bisexual, and queer people (Scheim et al., 2019). Participants in our study sometimes internalized vulnerability rhetoric by considering online dating as something that could lead to trouble or not knowing how to best engage with potential partners. Though digital sexual fields designed for people with disabilities exist, there is a need for more conversation and norms around people with disabilities accessing and navigating sexual fields organized around non-disabled actors (e.g., Match.com, a large, online dating service, or Grindr).

For most participants, having a disability label, and disclosing that label to potential intimate partners, placed them at a disadvantage, leading most not to disclose their disability. Participants employed self-presentation strategies to best portray themselves in a desirable way. These strategies included considering when to disclose their disability label and thoughtfully crafting their profile. For example, in their profile descriptions, participants highlighted other aspects of their bodies and personalities, including their physical features, hobbies, and personality traits, asserting multifaceted identities that involve more than just a disability label (Chadwick & Fullwood, 2018; Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2018). In our social world, conversations about disability remain grounded in deficit-based discourses that emphasize the limitations rather than the resilience of disabled people (Skarstad, 2018). Not only that, but people with disabilities also have a long history of being treated as "less of a person" and being dehumanized due to their disability label (Skarstad, 2018; Ward & Stewart, 2008). Thus, in their intimate lives, some people with intellectual disabilities may understandably choose not to disclose their disability for fear of being perceived as a less desirable partner.

In their digital interactions with non-disabled people, participants often had to educate their potential partners about their impairment. Many participants brought this up. Engaging in this type of labor can be emotionally taxing for disabled people (Kaufman et al., 2007; Porter et al., 2017). As Kaufman and colleagues (2007) articulate,

> "[P]eople living with disabilities are invariably put in the position of being 'The Ambassadors of Disability.' Because non-disabled people have so many hang-ups about disability, and so little information, if we choose to have sex with non-disabled people we do much of the initiating of conversations (p. 81)."

Further, there is a need for education in the general public to reduce the stigma and discriminatory experiences disabled people face when using mainstream dating applications. Reducing stigma around disability that leads to experiences of discrimination for disabled people when accessing online platforms is necessary, as non-disabled norms are forcing those with disabilities to feel their disability is something to conceal to maintain capital. As more people with disabilities engage more with digital sexual fields, and gain more acceptance and face less stigma and discrimination about being 'vulnerable', it is reasonable to suspect that access to fields and strategies for articulating sexual capital will continually evolve.

Taking a sexual fields framework allows us to theorize how disabled sexual actors mobilize sexual capital. First, it is crucial to recognize the structural barriers that impede disabled people's access to digital sexual fields. Having low economic capital and knowledge about technology, for example, has hindered participants' access to digital sexual fields, fields that may require membership fees (Saltes, 2013). Digital sexual fields also tend to reproduce an ideal image based largely on identity characteristics—the epitome of a person based on race, gender, ability, and other factors (Saltes, 2013; Wei Ang et al., 2021). The target market of digital fields (dating apps/websites) and the social attitudes of users presume non-disabled sexual actors. This can be seen through the expectation of users of dating apps who expect people with disabilities to disclose their disability status when engaging with others online (Porter et al., 2017). Attention to structural oppression (e.g., racism) in digital sexual fields is not new in research (Carlson, 2020; Wei Ang et al., 2021). However, more attention is needed to deconstruct the forms of ableism in these spaces.

The findings and discussion of this study should be considered with its strengths and limitations. This study is exploratory in nature and draws on a small sample, restricting the transferability of concepts. However, this study provides insights into the barriers that keep individuals with intellectual disabilities out of digital sexual fields and how they negotiate their participation in digital spaces that sometimes reproduce ableist understandings of disabled sexualities. The larger study included 46 participants, predominantly men, and the ratio of men to women in the subsample of participants who participated in digital sexual fields (n = 15) was 13:2. This may result from a larger culture in which men, both disabled and non-disabled, still have more "permission" to talk openly about sexuality. Additionally, having a cisgender man conduct this research may have discouraged some women from feeling comfortable with participating. When it comes to women with intellectual disabilities, who are often desexualized and constructed as particularly vulnerable, there may be additional barriers to their participation.

Future research should continue to explore sexuality among disabled people of all genders. Finally, it is important to note that because all participants were their own legal guardians, this may have resulted in more opportunities to access digital sexual fields in comparison with those under guardianship order whose decision-making power may be limited. Arguably, those under guardianship order might experience greater surveillance and social control over their choice to access and participate in digital sexual fields. This is yet another area for exploration.

Many people with intellectual disabilities experience great levels of social isolation in their everyday lives (Sorbring et al., 2017). Digital sexual fields can play a particularly important role for this social group, allowing disabled people to enhance their sexual knowledge, expand their networks, meet potential intimate partners, and experience forms of sexual pleasure. It is crucial that those who provide care to disabled people, such as parents, family members, caregivers, and service providers, take more of a supportive role in facilitating disabled people's safe access to digital sexual fields. At times, due to safety concerns, lack of knowledge, or discomfort, these social actors can take restrictive approaches that prevent people with intellectual disabilities from participating in these spaces. People with disabilities, however, have the same human rights in terms of sexual expression as non-disabled people and that should be respected. People with disabilities are entitled to what Plummer (1995) has called intimate citizenship, which refers to our "rights to choose what we do with our bodies, our feelings, our identities, our relationships, our eroticisms, and our representations" (p. 17). Instead of focusing on individuals' risk and vulnerability alone, it is crucial to take a different, and more proactive, approach that instead informs, educates, and supports people with intellectual disabilities to increase the likelihood that they might have positive and safer experiences navigating these spaces. Simply saying "no" to disabled people when it comes to participating in digital sexual fields is not enough. The exploratory findings in this study, nonetheless, provide insight into the sexual lives of people with intellectual disabilities and how they are accessing digital sexual fields as a resource for sexual and romantic connection. Furthermore, this finding prompts attention to the need for more research in this nascent field to better understand how people with intellectual disabilities might be best supported to overcome barriers discussed, such as technology literacy, financial, and social support.

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Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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