

Augustana College

Augustana Digital Commons

Sexual Ethics

Religion

Spring 4-5-2024

Dating Apps as an Outlet to Promote Sexual Autonomy Among Disabled Individuals: An Intersectional Approach to Change

Sarah Marrs

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/relgsexual>



Part of the [Disability Studies Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Marrs, Sarah. "Dating Apps as an Outlet to Promote Sexual Autonomy Among Disabled Individuals: An Intersectional Approach to Change" (2024). *Sexual Ethics*.

<https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/relgsexual/4>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sexual Ethics by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Dating Apps as an Outlet to Promote Sexual Autonomy Among Disabled Individuals: An
Intersectional Approach to Change

Sarah Marrs

RELG-363

December 15, 2023

Introduction

Disabled individuals have historically been given a narrative of existing as asexual beings. Yet, the sexual partners of Carson Tueller, a queer paralyzed man, often tell Tueller that, “this is the best sex I’ve ever had.”¹ While many people with disabilities are entirely capable of engaging in sexual acts and meaningful relationships, this desexualized narrative further forces the disabled demographic out of traditional social norms and into the social “other,” considering the significance of the idealized neoliberal figure: a heterosexual able-bodied capitalist and consumerist individual.² Scholars of occupational therapy Esmail et al. assert that as a result of social exclusion, members of the disabled community often develop an internalized sense of asexuality. While we must not ignore the legitimacy of asexual identities, those who have an internalized false asexual identity due to societal pressures tend to have lower levels of confidence and less desire and ability to find a partner.³ However, since the launch of Match in 1995, the first online dating website created by Gary Kremen, meeting potential partners has become more accessible to the disabled community. Christine Emba, author of *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation*, addresses that prior to the invention of dating apps, most couples met in a very public manner, whether through their social circles or at their respective churches,⁴ outlets for communication that are not as accessible for those who are disabled. By utilizing dating apps, disabled people can meet potential partners without leaving their homes and can portray themselves as more than just their disability. Dating apps display a wide variety of potential

¹ Doyle, Glennon, Amanda Doyle, interview with Carson Tueller, *We Can Do Hard Things: How to Love Your Body Now*, podcast audio, July 28, 2022, <https://momastery.com/blog/we-can-do-hard-things-ep-117/>.
<http://podcasts.nytimes.com/podcasts/2007/04/20/21bookupdate.mp3>.

² Long, Robyn. “Sexual Subjectivities within Neoliberalism: Can Queer and Crip Engagements Offer an Alternative Praxis?” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 19, no. 1 (February 5, 2018): 78–93.

³ Esmail, Shaniff, Kim Darry, Ashlea Walter, and Heidi Knupp. “Attitudes and Perceptions towards Disability and Sexuality.” *Disability and Rehabilitation* 32, no. 14 (January 2010): 1148–55.
<https://doi.org/10.3109/09638280903419277>.

⁴ Emba, Christine. *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation*. New York, Ny: Sentinel, An Imprint Of Penguin Random House Llc, 2022.

matches, allowing disabled users to search for an ideal partner with much more ease than in a traditional public setting. Emba furthers that dating apps allow the user to be the sole counsel of dating related affairs, thus users can date who and how they want with much more privacy and without interference and judgment from others. Emba also asserts that online dating platforms bring together potential partners of different races, educational backgrounds, and geographical locations. It is very plausible that dating apps can do the same for members of the disabled community. In this paper, I will argue that disabled individuals can engage in unique and genuine relationships by way of dating apps' ability to enable the disabled community with increased sexual autonomy and potential to date on their own terms. I will achieve this by addressing historical perspectives of "crip sex," comparing the disabled dating experience to the able-bodied dating experience and assert how dating apps can close the gaps between them, and describe the significance of a dating app designed for individuals with disabilities. I later will address theories as to why disabled adults face difficulties entering relationships due to social standards, and provide recommendations to further dismantle the neoliberal figure that renders disabled folks "unideal" and incapable of sex and relationships.

A Historical Approach to Understanding Crip Sex

Historically, the disabled community has been dehumanized and infantilized, as well as been desexualized. In extreme cases, as disability scholars Lund and Johnson⁵ explain, people with disabilities have been forcibly sterilized or denied the right to marry. *Crip Camp*,⁶ a 2020 film that guides viewers through the disability rights movement of the 1960s, features profound moments from the activists' time at Camp Jened,⁷ where they were able to discover their

⁵ Lund, Emily M., and Bayley A. Johnson. "Asexuality and Disability: Strange but Compatible Bedfellows." *Sexuality and Disability* 33, no. 1 (September 27, 2014): 123–32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-014-9378-0>.

⁶ Netflix. "Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution." YouTube Video. *YouTube*, July 23, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFS8SpwioZ4>.

⁷ A summer camp for disabled teenagers founded in 1951.

sexualities with the freedoms that able-bodied teenagers do. The experiences of the campers prove that when given the opportunity for engagement and exploration, disabled individuals can “be sexual,” furthering the notion that the asexual narrative put upon the disabled community is harmful. Nosek et al.⁸ of Baylor College of Medicine’s 1992-1996 study exploring comparisons regarding sexual behaviors between women with and without disabilities found that there is very minimal difference in sexual desire between the groups. The study also concluded that the disabled women surveyed expressed significantly lower levels of sexual activity and less satisfaction with their sex lives,⁹ an imbalance likely caused by societal perceptions of the disabled. In the digital age of the twenty-first century, disability is far less stigmatized, and disabled individuals are far less subject to discrimination following the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act. Regardless of historical era, individuals with disabilities have sexual desires and capabilities that in many instances are only hindered by the lack of partnerships many members of the demographic may find themselves with. The utilization of dating apps can minimize this barrier for disabled individuals seeking romantic or sexual partners.

Disparities in Relationships Between the Disabled and Able-Bodied (Why Online Dating is Impactful)

Disabled individuals who cannot drive themselves or require mobility devices, such as wheelchairs or crutches, do not have the same capabilities to meet potential partners on an everyday casual basis when in the public eye. Simply “getting out there” to search for relationships in the traditional spaces Emba mentions is not as plausible of an option for those with disabilities when mobility in public spaces and transportation is not accessible for those

⁸ Nosek, M. A., C. Howland, D. H. Rintala, M. E. Young, and G. F. Chanpong. “National Study of Women with Physical Disabilities: Final Report.” *Sexuality and Disability* 19, no. 1 (2001): 5–40. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1010716820677>.

⁹ Nosek et al., “National Study of Women with Physical Disabilities: Final Report,” 9.

with physical disabilities. Dating apps allow those with disabilities to have a significantly larger pool of potential partners that can be accessed without leaving home. Dating apps provide users with the option to select a location range, making it convenient for matches to meet nearby a disabled person's residence. The apps give users the option to share as much or as little information as they desire. From simply adding photos to very detailed personal values, users can create the ideal profile for themselves.¹⁰ Beyond a general stigma regarding disabled people exhibiting sexual traits, it is seemingly taboo for an able-bodied individual to become romantically or sexually involved with a disabled person. This stigma likely stems from a societal obsession with beauty standards and the ideal neoliberal body, as Robyn Long references. Long argues that because the "ideal" body is put on such a pedestal, and those who do not conform with such standards are deemed as lesser functioning and are denigrated and further pushed into the aforementioned "social other." Long also mentions the significance of the nuclear family. Many able-bodied individuals choose to avoid relationships with those who are disabled out of fear of a lack of reproductive ability or anxiety over the potential that disabilities are passed on to the child of a disabled person. The gap between the able-bodied and disabled can be bridged through usage of dating apps. Many mainstream dating apps, like Tinder, do not necessarily show users profiles based on disability or the lack of a disability,¹¹ implying that members of both demographics can be connected because of commonalities among personal interests. Ideally, these "matches" will feel inclined to become better acquainted through conversations centered around these commonalities rather than just discussions of disability.

¹⁰Tinder. "Editing Your Profile," n.d.

<https://www.help.tinder.com/hc/en-us/articles/115003339043-Editing-your-profile->

¹¹Lifestyle choices that are present in a profile may contribute, such as exercise habits, may indirectly impact this.

Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together*¹² argues that virtual intimacy diminishes the value of interpersonal friendships and relationships. Turkle is critical of online profiles and avatars due to the tendency to create them to only portray one's ideal self. A user can glorify themselves to appear more wealthy or attractive than reality. When messaging online, a user can edit and rewrite messages until they are perfectly phrased, an ability that is not available when speaking face to face. She argues that digital communication causes us to feel "alone together," rather than forming meaningful connections and a genuine sense of togetherness. In reality however, digital communication has the ability to connect demographics of individuals that societal values often put distance between. This perspective does not take disabled individuals into consideration. When analyzing the value of digital communication, we must consider the fact that many members of the disabled community do not have equal access to face-to-face communication. Ignoring these disparities diminishes the positive impacts online dating has on the disabled community, and further pushes the social norms that influence the asexual narrative of disabled people.

A Specialized Opportunity for Relationships

Two sisters, Jaqueline and Alexa Child, launched "Dateability," a dating app for disabled individuals, in 2022. The sisters aimed to change the narrative surrounding dating in the disabled community. Jaqueline, one of the app's co-founders, has lived with chronic illness for much of her life. Alexa, Jaqueline's able-bodied sister with a coalitional perspective of disability, addresses the significance of Jaqueline's disability to the design of the platform: Jaqueline's unique experiences and perspectives contribute to the app's potential as a "winner" in an

¹²Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

underrepresented demographic.¹³ With founders that have firsthand experience with the hardships and stereotypes that come with disabilities, the platform is designed for those with disabilities by someone with disabilities. Rather than simply serving a particular group within the disabled community, Dateability caters to “bodies and minds of all shapes, sizes and backgrounds.”¹⁴ It can be argued that dating apps lack progressivism and continue to keep disabled individuals confined to their particular demographic and maintain the separation of the social “other” by predominantly marketing to disabled individuals. Potential users may feel obligated to use apps like Dateability over mainstream apps like Tinder. Although apps like Dateability do not influence relationships between disabled and able-bodied individuals, it can be comforting and reassuring to have a partner that has shared experiences with disability, Nia Williams, a director at Miss Date Doctor, explains. Disability-specific dating apps provide those with disabilities an outlet to establish sexual autonomy with individuals with similar experience on a platform that encourages the coexistence of sexuality and disability. At its core, Dateability was created to give people with disabilities a “safe space to find love.” It can be empowering for disabled individuals to use an app designed with their needs in mind, in a society that has historically lacked mindfulness and representation for the demographic. Additionally, while there is very minimal advertisement (likely to maintain a disability-forward presentation), members of the able-bodied community are welcome to create profiles on the apps, granted they are consistent allies of disabled users.

A Discussion of the Taboo

¹³Alexiou, Gus. “Dateability’s New Dating App Helps Disabled and Chronically Ill Find Love.” *Forbes*, February 14, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/gusalexiou/2023/02/14/dateabilitys-new-dating-app-helps-disabled-and-chronically-ill-find-love/?sh=6e0c4d071c44>.

¹⁴Alexiou, Gus. “Dateability’s New Dating App Helps Disabled and Chronically Ill Find Love.” *Forbes*, February 14, 2023.

Consideration must be taken as to why it is socially taboo for disabled individuals to enter sexual relationships both with other disabled folks or someone who is able bodied. Dating apps can provide an outlet for disabled individuals to engage in these types of relationships, but it is impossible for the relationships to actually exist past the hypothetical if potential partners refuse to enter such relationships. An initial theory is the idolization of the ideal neoliberal figure. In American culture specifically, a body that is prime for reproduction and the ability to conform to the cycle of capitalism (or support a family, put simply) is much more commonly desired than one that is not. When seeking out potential partners, American folks generally look for someone who aligns with the stereotypical person that would be able to provide for them (whether it is work, family, or sexual needs). For example, we can imagine that seeing a woman who uses a wheelchair for mobility may deter a man from pursuing a sexual relationship because she outwardly does not look like she is ideal for sexual interactions and reproduction. Despite reevaluated gender norms in the twenty-first century, disability studies scholar Mary Wickenden is concerned by the fact that disabled women are often not viewed as equals to able-bodied women due to their inability to perform the domestic roles they are expected to fulfill.¹⁵ Disabled women have additional disadvantages in American culture because of their “double disadvantage,” a term described by Wickenden. This issue cannot be fully diminished if the neoliberal figure continues to be the standard and expectation for Americans, thus the need for an intersectional perspective further reveals itself.

Next, the infantilization of the disabled body produces anxieties and discomfort regarding whether or not it is ethical to engage in sexual behavior with those who are disabled. Critical disability studies scholar Alan Santinele Martino acknowledges the problematic

¹⁵Wickenden, Mary. “Disability and Other Identities?—How Do They Intersect?” *Frontiers in Rehabilitation Sciences* 4 (August 10, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fresc.2023.1200386>.

existence of “tricky” and “risky” stereotypes regarding the intersection of disability and sexuality. Martino expresses the misinformation often presented to disabled individuals. For example, these individuals report being told that marriage is not legal in Ontario, Canada until the age of forty (while the legitimate minimum age to be married in Ontario is sixteen), or that sex automatically results in pregnancy and the passage of disability to the child.¹⁶ The type of “sexual education” disabled individuals receive is often reflective of what concerned parents tell young children to deter them from engaging in any type of sexual activities. As previously mentioned, a disabled adult who understands consent and is able to give consent at will is fully capable of partaking in sexual relations and relationships. The able-bodied population must start viewing adults with disabilities as the adults they are, and realize that forming sexual and romantic bonds with someone with a disability is not necessarily inappropriate.¹⁷ While there are many stipulations to consider on the subject, it is important to understand that many disabled adults can and do have understandings of consent and are able to give consent.

This in mind, the final theory I will address is that many individuals, whether it be because of their gender, culture, or other factor, have a very narrow minded perception of what sex and sexuality really is. We must understand that sexuality isn’t just sex and sex doesn’t have to be just penetrative intercourse between a man and women. Just because a disabled person (or any person for that matter) is not interested or able to participate in penetrative intercourse does not indicate that they are asexual. The act of “having sex” itself can be very fluid. There is not a “correct” way to have sex (although there are considerations to be taken about whether or not an act is ethical). Carson Tueller, who described himself as a “good Mormon” in his youth, first

¹⁶ Santinele Martino, Alan. “Ethically Important Moments: Researching the Intimate Lives of Adults Labeled/with Intellectual Disabilities.” *Qualitative Research*, 27 June 2022, p. 146879412211101, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941221110179>.

¹⁷An exception to this may be when a disabled adult legitimately has the physical and mental functionality of a child despite an adult age or for whatever reason cannot give consent.

experienced sex and sexuality after coming out as gay and becoming paralyzed in 2014. He mentions how amazing queer, crip sex can be. He claims that much of the reason why this particular type of sex is so special is because it requires much more communication than “traditional,” able-bodied sex. Everyone involved expresses exactly what they are doing and how they feel about a given action. Despite crip sex’s nonconformity to standard, stereotypical standards, it remains a valid positive opportunity for marginalized groups, the disabled in particular, to practice and discover their sexualities and sexual preferences. In “Sexlessness,” an episode of Esther Perel’s podcast *Where Should We Begin?*, Perel relates the twirling of hair or the stroking of one’s arm to be comparable or even considered to be an act of sex.¹⁸ One can experience pleasure from these acts just as someone could from “traditional” sex, Perel explains. Kelly Brown Douglas argues that sexuality, rather than a simple matter of sex, truly pertains to how we interpret our identities, and is a driving force in the development of relationships between oneself and others.¹⁹ Thus, using a broader perspective of sexuality allows individuals to discover themselves and what they desire from themselves and others.

An Intersectional Approach to Inclusivity

To fully dismantle the idealized neoliberal figure and disability as a social other, dating and beyond, we must view disability from an intersectional perspective, and remind ourselves of the fact that individuals are defined by multiple identities. Acknowledging intersectional implications can foster coalition between various marginalized groups, such as race, gender, or sexuality. As addressed by Wickenden, it is very much conclusive that there is further marginalization for disabled individuals who also identify with other minority groups (double and triple disadvantaged individuals). Historically, having an intersectional approach to coalition

¹⁸ Esther Perel, Esther Perel, podcast audio, October 23, 2023, <https://www.estherperel.com/podcasts/sexlessness>.

¹⁹ Kelly Brown Douglas, “Black and Blues,” *Womanist Theologist Ethics: A Reader*, 2011.

between marginalized groups has shown to be successful for fostering social change. In 1977, the Black Panther Party allied with disability rights activists during the 504 Sit-Ins. Individuals like Brad Lomax, a disabled leader of the Black Panther Party, understood how discriminations like racism, classism, and ableism can present themselves hand-in-hand,²⁰ and that coalition rather than separation is beneficial to each movement. We must acknowledge that black disability studies and disability politics do not align with those of the mainstream white movement, as Schalk mentions. An intersectional perspective on disability can destigmatize and familiarize disability accommodations for the able-bodied population, as well. Wickenden argues that an able-bodied understanding of the needs of disabled folks can help build community and allow those who are disabled to access services and events more equally to people who are able bodied. An example of this issue being Carson Tueller's expression in *We Can Do Hard Things* that had concerns of whether or not a restaurant would be accessible for his wheelchair when going on a date. While using the bathroom at a restaurant may seem mundane for the able-bodied person, it can cause great anxieties and dictate whether or not an experience is enjoyable, if even feasible, for a disabled person. If the able-bodied population better understood these accessibility issues, less stress would be put on the disabled person to actually navigate the date, and dates can be planned with consideration of activities and locations that are mutually positive for a disabled and able-bodied person. From a contemporary perspective, we as a human culture can work to further understand that our differences are valuable and are significant to establishing individuality.

Conclusion

²⁰ Schalk, Sami. *Black Disability Politics*, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478027003>.

The digital age has produced outlets for communicating with potential romantic and sexual partners that defy the traditional means of communication. When physical or intellectual disability causes difficulty for an individual to meet others in public, dating apps, whether mainstream like Tinder, or disability specific platforms such as Dateability, provide an alternative way for the disabled community to practice sexual autonomy with less judgment and less strain than the aforementioned means presented by Emba. Demographics and groups of individuals can be brought together, disabled or not, that would have otherwise not been put in contact. Going forward, beyond the initial “match” on the apps, the able-bodied and disabled communities alike must be more mindful of stigmas, like asexuality, infantilization, and the neoliberal figure, placed upon disabled individuals that hinder their potential of forming genuine relationships. Users can utilize the ability to edit messages to maintain mindfulness for others and reach their desired quality prior to the other user receiving the message, a power granted by online communication that is not available through face-to-face conversations. It is essential that we view the disabled community as complex human beings that are more than just their respective disabilities. As more online dating platforms emerge, it is significant that we as humans understand their functions- both the benefits and drawbacks- in order to successfully utilize them as tools for building relationships. Dating apps, beyond stigma and stereotypes, are a powerful outlet that enable disabled individuals to engage in their sexuality with more similarities to what the able-bodied population regularly experiences, as well as connect diverse groups and communities together.

Bibliography

Alexiou, Gus. "Dateability's New Dating App Helps Disabled and Chronically Ill Find Love."

Forbes, February 14, 2023.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/gusalexiou/2023/02/14/dateabilitys-new-dating-app-helps-disabled-and-chronically-ill-find-love/?sh=6e0c4d071c44>.

Brown Douglas, Kelly. "Black and Blues." *Womanist Theologist Ethics: A Reader*, 2011.

Emba, Christine. *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation*. New York, Ny: Sentinel, An Imprint Of Penguin Random House Llc, 2022.

Esmail, Shaniff, Kim Darry, Ashlea Walter, and Heidi Knupp. "Attitudes and Perceptions towards Disability and Sexuality." *Disability and Rehabilitation* 32, no. 14 (January 2010): 1148–55. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09638280903419277>.

Esther Perel, Esther Perel, podcast audio, October 23, 2023,

<https://www.estherperel.com/podcasts/sexlessness>.

Long, Robyn. "Sexual Subjectivities within Neoliberalism: Can Queer and Crip Engagements Offer an Alternative Praxis?" *Journal of International Women's Studies* 19, no. 1 (February 5, 2018): 78–93.

Lund, Emily M., and Bayley A. Johnson. "Asexuality and Disability: Strange but Compatible Bedfellows." *Sexuality and Disability* 33, no. 1 (September 27, 2014): 123–32.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-014-9378-0>.

Netflix. "Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution." YouTube Video. *YouTube*, July 23, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFS8SpwioZ4>.

- Nosek, M. A., C. Howland, D. H. Rintala, M. E. Young, and G. F. Chanpong. “National Study of Women with Physical Disabilities: Final Report.” *Sexuality and Disability* 19, no. 1 (2001): 5–40. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1010716820677>.
- Santinele Martino, Alan. “Ethically Important Moments: Researching the Intimate Lives of Adults Labeled/with Intellectual Disabilities.” *Qualitative Research*, 27 June 2022, p. 146879412211101, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941221110179>.
- Schalk, Sami. *Black Disability Politics*, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478027003>.
- Slice, Jessica. “He Cared about Me, so I Broke up with Him.” *New York Times*, November 19, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/19/style/modern-love-he-cared-so-i-broke-up-with-him.html>.
- Tinder. “Editing Your Profile,” n.d. <https://www.help.tinder.com/hc/en-us/articles/115003339043-Editing-your-profile->.
- Townes, Emilie. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.
- Wickenden, Mary. “Disability and Other Identities?—How Do They Intersect?” *Frontiers in Rehabilitation Sciences* 4 (August 10, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fresc.2023.1200386>.