Exploring the dating experience of millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

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Abstract

This study addresses a significant gap in the qualitative understanding of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) in millennial male dating experiences. Set against a backdrop of increased mental health awareness and the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it explores the complex interplay of social anxiety within the realm of modern dating. Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research engaged six millennial males aged 29 to 39, representing diverse sexual orientations, in semi-structured interviews. The analysis revealed four main themes: 'Societal and Cultural Baggage - Societal and Cultural Norms on Perception of Self', 'Navigating the Current Dating Landscape through the Anxious Self', 'Playing the Dating Game', and 'Game Over, Restart? - Post Date Evolving Self-Perception'. These themes unravelled the intricate interplay of internal narratives, societal expectations, and the influence of digital platforms on dating experiences, offering a rich, in-depth understanding of how social anxiety is both shaped by and shaped the dynamics of modern romance, including evolving norms of masculinity and the extensive role of technology.

A novel contribution of this study was the concept of 'internal movies' – a metaphor for the heightened self-focus and introspection that guided participants' dating experiences. This concept significantly advanced our understanding of how internal narratives, intensified by societal pressures and digital interactions, profoundly affect participants' self-perception, emotional responses, and interpersonal relations. The study also highlighted proactive strategies employed by individuals, especially within the LGBTQ+ community, to manage social anxiety, marking a departure from previous research that primarily focused on the passive impact of environments.

The study's findings underscore the necessity for nuanced, intersectional therapeutic approaches, especially for millennial males in digital dating landscapes. Future research, informed by this study, should expand to include a variety of intersectional identities and explore generational differences in dating to deepen the understanding of social anxiety's evolving influence across diverse contexts and age groups.

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Abbreviations

APA American Psychiatric Association

BPS British Psychological Society

CBT Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy

DSM Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

IPA Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

NICE National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

SAD Social Anxiety Disorder

UEL University of East London

UK United Kingdom

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This chapter introduces the study, emphasising the importance of mental health and the rising prevalence of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) in dating contexts. It highlights the researcher's dual perspective as a Counselling Psychologist and millennial male, providing both personal and professional context. The chapter outlines the research questions and methodological approach, concluding with a discussion on the study's relevance to Counselling Psychology and its potential contributions to the broader mental health discourse.

1.2 Introduction

The field of mental health, once overlooked or misunderstood, has undergone significant developments over the past decade, primarily fuelled by increased international attention, transformative research, and proactive policymaking (Wainberg et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic amplified this increased awareness, presenting global society with a mental health crisis, as confinement, fear, and uncertainty significantly contributed to instances of psychological distress (Zheng et al., 2020). Amid this mental health panorama, anxiety stands as a prevalent concern, second only to depression in global statistics, underlining the urgency of in-depth, nuanced research on the subject (World Health Organisation and Office for National Statistics, 2020).

1.3 Overview of Anxiety and Social Anxiety

Anxiety, a complex, multi-faceted construct, can be defined as a feeling of discomfort and worry that often manifests as a generalised and nonspecific overreaction to perceived threats, creating a psychological and physiological state of alarm (Bouras & Holt, 2007;

Davidson, 2007). While anxiety is a natural human response mechanism designed to protect individuals from potentially threatening events, when these feelings become excessive, uncontrollable, and persist over six months, they can culminate into an anxiety disorder (APA, 2013). Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), a specific branch of the more prominent anxiety disorder family, is characterised by a disproportionate and disruptive fear and anxiety in social situations (Clark & Wells, 1995; NICE, 2013). This fear significantly hinders individuals' daily lives and impedes their ability to function optimally in various life domains (NICE, 2013). The symptoms associated with SAD, such as excessive sweating, palpitations, trembling, blushing, stammering and impaired speech (NICE, 2013, APA 2013), can create barriers to meaningful social interactions, fostering negative self-perception and, in many cases, leading to social isolation (Warnock-Parkes et al., 2020).

1.4 Contextual Background

As a trainee Counselling Psychologist and a millennial male, my journey through the field of Counselling Psychology has offered personal and professional encounters with anxiety disorders, specifically social anxiety. My personal and professional experiences have led me to observe a recurring trend in therapeutic protocols that prioritise diagnostic criteria over individual experiences, often overlooking the nuanced subjective realities that clients live (Leichsenring et al., 2014). Further complicating the scenario, millennial males (born between 1981-1996) might struggle with specific challenges— the omnipresence of social media, the complexities of online dating, and shifting masculinity norms (Lehmiller et al., 2015; Courtenay, 2011)—all exacerbated by the wide-ranging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Zheng et al., 2020).

1.5 The Dynamics of Modern Dating

Dating, as referred to in this research, encompasses the range of activities, interactions, and relationships initiated to pursue romantic or intimate connections (Poitras & Lavoie, 1995). This can involve short-term casual encounters and long-term relationship pursuits facilitated through face-to-face interactions or mediated by digital platforms (Chorney & Morris, 2008). In interpersonal relationships, dating is a significant life domain, especially for millennials who are constantly navigating the intricate dynamics of forming intimate connections in the digital age. The very act of dating involves putting oneself "out there", often leading to heightened vulnerability, especially for those grappling with social anxiety (Fehm et al., 2005; Lecrubier et al., 2000). With the proliferation of online dating apps and platforms, social interactions have taken on a new dimension, presenting both opportunities and challenges. For individuals with SAD, these platforms can serve as a double-edged sword—offering a refuge from face-to-face encounters while simultaneously magnifying fears of judgment, rejection, and inadequate self-presentation (Finkel et al., 2013; Turgeman et al., 2020). Recent studies underscore the nuanced ways in which social anxiety impacts romantic relationship quality and functioning, highlighting the need for more targeted interventions and support mechanisms within this demographic (Casey et al., 2023). This is further complicated by social media interactions, which can exacerbate social anxiety in dating contexts, suggesting a complex interplay between digital communication and anxiety levels (Turgeman et al., 2020). Moreover, the evolving societal expectations surrounding masculinity and romantic pursuits further compound the anxiety experienced by millennial males (Dixon, 2022). This intricacy of modern dating, its interface with technology, and its intersection with social anxiety, especially among millennial males, becomes a focal area of exploration in this research.

1.6 Rethinking Psychopathology

Historically, research on SAD has been conducted through a predominantly medical lens, treating social anxiety as a pathological disorder needing a cure (Clark & Wells, 1995). However, while valuable in many respects, this approach may overlook the intricacies and subjective nuances of lived experiences (Rogers, 1951). Thus, this study proposes an alternative perspective, approaching social anxiety from a more humanistic viewpoint, in line with the counselling psychology ethos that values the richness of individual experiences and emotions (Walsh & Frankland, 2009; Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2008; Woolfe, 1996).

1.7 Identified Gaps in Literature

Existing literature on social anxiety predominantly focuses on statistical correlations with romantic relationships through quantitative methods, often overlooking the subjective experiences of individuals, particularly millennial males (Cuming & Rapee, 2010; Garcia-Lopez et al., 2015; Porter & Chambless, 2014). This research trend neglects the millennial demographic's specific challenges and lived experiences in dating contexts. Moreover, there is a paucity of investigation into the role of gender and sociocultural contexts in shaping the manifestation of social anxiety (Vriends et al., 2017; Weiss Wiesel et al., 2014). Notably, Casey et al. (2023) highlight the impact of social anxiety on romantic relationship quality and functioning, urging a deeper qualitative examination of these dynamics. Similarly, Turgeman et al. (2020) provide insights into the influence of evolving digital communication on social anxiety, which suggests a need to explore how these interactions might impact dating experiences. This study intends to address these gaps by delving into the qualitative experiences of millennial males with social anxiety. Focusing on their narratives, feelings, and thoughts, this research aims to provide a richer,

more nuanced understanding of their challenges and perceptions in social and dating scenarios.

1.8 Research Questions

The study is guided by a set of primary and secondary research questions. Primary questions include:

- How do millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations experience dating?
- What does being anxious in social situations mean for millennial males?

The study also aims to answer a secondary question:

- How does an understanding of participants' experiences help inform future practice in counselling psychology and psychological therapy?

1.9 Research Approach and Methodology

As a critical realist, I acknowledge both the objective reality of social anxiety and the subjective ways it is perceived and interpreted. As a critical realist, I understand that social anxiety is not solely an objective disorder but rather a lived reality that varies in its impact and manifestation for different individuals (Bhaskar, 2013). My research thus adopts a qualitative design, using semi-structured online interviews to capture the subjective experiences of millennial males navigating dating with social anxiety. A total of six millennial males representing diverse sexual orientations were recruited for the study through a strategic combination of social media advertisements and personal networking. This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to dissect the complex, nuanced data obtained from these interviews, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived realities (Smith et al., 2021).

1.10 Relevance to Counselling Psychology

This research holds considerable relevance to the field of counselling psychology, particularly in understanding the complexities of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) among millennial males. It aims to provide insights into their experiences with modern dating, evolving masculinity norms, and the influence of digital platforms. These insights could be instrumental in guiding counselling psychologists towards more holistic, personalised therapeutic approaches, potentially enhancing the quality and effectiveness of interventions for this demographic. Aligning with the person-centred ethos of counselling psychology, this research underscores the importance of recognising individual narratives and the diverse influences on mental health (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2008; Walsh & Frankland, 2009; Woolfe, 1996).

1.11 Summary

This chapter provides an overview of anxiety and SAD, highlighting their significance in mental health. It presents the researcher's perspective, identifies gaps in the literature, and outlines the research questions. The chapter describes the critical realist approach and the study's potential impact on Counselling Psychology, setting the stage for the subsequent literature review.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Over the last decade, the awareness of mental health has increased dramatically by international organisations and policymakers (Wainberg et al., 2017). Something that became apparent, especially over the last couple of years, due to the detrimental contribution of COVID-19 to psychological distress (Zheng et al., 2020). According to the World Health Organisation and Office for National Statistics (2020), anxiety is a common mental health concern, and it is considered one of the leading mental health presentations globally and second only to depression.

Anxiety can be defined as a feeling of discomfort and worry, which tends to be generalised and nonspecific as an overaction to an event that is perceived as threatening by the individual, and it is typically supplemented with physical symptoms, nervousness, rumination and poor concentration (Bouras & Holt, 2007; Davidson,2008). As anxiety is closely associated with fearing, a reaction to an actual or perceived instantaneous threat, it involves the anticipation of future threats, including dread, and hence, it may cause individuals to withdraw from situations that elicited anxiety in the past (Baker, 2003; American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013). Anxiety is thought to be a natural human response mechanism utilised to protect individuals from threatening events or escape from dangerous situations (Bouras & Holt, 2007). However, when it becomes excessive, uncontrollable, frequent and persists over six (6) months, it may be diagnosed as an anxiety disorder (APA, 2013).

Anxiety disorders are a cluster of mental health disorders depicted by substantial and uncontrollable feelings of fear and anxiety that significantly disrupt individuals' daily

function and cause significant psychological distress (Hovenkamp-Hermelink et al., 2021). Anxiety disorder(s) is an umbrella term that contains distinct disorders that include specific phobias or anxiety symptoms such as Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Specific Phobia(s) (e.g., fear of heights, needles, spiders, etc.), Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), Separation Anxiety Disorder, Agoraphobia, Panic Disorder, Selective Mutism (APA, 2013). Based on triggering events, unique and distinctive symptoms and timing, the individual disorder can be successfully diagnosed by a mental health professional.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2020), one of the most prevalent forms of anxiety disorder is Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD). Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), or Social Phobia, is characterised by a feeling of anxiety and fear in social situations, causing significant distress and disrupting individuals' ability to function appropriately in their daily lives (NICE, 2013). Typically, these fears are elicited by perceived or actual scrutiny from others and can be specific to particular social situations (such as dating) or experienced in every social interaction (Shields, 2004). Individuals diagnosed with SAD often display specific somatic symptoms involving excessive sweating, palpitations, trembling, blushing, stammering and impaired speech (APA, 2013; NICE, 2013). Symptoms that, due to their nature, might hinder their social interactions, and they might be perceived as another reason to be negatively evaluated (Stein et al., 2001). As with all anxiety disorders, those suffering from SAD might attempt to avoid the source of their anxiety, something that might be particularly problematic in individuals with SAD, as it could lead to complete social isolation (Warnock-Parkes et al., 2020). This has been supported by studies that linked SAD with impairment in the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships (Aderka et al., 2012; Alden & Taylor, 2004).

Based on recent data from the ONS (2020), following the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of individuals suffering from symptoms closely related to SAD has increased by 15% in the U.K. compared to pre-pandemic numbers, especially in the ages 26-41 (millennial population) possibly due to social media usage and prolonged isolation (Twenge et al., 2019; Betul et al., 2020). Additionally, another confirmatory study has shown that COVID-19 has significantly increased SAD presentations among the general population of all ages (Zheng et al., 2020).

2.2 Theories of Social Anxiety

2.2.1 Cognitive Model of Social Anxiety

Clark and Wells (1995) provided a cognitive conceptualisation of SAD, suggesting that such anxiety is perpetuated despite ongoing exposure to social stimuli. Their model posits that feared situations trigger maladaptive beliefs and assumptions, remnants of past experiences. These preconceptions predispose individuals to perceive social interactions as threatening, expecting they will fail to achieve their own, often lofty, social performance standards. The model suggests that upon such appraisal, an automatic 'anxiety program' is activated, altering affective, attentional, behavioural, cognitive, and somatic responses. These changes, although protective in intent, unfortunately perpetuate SAD.

A critical observation by Clark (2001) is the shift in attentional focus among those with SAD when confronted with anxiety-inducing situations. They engage in intensive self-monitoring, utilising internal cues to deduce how others perceive them. This self-generated evidence reinforces their fears, as external, potentially disconfirmatory feedback is overlooked or discounted.

Clark and Wells (1995) identified a triad of dysfunctional beliefs: unattainably high social performance standards, conditional beliefs linking social missteps to harsh judgment, and negative self-assessments. These beliefs fuel the 'anxiety program,' resulting in biased feedback that sustains erroneous schemas. People with SAD appraise social interactions as hazardous, predict negative outcomes, and critically evaluate their performance, leading to a range of affective and behavioural responses.

Clark and Wells (1995) suggest that anxiety manifests through various physical symptoms—such as perspiration, blushing, trembling, or vocal instability—which are scrutinised and negatively interpreted, escalating fear and intensifying symptoms. Safety behaviours, while meant to mitigate risk, obstruct the disconfirmation of unrealistic beliefs about social interactions, thereby maintaining SAD.

Clark and Wells' (1995) model further explicates the processes of anticipatory anxiety and post-event rumination, emphasising the biased nature of such reflections. It also delineates the internalisation of a negative self-image, erroneously perceived as reflective of others' perceptions, perpetuating a distorted self-concept. This biased internal feedback is maintained through cognitive distortions, such as emotional reasoning, where feelings are misconstrued as reality.

Further expanding on the cognitive perspective, Hofmann (2007) emphasised the role of cognitive biases and distorted thinking patterns in maintaining SAD, suggesting that these cognitive distortions lead to a heightened perception of threat in social situations and an underestimation of one's social performance. Moscovitch (2009) proposed that the core fear in SAD is related to the perceived negative evaluation by others, which is deeply rooted in the individual's self-concept and identity. This model aligns with Clark and

Wells by highlighting the internal feedback loop of negative self-evaluation and its impact on social anxiety.

Rapee and Heimberg (1997) introduced a cognitive-behavioural model that complements Clark and Wells' framework by integrating the role of social skills deficits and avoidance behaviours in perpetuating SAD. They argue that the interaction between cognitive distortions and behavioural responses creates a cycle that reinforces social anxiety. Heimberg et al. (2010) further elaborated on the spectrum of social anxiety, suggesting that the severity and manifestation of social anxiety can vary widely among individuals, influenced by both cognitive and environmental factors.

2.2.2 Self-presentation Theory of Social Anxiety

The fundamental tenet of self-presentation theory posits that our actions and emotions are often driven by the desire to influence how others perceive us. Social interactions are shaped by the impressions individuals make on one another and their reactions to these impressions. Consequently, individuals frequently engage in self-presentation, the act of managing one's image in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary, 1995).

Social anxiety is tied to concerns over social scrutiny and can be viewed as a self-presentational challenge (Leary & Buckley, 2000; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). It arises when there is a strong desire to be accepted socially and uncertainty about one's ability to project the desired image. Those who have an intense aversion to rejection and a strong desire for acceptance are more likely to experience social anxiety.

In more technical terms, from a self-presentational viewpoint (Leary, 1983; Leary & Kowalski, 1995), social anxiety consists of two elements: the motivation to make a particular impression (IM) and the perceived likelihood of succeeding in doing so (impression efficacy, IE). When individuals place great importance on the outcomes of their social presentations, their concern for the impression they make increases, consequently elevating the potential for social anxiety.

2.2.3 Understanding Social Anxiety in Dating Context

Bringing these two theories together, social anxiety could be described as "a state of anxiety resulting from the prospect or presence of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social settings" (Leary, 1983, p. 67). Research suggests that central to social anxiety is the apprehension of being negatively evaluated or rejected by others (Clark & Beck, 2012). Those dealing with social anxiety are prone to experiencing feelings of unease, despondency, and discomfort, often resorting to evasive actions in social contexts (Heuer et al., 2007; Pierce, 2009). Furthermore, these individuals might struggle with developing and preserving intimate relations (Asher & Aderka, 2019; Porter & Chambless, 2017).

Research on SAD spans both traditional, in-person environments (Asher et al., 2017; Norton & Abbott, 2017) and the digital world, including social media and dating apps (Lee-Won et al., 2015; Seabrook et al., 2016). However, the intersection of social anxiety with online dating is not extensively explored, with limited studies examining online communication as a tool for partnership seeking among individuals with SAD or considering SAD as a factor in the problematic use of online dating (Poley & Luo, 2012; Stevens & Morris, 2007; Stinson & Jeske, 2016). The reasons why social anxiety

manifests more intensely in some individuals during online dating remain less understood.

Leary's (1983, p.67) terms "real or imagined" are in line with current interpretations that view social anxiety primarily as the outcome of adverse cognitive evaluations of potential threats (Gkika et al., 2018). Within dating scenarios, 'a potential threat' represents any evaluative interaction via messaging, calls, or direct encounters where one risks being judged or rejected. The significance lies in the individual's perception of the situation rather than the factual circumstances. Present research underlines that cognitive evaluations significantly contribute to the onset and persistence of social anxiety (Kampmann et al., 2019). According to the cognitive models of depression and anxiety, the way one interprets uncertain social situations, including dating, crucially shapes their emotional responses (Everaert et al., 2017; Garcia et al., 2019; Gkika et al., 2018; Hirsch et al. 2016). Thus, understanding individuals' cognitive assessments is essential to comprehending the nature of social anxiety.

While the Cognitive and Self-Presentation theories provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of social anxiety in dating, they primarily focus on internal cognitive processes and self-evaluative concerns (Clark & Wells, 1995; Leary, 1983). These theories elucidate how individuals' perceptions and desires to manage impressions can influence their experience of anxiety. However, to gain a more holistic understanding of social anxiety in dating, especially in terms of its more profound psychological impacts, it is beneficial to explore additional theoretical perspectives.

2.2.4 Shattered Assumptions Theory

Building upon the insights from the cognitive and self-presentation theories, the Shattered Assumptions Theory by Janoff-Bulman (1992) is next considered for its distinct perspective. Formulated initially to interpret reactions to traumatic events, this theory investigates how individuals react to experiences that deeply challenge their established worldviews. The applicability of this theory goes beyond its initial trauma-focused context, providing insightful contributions to understanding social anxiety, as highlighted by recent studies (Pitcho-Prelorentzos et al., 2020). This theoretical approach facilitates a comprehensive examination of the profound effects of social interactions on an individual's core beliefs and perceptions, thereby deepening the understanding of the psychological dimensions of social anxiety.

Furthermore, while social anxiety is not typically classified as a form of trauma, the concept of social trauma introduced by Bjornson et al. (2020) suggests a similar significant impact on an individual's psyche due to continuous exposure to social stressors. This notion aligns well with the Shattered Assumptions Theory and emphasises the profound psychological changes that can occur in response to persistent social challenges. The adaptation of this theory to explain social anxiety, particularly as proposed by Pitcho-Prelorentzos et al. (2020), complements the broader aim of this study, which seeks to explore the cognitive and emotional underpinnings of social anxiety in millennial males within dating contexts.

Building on this understanding, Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) Theory of Shattered Assumptions scrutinises individuals' fundamental beliefs or cognitive appraisals, examining their significant influence on their existence. Such deep-seated beliefs forge one's anticipations and evaluations about themselves, others, and the broader

environment. As Janoff-Bulman (1992) delineates, there exist three core assumptions critical to one's cognitive framework: the perception of the world as inherently kind, which encompasses both the benignity of the world at large and of its inhabitants; the certainty of a fair, manageable, and foreseeable world; and the view of the self as virtuous, comprising notions of moral worth, self-efficacy, autonomy, and fortuity. These assumptions are pivotal to daily functioning and forging meaningful connections (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Significant life occurrences frequently challenge and modify these core beliefs - particularly the adverse ones- (Lampe, 2009; Norton & Abbott, 2017; Ollendick & Hirshfeld-Becker, 2002; Rapee & Spence, 2004; Spence & Rapee, 2016; Wong & Rapee, 2015), leading to distressing psychological states, heightened anxiety, and diminished well-being (Currier et al., 2009; Dekel et al., 2004; Harris & Valentiner, 2002; Lilly et al., 2011). Prior research has also investigated the repercussions of these fractured assumptions on interpersonal bonds (Coll & Draves, 2009; Gordon et al., 2005; Hong & Hyun, 2018; Roos et al., 2019).

In line with Janoff-Bulman's (1992) theory, disruptions in foundational beliefs can manifest as adverse judgments about oneself, the world, and other people, potentially escalating anxiety in specific scenarios (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Such shattered beliefs are associated with increased worry and a heightened sense of apprehension about negative events occurring, which can undermine an individual's perceived self-competence, particularly in situations that are not clear-cut (Shahriar & Shepherd, 2019). Research indicates that individuals with social anxiety often have a paucity of positive evaluations when faced with uncertain situations (Amir et al., 2012; Beard & Amir, 2009; Hirsch et al., 2016; Moser et al., 2008).

Dating, and more particularly online dating, a realm characterised by its ambiguity, exemplifies such a situation, unfolding in a digital environment where daters, essentially strangers, are exposed due to limited means of verifying the information shared (Caplan, 2007; Ellison et al., 2006). In these instances, individuals should depend on their intrinsic postulations to navigate the uncertainties of virtual dating. As dating inherently involves interaction with others within a social framework, negative perceptions of one's social sphere, self, and others can contribute to the development of social anxiety in the dating context.

2.2.5 Shattered Assumptions Theory in Dating Context

The World as Inheritably Good (World Appraisals)

The belief in a fundamentally good world helps people feel less exposed to harm, leading to reduced anxiety. Conversely, viewing the world as harmful, chaotic, and beyond control can escalate anxiety, either in a broad sense or about specific, uncertain situations (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). In dating, individuals might experience heightened social anxiety if they encounter excessive uncertainty, leading them to perceive the dating scenario as overly perilous (Corriero, 2019; Finkel et al., 2012; Kee & Yazdanifard, 2015).

Self as Capable (Self-Efficacy)

As Janoff-Bulman (1992) suggest, a favourable view of oneself regarding self-efficacy and personal worth can decrease anxiety symptoms. Self-efficacy concerns an individual's ability to influence events and secure desired results (Bandura, 1997; Leal, Goes, Da Silva, & Teixeira-Silva, 2017). In online and traditional dating, individuals strive to be perceived favourably by prospective partners, linking their sense of worthiness to their assumed competence to achieve the required positive evaluation (Leal et al., 2017). The potential for negative outcomes, such as rejection or ridicule, can incite

social anxiety symptoms (Clark & Beck, 2012). Notably, there is a correlation between the individual's belief in their self-efficacy and social anxiety, with a deficiency in self-efficacy predisposing individuals to heightened apprehension (Bandura, 2001; Closson et al., 2019; Gaudiano & Herbert, 2007; Rodebaugh, 2006; Thomasson & Psouni, 2010). The relationship also operates in reverse: social anxiety has been observed to correlate with diminished self-efficacy and the sentiment that one's emotional state is unalterable in specific scenarios, such as when facing the judgment of others (Daniel et al., 2019; De Castella et al., 2014; Gemzøe et al., 2002). This might lead to a negative self-perception among individuals who are apprehensive about being evaluated by prospective matches. Therefore, individuals who perceive themselves unable to manage their dating interactions or their likelihood of success might experience increased social anxiety in such contexts.

The Kindness of Others (Concerns About Recognition)

The underlying belief in the kindness of others can significantly influence one's psychological well-being, often intensifying anxiety (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This is because people are routinely interacting and being evaluated by others (Daniel et al., 2019). Worries about being judged, condemned, or spurned are intrinsic to social anxiety (Clark & Beck, 2012). Given the existing negative perceptions surrounding online dating, concerns regarding others' opinions may include the apprehension about how people will perceive someone's engagement with dating apps or sites (Cali et al., 2013; Paul, 2014; Smith & Duggan, 2013). Specifically, online daters who possess pessimistic views about the world might be troubled by the possibility of acquaintances, such as coworkers, friends, or relatives, seeing and recognising their dating profiles (Corriero & Tong, 2016; Gibbs et al., 2011; Stephure et al., 2009).

2.3 Cultural Aspects of Social Anxiety

Social anxiety involves discomfort and worry in social interactions or performances where there is a risk of negative judgment. It manifests in contexts with significant personal importance, encompassing societal values, beliefs, and expectations that inform views of social triumph or debacle. Leading cognitive theories highlight the role of social performance standards (Clark & Wells, 1995) and one's self-concept in social contexts (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) in fostering problematic social anxiety. Cultural context could shape notions of acceptable social conduct and the perceived threats of negative social repercussions following awkward or disapproved actions.

Culture might influence the manifestation and reporting of social anxiety by defining the social self and dictating norms for acceptable and successful social interaction. For instance, while Western norms endorse self-assertiveness within acceptable bounds and generally discourage excessive modesty and reservation, fear of being perceived as unassertive or dull is a common worry among socially anxious individuals in the West, who often exhibit more reserved behaviour in intimidating social settings (Alden & Bieling, 1998). Conversely, East Asian communication preferences lean towards a less assertive, more evasive approach (Kim, 1994; Oetzel (1998a), Oetzel (1998b)), where behaviours such as conspicuous modesty might be advantageous. Additionally, self-concepts valued in Western contexts, like assertiveness derived from individuality, might not resonate with success in East Asian social circles (Triandis, 1995).

Societal norms and values underpinning social conduct and assessments vary across cultures (Triandis, 1989). Consequently, the prevalence and portrayal of social anxiety, understood as the dread of adverse social scrutiny, vary with cultural backgrounds. Proposed factors that may explain cultural variances in social anxiety include

individualistic and collectivistic tendencies, perceptions of social norms, degrees of independent and interdependent self-views, and gender roles (Hofmann et al., 2010). Comparisons between East Asian and Western European cultures have revealed that East Asians typically report higher levels of social anxiety compared to Western Europeans. However, findings are inconsistent, with varied effect sizes and challenges in comparison due to diverse social anxiety measures and sample demographics.

2.4 Peer and Familial Aspects of Social Anxiety Development

Early development years, and especially adolescence, play a significant role in the emergence of social anxiety, as suggested by the research. Peers and family dynamics are among the most impactful elements (Kapoor, 2020). Adolescents often experience peer pressure as they seek validation within their social circles, sometimes adopting behaviours without thoroughly assessing their merit. The bond adolescents share with their friends crucially influences their social capabilities and self-assuredness, both vital for adult social functioning (Ingersoll, 1989). Peer groups provide a sense of belonging, boosting self-esteem and offering a platform for acceptance. Adolescents often gravitate towards friends facing similar issues, ensuring a mutual understanding (Kandel, 1985; Urberg et al., 2003). Peer pressure's effect can vary, fostering positive or negative outcomes or sometimes having no discernible impact, as peer dynamics involve continuous learning (Gulati, 2017). An individual influenced by peer pressure might have mixed feelings about joining certain groups. They could also identify groups they prefer not to be associated with, leading them to act contrary to the behaviours of those groups. On the contrary, peer pressure can be beneficial, such as when peers encourage involvement in communal service or academic and athletic excellence (Vaithyanathan & Sivakumar, 2020).

Research highlights that adolescents thriving in life often benefit from their parents' nurturing and need-fulfilling environment (Bhanot, 2011; Lee et al., 2006; Olsson & Hwang, 2002). Studies have suggested that positive parental styles incorporating acceptance, sensitivity, emotional warmth, and responsiveness might increase psychological well-being (Kawabata et al., 2011; Young et al., 2013). On the contrary, the literature points out that poor or negative parental styles that incorporate overprotectiveness and excessive parental interference might increase social anxiety expression in children (Verhoeven et al., 2012; Zhang & Li, 2011). Additional research has demonstrated connections between children's heightened anxiety and parenting styles characterised by rejection (Brown & Whiteside, 2008), overprotection (Bögels et al., 2001), and parental anxiety (Gruner et al., 1999; Muris et al., 2000).

Literature on adolescents suggests the same results and points to certain parental behaviours, like overprotectiveness, lack of emotional warmth, negative parenting, and parental rejection or conflict, as factors exacerbating social anxiety in adolescents (Akinsola & Udoka, 2013; Binelli et al., 2012; Knappe et al., 2009; Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014; Xu et al., 2017). As it is evident, there is a well-established connection between anxiety and parenting styles, as well as the dynamics within the parent-child relationship (Rapee et al., 2005). Akpunne and Uzonwanne (2015) explored the impact of familial and relational backgrounds on social phobia in Nigerian university students by studying 400 students across five universities. Utilising The Social Phobia Inventory for data collection, the study found that adolescents from divorced families reported significantly more social phobia than those from monogamous or polygamous families. In parallel, Tahirovic and Demir (2018) observed that adolescents from divorced families exhibited higher levels of social anxiety compared to those from intact families. Xu, Ni,

Ran, and Zhang (2017) noted that parenting styles significantly influence social anxiety among adolescents in Chinese migrant families.

2.5 Dating with Social Anxiety – Current Literature

2.5.1 Social Anxiety and Interpersonal Relationships

In current literature, Social Anxiety Disorder has been linked with impairment in many aspects of daily life, including interpersonal relationships (Aderka et al., 2012; Alden & Taylor, 2004). Studies have indicated that individuals diagnosed with SAD tend to experience significant difficulties in forming and maintaining close romantic relationships (Alden & Taylor, 2004, 2010; Rodebaugh, 2009) and report lower global quality of friendships (Rodebaugh, 2009; Rodebaugh et al., 2012). Furthermore, studies have found that when individuals diagnosed with SAD develop close romantic relationships, they report an overall impaired relationship quality (e.g., less intimacy, less disclosure, and less emotional expression). This leads to early termination of the relationships, which in turn causes psychological distress (Davila & Beck, 2002; Porter & Chambless, 2014; Sparrevohn & Rapee, 2009). The difficulty in forming close relationships is a unique characteristic of SAD, as research has shown that individuals with SAD are less likely to date and consequently to be married than individuals with other anxiety disorders (Fehm et al., 2005; Lecrubier et al., 2000).

2.5.2 Social Anxiety and Initial Interactions (Dating)

The term 'dating' is very flexible, and currently, it is used to describe a broad spectrum of social interactions, ranging from single romantic events to long-term partnerships. For instance, Poitras and Lavoie (1995, p. 300) state that “dating relationships cover the spectrum of experiences ranging from one-night stands and short-term encounters to

relationships that are long-lasting and stable over time, excluding cohabitation". In a more contemporary context, Chorney and Morris (2008, p. 226) characterise dating as "a dyadic interaction that focuses on participation in mutually rewarding activities that may increase the likelihood of future interaction, emotional commitment and/or sexual intimacy". As evident, initial interactions (dating) are imperative in forming long-term relationships (Berscheid & Regan, 2016). Therefore, exploring the process occurring in those interactions might assist Counselling Psychologists in better understanding the interpersonal impairment that individuals diagnosed with SAD might experience.

Two quantitative studies conducted in lab settings have examined "getting-acquainted" interactions of individuals diagnosed with SAD. In the first study (Vriends et al., 2017), single women with and without a diagnosis of SAD participated in an online conversation with an attractive male participant. The results revealed that in comparison with women without a diagnosis of SAD, women diagnosed with SAD exhibited increased inward focus and elevated anxiety scores throughout the process. While this study effectively delineates behavioural differences between women with and without SAD and includes controlled experiments with control groups, its reproducibility may be limited by its reliance on specialised equipment, such as an eye tracker, within a highly controlled setting. This specific requirement for technology and setting could pose challenges for replication in more varied or naturalistic environments. In the second study (Vöncken et al., 2008), individuals diagnosed with SAD interacted with study participants who were instructed to follow a predetermined interaction protocol. The findings of this "experiment" involving a sample of 90 participants, including a control group of 27, indicated that individuals diagnosed with SAD had been found to evoke a range of negative emotions in their interaction partners, and they have often been rejected. However, the study's scope was limited to five-minute exchanges, which may not fully

capture the complex dynamics of social anxiety's impact over longer or more naturalistic social interactions. This brief duration raises questions about the generalizability of the findings to real-world social settings.

It is apparent from prior research that during dating scenarios, individuals with SAD manifest a heightened level of anxiety and increased self-focused attention (Vriends et al., 2017), and their partners may express a lesser inclination toward future interactions (Vöncken et al., 2008). However, these studies primarily examine the acute anxiety experienced during initial or first-time interactions, which is purported to represent the zenith of anxiety (Asher & Aderka, 2019), without extending the focus to subsequent encounters where familiarity could potentially alleviate this anxiety (Vittengl & Holt, 1998). Additionally, the broader experiential context of the participants' lives has not been sufficiently explored to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences throughout the dating process.

Another study by Turgeman et al. (2020) further explores these dynamics by examining the role of digital communication in shaping social interactions for individuals with social anxiety. This study highlights how technology can provide a safer space for initial interactions but may also reinforce avoidance of face-to-face encounters. The study found that excessive use of digital communication can exacerbate social anxiety symptoms by promoting avoidance behaviours and reducing opportunities for real-life social interactions. Although the study does not focus specifically on dating, its findings suggest that digital communication can significantly impact social anxiety and self-presentation, emphasising the need for further research to better understand its implications in dating contexts. However, the reliance on self-reported data limits the generalizability of these findings to broader social contexts.

2.5.3 The Role of Social Context

According to current literature, social context can considerably impact the experience and the expression of symptoms associated with SAD. Specifically, both the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) and the universally used Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS; Liebowitz, 1987) distinguish between social anxiety arising in different social contexts, such as social interactions and performance situations.

Two contemporary quantitative studies have assessed the role of social context on social anxiety and relationship outcomes. The first study by Kashdan et al. (2014) adopted a two-phase approach. Initially, they tracked 37 SAD-diagnosed participants and 38 controls over two weeks, documenting instances of experiential avoidance and social anxiety during real-life social interactions. They found that momentary experiential avoidance was linked to heightened anxiety symptoms, especially in those with SAD. Individuals with lower experiential avoidance demonstrated acute sensitivity to the perceived threat level within interactions. This phase laid the groundwork for the subsequent experimental component, wherein the researchers further explored these dynamics under controlled conditions. In the second part of the study, they examined a lab-based interaction of opposite-sex pairs of 106 undergraduate students. In this study, the social context of the interactions was purposefully manipulated in such a way that every pair was randomly allocated to a "closeness-generating" condition, forcing self-disclosure or a casual small-talk condition. Psychological distress (i.e., experiential avoidance leading to increased anxiety) was observed only in the "closeness-generating" condition, as it might have been perceived as a more threatening situation by the participants. Acknowledging the comprehensive nature of the study by Kashdan et al. (2014), it is clear that while significant insights have been gained into how experiential avoidance contributes to social anxiety in both observed day-to-day and experimental

settings, the studies may have limitations. Specifically, the second part of the research, with its reliance on undergraduate students, might not capture the nuanced experiences of a wider demographic. Furthermore, the short-term interactions in a lab setting, even when meticulously designed, may not replicate the complexities of prolonged and organic social exchanges in varied real-world contexts.

The second study by Plasencia, Taylor, and Alden (2016) explored the potential of enhancing perceived authenticity to improve social functioning in individuals with SAD. In this study, 72 participants with SAD engaged in social interactions where they were randomly assigned to either maintain their typical self-concealment behaviours or to reduce these safety behaviours, thereby increasing self-authenticity. The findings suggested that this increase in authenticity facilitated positive changes in relationship outcomes and cognitive, affective, and motivational processes that underlie successful relational functioning. This indicates that expressing one's true self may alleviate some of the social impairments associated with SAD. Although the study by Plasencia, Taylor, and Alden (2016) yields valuable insights into the impact of authenticity and self-disclosure on social interactions, it raises the issue of subjectivity inherent in these constructs. The self-reported nature of authenticity and self-presentation could introduce variability in measurement, as these are intrinsically personal experiences that each individual may interpret differently, thus presenting challenges for consistent and objective assessment in research contexts.

Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Casey et al. (2023) underscores the importance of perceived authenticity and self-disclosure in improving relationship quality among individuals with social anxiety. This review, encompassing 50 studies, highlights that interventions encouraging these behaviours can enhance relationship satisfaction and

overall social functioning. The findings suggest that individuals with higher levels of perceived authenticity and self-disclosure reported better relationship outcomes and lower levels of social anxiety. However, the reliance on self-reported data and the focus on specific interventions might limit the generalizability of these findings across different populations and contexts. The meta-analysis also emphasises the need for tailored interventions considering individual differences in the perception and practice of authenticity and self-disclosure.

When putting the findings of these studies together, it is evident that increasing self-disclosure might result in both increased anxiety and more positive relationship outcomes (i.e., a greater desire for future interaction). While the conclusions might initially seem incongruous, both can be anticipated as part of effective exposures in SAD (Hope et al., 2006).

2.5.4 The Role of Gender

Eaton and Rose (2011) argue that despite evolving dating practices, established gender-specific behaviours endure: “Men were expected to initiate, plan, and pay for dates and to initiate sexual contact, whereas women were supposed to be alluring, facilitate the conversation, and limit sexual activity” (p. 862) This binary view of men as initiators and women as respondents remains a gendered characteristic of dating. Lever, Frederick, and Hertz (2015), in their examination of 17,607 single heterosexual men and women in the USA, observed that a significant proportion of men still tend to cover the cost of dates, suggesting that gender roles and dating narratives have scarcely evolved, perpetuating long-standing gender stereotypes and power imbalances. Men’s success in dating is often socially interpreted as a sign of authentic masculinity. Seal and Ehrhardt (2003) highlight that traditional gender positioning enables men's control over women. Bouffard and

Bouffard (2011, p. 4) discuss how “these gendered expectations include male control and female dependence, obedience, and sexual access”.

Michael Kimmel (2008) postulates that the recent dating trend of 'hooking up' - a term referring to casual sexual encounters without the expectation of emotional commitment or a formal relationship - is a phenomenon that mainly advantages young men by allowing intimate encounters without emotional investment and reinforcing their masculine identity among peers. On college campuses, 'hooking up' perpetuates conventional masculine narratives of sexual pursuit and male bonding over such conquests (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011, p. 138). Ultimately, it is argued that both traditional and modern dating practices reflect a broader societal pattern of relationships built on a dyadic, 'complementary', and unequal gender dynamic. This power imbalance might have impacted men’s self-perception and might have adverse effects on their dating behaviours and broader social interactions.

According to a recent literature evaluation (Asher et al., 2017), gender is considered to play a significant role in nearly all aspects of the individual's experience of social anxiety, including intimate relationships. In particular, it was found that social anxiety was linked to less self-disclosure to romantic partners and lower overall satisfaction in romantic relationships. However, these findings were only associated with the female participants of the studies. (Cuming & Rapee, 2010; Porter & Chambless, 2014). Another study (Porter & Chambless, 2017) on couples found somewhat contradictory results. Specifically, it was found that men's (but not women's) social anxiety ratings projected higher breakup rates one year later. At this point, it is noteworthy to mention that these studies have also included individuals without a diagnosis of SAD; thus, their validity exclusively on individuals diagnosed with SAD remains unclear. Additionally, the

abovementioned studies did not examine individuals in dating situations, and their conclusions tend to be mixed.

Adding a qualitative dimension, the study by Fullwood et al. (2019) provides a rich narrative on the psychological effects of online dating for heterosexual men. The study elucidates themes of resilience amidst the frustrations tied to entrenched gender norms and the negative impact on self-perception within the digital dating sphere. These personal accounts from male daters reflect the barriers and challenges shaped by traditional male roles and the opportunities for personal growth and authenticity in their online dating experiences. These insights offer a complex understanding of how men perceive and are affected by the gendered expectations that persist in dating, reinforcing the findings from Eaton and Rose (2011) and Lever, Frederick, and Hertz (2015) regarding the sustained gender-specific behaviours and the potential for both adverse effects and resilience in the face of modern dating practices. While this study (Fullwood et al. (2019) provides insightful qualitative data on heterosexual men's experiences, the study's focus omits a direct examination of social anxiety, limiting its application in understanding anxiety's role in dating behaviours. Additionally, the exclusive concentration on heterosexual men's perspectives overlooks the varied experiences of other gender identities and sexual orientations. The specificity of online dating also constrains the broader applicability to offline dating contexts. Moreover, the small sample size of just eight participants may not provide a sufficient basis for generalising the findings to a wider population.

In summary, the studies presented in this section collectively underscore the enduring impact of traditional gender roles on social anxiety and dating behaviours. While quantitative data reveal trends in behaviour and satisfaction, the qualitative insights from

Fullwood et al. (2019) offer a more personal understanding of the male experience in online dating. Despite their limitations, these findings contribute valuable perspectives to the discourse on gender dynamics and underscore the necessity for more inclusive and diverse research to fully comprehend the complexities of social anxiety within the realm of modern romantic relationships.

2.5.5 The Role of Age

Age plays a detrimental role in the experience and expression of social anxiety. Specifically, it was found that ageing moderates the effects of trait anxiety on subjective cognitive difficulties in daily life (Spalding et al., 2021). There are several studies focusing on different age populations and their subjective experiences, such as children and adolescents (Garcia-Lopez et al., 2015; Kashdan & Herbert, 2001; Peleg, 2012) and older adults (Gretarsdottir et al., 2004; Weiss Wiesel et al., 2014). However, no studies currently focus on the subjective experience and expression of social anxiety in adults born between 1981 and 1996 (currently 27 and 42) – also known as the millennial population (Dimock, 2019; Rauch, 2018;).

According to recent studies, they are currently one of the most active populations in the dating scene (Dixon, 2022). They use traditional dating methods (e.g., through peers, family, and social events) and modern methods, such as social media and dating apps (Dalessandro, 2021; Tashiro, 2014; Twenge et al., 2019). This might help gather richer participant data and bridge the gap between online and traditional dating. Additionally, it has been suggested that millennials value romantic relationships and intend to form and maintain long-term romantic relationships (Dalessandro, 2021; Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2019). Something that might make them ideal participants for my research as it will allow them to contribute to my research, which might potentially inform future

psychotherapeutic practices and, therefore, directly or indirectly help the millennial population form and maintain healthier interpersonal relationships.

2.6 Gaps in Literature

After reviewing the relevant literature, it is easy to identify several gaps in the current studies. Firstly, current literature focuses more on identifying correlations between social anxiety and romantic relationships using clinical and non-clinical populations (Cuming & Rapee, 2010; Porter & Chambless, 2014). Secondly, several previous experimental studies explored the interactions between individuals diagnosed with SAD and study confederates in lab settings studies (Plasencia et al., 2016; Vöncken & Dijk, 2013). Although this might increase the internal validity of the finding, it might decrease external validity as it does not sufficiently represent "real-world" interactions. Thirdly, previous studies failed to examine the role of gender and context in the expression of SAD. For example, several studies (Vöncken & Dijk, 2013; Vriends et al., 2017) have focused only on female participants with a diagnosis of SAD. Fourthly, there are several studies on social anxiety examining specific age groups, such as children and adolescents (Garcia-Lopez et al., 2015; Kashdan & Herbert, 2001; Peleg, 2012) and older adults (Gretarsdottir et al., 2004; Weiss Wiesel et al., 2014), but no study focusing on the most active age group in the dating scene (Dixon, 2022) currently. Recent studies underscore emerging needs and areas for exploration. For instance, Casey et al. (2023) highlight the importance of exploring social anxiety's impact on romantic relationships through qualitative methods, emphasising perceived authenticity and self-disclosure. Additionally, Turgeman et al. (2020) suggest that digital communication profoundly impacts social anxiety, highlighting the need to understand how technology affects social interactions. Although this study does not directly address dating, it invites further exploration into how digital interactions may reinforce avoidance behaviours and potentially affect dating

experiences. Finally, most of the studies have consistently taken a positivistic quantitative view to either create and validate scales to precisely measure the effect of social anxiety in a dating context (Dating Anxiety Scale) (Glickman & La Greca, 2004) or to finetune assessment tools for individuals with SAD and "dating anxiety" (Chorney, & Morris, 2008). Although findings from such studies are beneficial for all practitioner psychologists, they do not capture the lived subjective experience of individuals diagnosed with SAD. In addition, no previous study has examined the process occurring during initial interactions with millennial male individuals diagnosed with SAD using a qualitative approach to better understand their experiences, feelings, and thoughts. This is important as information gathered by such a process might potentially: a) enable counselling psychologists working with such population to: i.) better refine existing interventions through understanding their clients' experiences and perceptions ii.) conceptualise new individualised care plans based on their clients' unique needs, b) bring awareness to clinicians and trainees wishing to work with this population group, c) bring millennial males' expectations and needs to the centre of future practices and policies, enabling CoPs and community to offer better support in the future d) add to the existing literature on Social Anxiety and Interpersonal relationships.

To contribute to the literature and hopefully address some of these gaps, this study will take a qualitative stance to try and answer the question: "What is the dating experience of millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations?".

Therefore, the primary research questions are:

- How do millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations experience dating?
- What does being anxious in social situations mean for millennial males?

Consequently, the secondary question is:

- How does an understanding of participants' experiences help inform future practice in counselling psychology and psychological therapy?

4. Methodology

4.1 Overview

This chapter explains the methodological choices for the research, including the philosophical foundations (ontological and epistemological) and the theoretical basis for using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It details the research procedures, participant descriptions, data collection methods, and analysis approach. The chapter concludes with criteria for evaluating qualitative research quality and ethical considerations. Personal reflections on conducting an IPA study are included for transparency and highlighted in grey font.

4.2 Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology, as described by Ponterroto (2005), pertains to the nature of reality and is perceived as a continuum ranging from realism to relativism. Researchers aligning with realism perceive reality or truth as being objective, knowable, and independent of the individual (Cohen et al., 2018). In contrast, researchers ascribing to relativism position reality as subjective, suggesting that individuals construct their understanding of the world through personal experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Positioned within this continuum, critical realism offers an intermediary viewpoint. It acknowledges the existence of an objective reality, similar to realism, while also recognising, like relativism, that our perceptions and understandings of this reality are influenced by personal and social contexts (Bhaskar, 2013).

Epistemology studies how knowledge about reality is gained (Heaviside, 2017). Ponterroto (2005) posits that researchers align with distinct research paradigms. Filstead (1979, p. 34) defines a research paradigm as a "group of interrelated suppositions about the social world which offers a philosophical and conceptual scaffold for the systematic

exploration of that world." These presuppositions concern the nature of reality (ontology) and the acquisition of knowledge (epistemology) and, thus, can shape the methods and processes of a research study (methodology).

Acknowledging the researcher's worldview is crucial for a research study to yield meaningful results. This allows the reader to comprehend the reasons behind the chosen research approaches and provides insight into the researcher's particular conclusions (Heaviside, 2017). As a researcher engaged with CoP, striving to execute reflective and meaningful research, an endeavour will be made to articulate the researcher's own epistemological stance and its connection to the proposed study in the following section.

4.3 Constructivism and Critical Realism

Psychological research, particularly in the realm of social anxiety (SAD), has traditionally been guided by quantitative studies within positivist and post-positivist paradigms. These paradigms, rooted in philosophical realism, rely on hypothetico-deductive methods where hypotheses are tested, and results are presented as statistical data to represent functional relationships (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). This approach is founded on the belief in a single, observable, and objectively measurable reality. However, this focus, often prescribed to a medical model of illness, falls short of fully capturing the lived subjective experiences of individuals with SAD. This limitation has led to other paradigms, such as constructivist and critical-ideological perspectives, which view reality as co-constructed while emphasising the power relations involved (Willig, 2013).

In contrast to the positivist approach, qualitative research within these emergent paradigms aims to explore participants' experiences in specific contexts. This research adopts a constructivist epistemological stance, where individual comprehension of phenomena is shaped by life experiences, impacting the meanings individuals attach to

them (Creswell, 2009; Ponterroto, 2005). In constructivism, the world is perceived as an amalgamation of pre-existing beliefs and experiences (Ültanir, 2012), and the goal is to understand participants' unique, subjective experiences rather than generating universal laws (Cohen et al., 2018).

The fundamental beliefs guiding a researcher's work—epistemological, ontological, and axiological positions—constitute their paradigm (Morrow, 2007). Epistemologies are understood along a continuum reflecting the degree to which they view data as representing reality, from realism to relativism, and the role of the researcher, which ranges from an objective observer to a co-constructor of knowledge (Willig, 2013).

My philosophical position is grounded in critical realism, which bridges the gap between positivism and constructivism. Critical realism acknowledges an objective reality that is experienced subjectively and influenced by personal, social, and cultural contexts (Maxwell, 2012). This perspective recognises that while there is an objective reality, our understanding of it is mediated through subjective experiences and social constructs. Thus, critical realism differs from a purely relativist ontological position, which posits ‘multiple apprehendable and equally valid realities’ (Schwandt, 1994). In critical realism, the researcher and the participant co-construct meaning as they attempt to understand and interpret an objective reality. This interpretive endeavour aims to reveal the deeper mechanisms shaping social phenomena and individual experiences. Consequently, as a researcher, my role involves engaging in a reflective, relational process of interpreting meaning in social life at a methodological level.

In adopting a critical realist position within the study of millennial males' experiences of social anxiety and dating, I acknowledge that I tread a middle ground between two poles

of thought (Bhaskar, 2013). While I accept the existence of an objective reality, in this case, social anxiety (Archer et al., 2013), I also recognise that this reality is perceived and interpreted differently based on individual experiences and contexts (Sayer, 2000). This is where my approach borrows from constructivism: I rely on IPA (Smith et al., 2021) to delve deep into participants' subjective experiences, understanding that their interpretations are crucial in shaping our knowledge about social anxiety in dating contexts.

As a critical realist, I understand that social anxiety is not solely an objective disorder but rather a lived reality that varies in its impact and manifestation for different individuals (Bhaskar, 2013). This study aims to illuminate the complexities and nuances within this lived experience. As such, the singular objective reality is expanded upon and diversified through the lens of multiple subjective experiences (Maxwell, 2012).

It is essential to remember that my interpretation as a researcher is equally subject to personal biases and assumptions. My understanding of the participants' experiences is not a mere mirroring of their reality but a co-construction influenced by my preconceptions and perspectives (Finlay, 2002). This awareness calls for a commitment to reflexivity throughout the research process, a practice I hope will enhance the integrity and validity of this study (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

While I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of social anxiety in millennial males and inform future practice in counselling psychology and psychological therapy, my research does not seek to define or prescribe an absolute 'truth' (Lincoln et al., 2011). Instead, it offers a nuanced perspective based on a constructivist interpretation of a critical realist 'reality' (Maxwell, 2012). By acknowledging the potentially transformative power

of my research, I remain conscious of the need to avoid imposing my values or beliefs on the research process or the findings that emerge from it.

In sum, while my philosophical position may not neatly fit into established categories, it is perhaps this very flexibility and openness that can help to capture the intricate, multifaceted realities of social anxiety within the context of dating for millennial males.

4.4 Overview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

For the research to be effective and insightful, it is crucial that the selected methodology resonates with the research's ontological and epistemological viewpoints. In this case, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has been selected as the method of investigation. The subsequent section will provide an overview of IPA, its theoretical underpinnings, and how IPA aligns with the researcher's ontological and epistemological stances.

4.4.1 Introduction to IPA

IPA is a qualitative approach grounded in phenomenology (the study of lived experiences), hermeneutics (the interpretation of those experiences), and idiography (the detailed, in-depth investigation of these experiences). It is ideally suited for exploring individuals' unique, lived experiences in depth, especially how they interpret and make sense of these experiences within their broader social, cultural, and political contexts (Flood, 2010; Smith et al., 1996). This method aligns well with my goal of investigating the lived experiences of socially anxious millennial males within the dating landscape. IPA was selected as the most appropriate methodology for this research due to its emphasis on the in-depth examination of individual experiences.

Other methodologies, such as Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and Narrative Analysis (NA), were initially considered due to their ability to dissect the meanings and narratives constructed in societal discourses and personal narratives, respectively. FDA's focus on understanding the creation of meaning and social reality through discourses seemed promising for a study of social anxiety and dating experiences (Willig, 2013). However, I determined that it did not adequately allow exploring how millennial males assign meaning to their experiences within their broader environmental context.

On the other hand, NA appeared valuable for examining how millennials narrate their experiences, potentially shedding light on how they construct their life narratives. However, I found a disconnect between my critical realist perspective and the social constructionist approach inherent in NA. The conflation of 'construing' and 'constructing' the world, in my view, goes against the tenets of critical realism that clearly distinguish these two concepts (Bhaskar, 2013; Sayer, 2000). Additionally, as NA primarily explores the construction of narratives rather than the experiences themselves, I decided a phenomenological approach would provide a more focused examination of millennial males' unique experiences.

Historically, IPA emerged as a distinct qualitative methodology in the 1990s. Its primary focus on in-depth exploration of individuals' lived experiences, coupled with an interpretative process, positions it uniquely within psychological research (Davidsen, 2013; Smith et al., 1996). Given the aim of this study to offer an account of the experience of social anxiety and dating among millennial males, IPA provides the necessary depth and interpretive flexibility to explore these personal experiences (Smith et al., 2021; Wagstaff & Williams, 2014).

Aligning with my critical realist philosophical stance, the choice of IPA appears apt. This stance accepts the existence of an independent reality but simultaneously recognises that our access to this reality is mediated by our perceptions and interpretations (Maxwell, 2012). From an epistemological perspective, I appreciate the relativistic nature of my understanding – being contingent on time and place. Whilst I cannot completely access individuals' experiences, I can engage in a reflective and relational process of understanding others' worldviews - making IPA, particularly its hermeneutic component, a fitting approach for this research. The hermeneutic aspect of IPA allows me to delve into the interpretive process, helping to illuminate how individuals assign meanings to their experiences and navigate their realities, making it a particularly suitable choice for this study. Furthermore, the phenomenological aspect will guide the exploration of their lived experiences, and the idiographic nature will ensure an in-depth understanding of each participant's unique experience.

4.4.2 Theoretical Underpinnings of IPA

To further elucidate why IPA is the most suitable for the present study, I will delve deeper into the theoretical foundations of this approach. The philosophical principles underlying IPA are anchored in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography.

4.4.2.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenological philosophy can be understood as a dynamic construct moving philosophy from abstract speculation to direct contact with tangible, lived experiences (Moran, 2002). Even with the variation among phenomenologists, a core shared interest lies in the human experience in its entirety. This is of significant importance to psychologists, as it provides insights into better ways to delve into and comprehend lived experiences (Smith et al., 2021).

Husserl proposed a change from a natural to a phenomenological mindset, advocating for a description of how consciousness experiences the world. This proposition is frequently interpreted as a 'shedding off' of prejudices and assumptions to interact directly with the essence of a phenomenon, transcending the contextual and personal aspects (Langdridge, 2007). As expressed by Smith and colleagues, adopting a phenomenological stance necessitates reflexivity and a keen focus on each facet of the experience – shifting one's attention from the world's objects to the perception of these objects (Smith et al., 2021).

IPA is deeply tied to Heidegger's contributions to phenomenology and experiential research. Heidegger introduced the concept of a human being as a Dasein or 'Being-in-the-world' (Spinelli, 1989, p.108), an idea that harmonises with IPA's perspective of individuals being socio-historically embedded. Dasein replaces dualistic thinking (person/world, mind/body) with the notion that our relationship and engagement with the world are intrinsically intertwined. Consequently, we find ourselves in a pre-existing world replete with culture, history, and language (Heidegger, 1962/2004). Heidegger, therefore, argued that it is not feasible to 'bracket' or detach oneself from an inner world, given this embeddedness of humans in the world (Smith et al., 2021). This thought was echoed by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2004), who stated that "man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself". Furthermore, Sartre expanded on these concepts, suggesting that " things that are absent are as important as things that are present in defining who we are and how we see the world " (Smith et al., 2009, p.19).

Drawing from these influential figures, phenomenology has advanced to include understanding individuals as integral parts of a socio-historical world, encompassing culture, language, and time. Thus, a person's engagement with the world is both personal

and the result of their environmental interactions (Smith et al., 2021). Consistent with this, IPA research is dedicated to shedding light on participants' experiences of a phenomenon and their derived meanings from it rather than the structure of the phenomenon itself (Smith et al., 2021). This study's objective was to delve into the personal narratives of socially anxious males and uncover the meanings they assign to their experiences within dating landscapes.

4.4.2.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, IPA's second philosophical pillar, pertains to the study of interpretation. Renowned hermeneutic theorists like Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer were deeply invested in the mechanisms and motivations of interpretation and the significance of context in assigning meaning (Smith et al., 2021).

Schleiermacher differentiated between grammatical and psychological interpretation. The former alludes to the precise textual meaning, for example, the language used, while the latter focuses on the speaker's distinctiveness (Smith et al., 2021; Henriksson et al., 2012). Moreover, Schleiermacher envisioned interpretation as a comprehensive process akin to an art form that necessitates various skills, including intuition (Smith et al., 2021). He postulated that the interpretative analyst could bring a unique angle in tandem with the speaker's presentation (Smith et al., 2021).

Heidegger proposed that the 'manifestation' of a phenomenon comprises both apparent and concealed meanings. In essence, "phenomena always exhibit themselves in a way that simultaneously obscures themselves" (Moran, 2002, p. 229). Additionally, Heidegger held that the analyst introduces their 'pre-understanding' (i.e., presuppositions, biases, experiences) to the encounter and thus interprets new stimuli through the lens of previous

experience (Heidegger, 1926/2004). While the analyst should aim to recognise and exclude their 'pre-understandings' from their interpretations, Heidegger maintained that 'bracketing' can only be partially realised (Smith et al., 2021; Henriksson et al., 2012).

Gadamer built upon these concepts, emphasising the intricacy of the relationship between the interpreter and the interpreted. He posited that “an individual endeavouring to comprehend a text is perpetually projecting” (Gadamer, 1989/2004, p. 269). Gadamer additionally suggested that the analyst is more prone to uncover their biases once the interpretative process has begun. This signifies that the process is dynamic and multifaceted – interpretation can shape the researcher's preconceptions, influencing their interpretation (Smith et al., 2021). In essence, the researcher participates in a dialogue between the old (preconceptions) and the new (the text), making it crucial “to be conscious of one's own biases, so the text can present itself and assert its truth against one's own preconceptions” (Smith, 1996, p. 269).

The concept of the hermeneutic circle, which discusses the relationship between the parts and the whole, is another crucial point. Specifically, “to comprehend any given part, one refers to the whole; to understand the whole, one refers to the parts” (Smith et al., 2021, p.22). This principle is particularly relevant within IPA, as it aids in the multilevel analysis of data and encourages researchers to visualise analysis as a dynamic, non-linear procedure (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). In this study, hermeneutic principles will be employed to interpret the unique narratives of socially anxious millennial males in dating scenarios, focusing on understanding the whole through its constituent parts.

4.4.2.3 Idiography

Most psychological research is 'nomothetic', aiming to create universal principles regarding human behaviour. The third theoretical foundation of IPA is idiography, which prioritises specificity. IPA is fundamentally idiographic, committed to the detailed analysis of the phenomenon under investigation (Eatough & Smith, 2006). This approach entails treating each case with great care, offering detailed and nuanced analysis, and valuing each case on its merits before moving to cross-case analysis to identify convergence and divergence between cases (Smith et al., 2021). Researchers are required to follow this idiographic approach throughout the analytic process, ensuring a thorough examination of the similarities and differences in participants' experiences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). This method allows for a deeper understanding of individual cases before synthesising broader patterns, aligning with the commitment to understanding personal experiences in context (Finlay, 2011; Giorgi, 2010).

In the context of IPA research, this usually implies a smaller sample size and a meticulous, in-depth analysis of specific phenomena, viewed through the lens of the participants and grounded in a particular context (Smith et al., 2021). As a result, a limited number of millennial males were required to address the research questions in an idiographic fashion, enabling a comprehensive and methodical analysis of each interview.

4.5 Theoretical underpinnings of IPA within this research

The phenomenological roots of IPA, centred on exploring the lived experiences of individuals, provide a firm foundation for this research. Exploring the intimate dating experiences of millennial males who identify as socially anxious undoubtedly aligns with phenomenological enquiry, emphasising the importance of subjective perception and

understanding. However, while phenomenology is key, the hermeneutic influence on IPA is the primary theoretical driving force behind this research.

Hermeneutics, with its emphasis on interpretation, offers a robust framework to understand and interpret the dating experiences of socially anxious millennial males. I will draw upon the principles laid out by hermeneutic theorists like Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer to interpret the unique narratives of the participants, focusing on the explicit language used to describe their experiences (grammatical interpretation) and the unique perspectives and emotions attached to these experiences (psychological interpretation).

This interpretive process will be influenced by my own 'fore-conceptions', as highlighted by Heidegger, and I will strive to identify and limit these in interpreting participants' accounts. As Gadamer (1989/2004) posits, I understand that interpretation is a dynamic and multifaceted process and that my preconceptions can both shape and be reshaped by the interpretive process. I aim to engage in an iterative dialogue between my preconceptions and the participants' narratives.

Finally, I will adopt the hermeneutic circle's approach to understanding the whole through its parts and vice versa, as this helps to visualise analysis as a dynamic, non-linear procedure (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). In this manner, hermeneutics will facilitate a deeper understanding of the dating experiences of socially anxious millennial males.

As a researcher focusing on the often-overlooked experiences of socially anxious millennial males in the dating scene, I align with the principles of IPA in giving a voice

to the understudied and allowing them to share their experiences in their own manner and words (Smith et al., 2021).

Moreover, conducting an IPA adheres to my professional and ethical values. It resonates with my dilemma of recognising an objective reality while appreciating the complexity of individual interpretations (Maxwell, 2012). I believe this approach makes my research goal more achievable and reflects the moral values underpinning my professional practice (Ponterotto, 2010; Yardley, 2015).

By facilitating conditions created through the co-membership of my participants in the research process, I am enhancing their empowerment. Despite adopting a critical realist stance, I understand the relative nature of individual experiences (Fletcher, 2017). This reflexivity aligns with my effort to ensure the accurate representation of the experiences of socially anxious millennial males within the dating landscape (Finlay, 2002).

4.6 Critique of IPA

While Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers significant insights into the lived experiences of individuals, it is not without critique. Willig (2013) highlights some of these conceptual and practical concerns, which can be particularly relevant to the current research on the lived experiences of socially anxious millennial males in dating scenarios.

Firstly, IPA heavily depends on language to express lived experiences, for example, through interviews or diary entries. This reliance presumes that language can fully encapsulate an individual's experience, thus putting a premium on the "representational validity of language" (Willig, 2013, p.94). In other words, the language an individual uses

to recount their experience shapes the interpretation of that experience. Therefore, one might argue that an interview transcript reveals more about how the experience is narrated than the experience itself (Willig, 2013). In response to this critique, it is suggested that IPA researchers pose detailed probing questions to participants to capture their experiences accurately (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). This requires remaining open-minded and bracketing preconceptions during interviews. Smith et al. (2021) acknowledge that meaning-making is intertwined with language, including narratives, discourse, and metaphors, thus recognising the integral role of language in IPA.

Secondly, Willig (2013) raises doubts about the quality and suitability of participants' accounts of their experiences. IPA's goal is to delve into the experiences and meanings of a phenomenon rather than individuals' opinions about it. The ability of participants to convey their experiences accurately and whether their accounts provide rich enough data for a phenomenological analysis come into question (Willig, 2013). However, in this study, it is assumed that as participants navigate the millennial dating scene - often a communicatively complex and nuanced environment - they would have developed some capacity to articulate their experiences. Furthermore, participants' narrative skills may be bolstered by the probing and open-ended nature of the interview questions posed. As Smith et al. (2021) highlighted, the researcher also plays a crucial role in interpreting participants' accounts to understand the phenomenon under study. This critique regarding participants' communication skills has been noted by others as well (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Brocki & Wearden, 2006), but it is argued that effective probing and a supportive interview environment can mitigate this issue.

Finally, Willig (2013) notes that phenomenological research describes participants' lived experiences but does not seek to explain them. Limiting the focus to descriptions of

experiences without considering their origins or causes may restrict our understanding of the phenomenon. Also, because phenomenological research concentrates on the individual's perception of the world, it is argued that it cannot make claims about the world itself. In response to this critique, Smith et al. (2021) argue that the interpretative aspect of IPA, rooted in the hermeneutic circle, allows researchers to delve into an experience in greater detail, including potential causes. This implies that deeper insights into the experiences of socially anxious millennial males navigating the dating scene can be gleaned through a careful, idiographic interpretation of each participant's account. This view is supported by Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006), who emphasise that while IPA focuses on individual experiences, it can still provide insights into the broader social and cultural contexts influencing those experiences.

In summary, while IPA has limitations, including a heavy reliance on language, potential issues with the richness of participants' accounts, and a focus on description over explanation, the methodology remains a powerful tool for exploring lived experiences. Researchers are encouraged to address these critiques through detailed and probing interviews, careful interpretation, and consideration of broader contexts (Smith et al., 2021; Finlay, 2011). Though it is important to remember that IPA is fundamentally a subjective research approach, two researchers working with the same data may come up with different interpretations (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011).

4.7 Participants

4.7.1 Purposive Sampling and Homogeneity

In line with the idiographic approach of IPA, this study centres on the detailed exploration of specific phenomena, demanding the deployment of small, purposively chosen and

homogeneously selected samples (Smith et al., 2021). Therefore, a purposive sampling approach was selected for this research, aligning well with IPA's nature, the research questions, and the philosophical standpoints adopted. Smith et al. (2009, p.51) indicated that homogeneity, in combination with a "rich, transparent and contextualised analysis" of participants' experiences, fosters the potential for the theoretical transferability of findings.

In this context, homogeneity was defined according to particular demographic and experiential factors. These included participants being millennial males (born between 1981 and 1996), self-identifying as socially anxious, and having engaged in dating within the past three months. A target of eight participants was established, providing a buffer for possible dropouts during or after the interview process. This approach follows Landridge's (2007) recommendation that a sample size of six is optimal for an IPA study. Despite the larger study population—socially anxious millennial males—the chosen demographic and experiential factors ensured a degree of homogeneity necessary for an IPA study (Smith et al., 2021).

4.7.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The participant selection criteria for this study encompassed several specific elements to ensure the richness and relevancy of the collected data. Firstly, participants were required to be millennial males fluent in English and self-identifying as socially anxious. Notably, a formal diagnosis of SAD was not necessary, reflecting the subjective, experiential focus of the study. Participants needed to be experiencing mild to moderate symptoms of social anxiety (self-reported) and have had at least one dating experience in the past three months. This recent dating experience was considered vital to enable vivid recall of events, contributing to the richness of data. The exclusion criteria for this study included

individuals currently on any psychotropic medication or undergoing psychological therapy for SAD, which might impact their behaviour, thoughts, or feelings.

Regarding the recruitment process, a multi-faceted approach was planned, encompassing on-campus and online University announcement boards, personal social media accounts, and a snowballing technique for recruiting participants via networking with friends, colleagues, or peers (see Appendix A for study advertisement), with participants explicitly encouraged to share this research with their social circles. These strategies were deemed most effective considering the demographic and technological affinity of the participant pool. A pilot interview was conducted, and the data collected were used exclusively to identify potential issues in the interview process. As per standard practice in qualitative research (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017), these data were not included in the final analysis.

4.7.3 Introduction to participants

The data presented below encompasses information from a total of six male participants who were interviewed for this study. This number adheres to the recommendations by Smith et al. (2021), suggesting that the ideal participant count for doctoral research lies between four and ten individuals. Each participant was enlisted using the snowballing recruitment technique. Participants were given a pseudonym at the interview to protect their anonymity.

1. **Nick:** A 34-year-old white homosexual male from Spain, residing in Greater London for over nine years. Engaged in psychotherapy four years prior to this study for anxiety management.

2. **Paul:** A 32-year-old white bisexual male from France, living in Greater London for over seven years. Received CBT two years before this study to manage his anxiety.
3. **John:** A 36-year-old white homosexual male from Italy, residing in Greater London for over six years. Has not engaged in any form of therapy prior to this study.
4. **James:** A 39-year-old white homosexual male from Italy, living in Greater London for over four years. Has not previously received any form of therapy.
5. **Michael:** A 30-year-old white homosexual male from Spain, residing in Greater London for over eight years. Engaged in psychotherapy one year ago for social anxiety.
6. **William:** A 29-year-old white heterosexual male from Spain, living in Greater London for over three years. Has not previously engaged in any form of therapy.

Reflecting on this group of participants, a notable commonality emerges: all are individuals living away from their countries of origin, navigating life in Greater London as foreigners. This shared context of being non-native residents in a diverse and dynamic city like London adds a unique dimension to their experiences, potentially intersecting with and influencing their perceptions and experiences of social anxiety. As a researcher who is also a foreigner living in London, this shared aspect resonates deeply with me and brings an additional layer of understanding and empathy to my interpretation of their narratives.

The composition of the participant group reveals significant patterns, making me reflect on various layers of intricacies woven into the tapestry of social anxiety, masculinity stereotypes, and cultural contexts. The overrepresentation of homosexual men in this

sample is striking. This raises questions: Are homosexual men more willing to talk about their experiences with social anxiety due to the intersecting challenges they face concerning sexuality and societal expectations? Could it be that the broader societal acceptance of vulnerability among the homosexual community created a safer space for these men to share?

The snowballing recruitment method, where participants were encouraged to share this research with their social circles, might have contributed to the predominantly homosexual sample. This method inherently risks creating homogeneity within the sample, as participants are likely to refer individuals with similar backgrounds or characteristics, including sexual orientation.

Conversely, the noticeable underrepresentation of heterosexual men made me contemplate multiple possibilities. The silence of heterosexual men speaks volumes. Could their absence be a testament to the deeply entrenched masculine ideals they grapple with, which may have dissuaded them from participating? Perhaps discussing vulnerabilities, especially with another male researcher, might challenge the conventional notions of masculinity. This beckons to the potential impacts of male researcher-male participant dynamics, a dance of unspoken assumptions, expectations, and possible trepidations.

Additionally, with most participants being from Greater London, the urban setting becomes an essential backdrop to these narratives. Greater London, a melting pot of cultures and lifestyles and a hub of rapid technological advances could influence their social anxiety experiences. The bustling nature of the city juxtaposed with feelings of

isolation or anxiety evokes thoughts about how urban environments shape the inner emotional landscapes of individuals.

These reflexive observations will guide me as I navigate the rich insights from the data. They will act as touchstones, ensuring I remain attuned to the silent undertones, the conspicuous absences, and the intersections of identity that shape each participant's narrative.

4.8 Data Collection

4.8.1 Semi-structured interviews

To elicit 'rich data', this study adopted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, a method preferred by IPA researchers. The primary goal of this approach is to invite participants to share their stories in an open, reflective, and expansive manner while maintaining flexibility and adaptability (Smith et al., 2009; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017).

The one-on-one format is invaluable in this context, as it allows the development of a rapport between the researcher and the participant, creating an atmosphere conducive to sharing personal accounts, thoughts, and emotions (Smith et al., 2021). This individual attention fosters nuanced insights into the participants' lived experiences.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews offers a delicate balance between predetermined questions and spontaneous conversations (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). As Smith et al. (2021) describe, the researcher and participant engage in a dialogue where initial questions can be altered in response to the participant's feedback. This allows the researcher to delve into new intriguing areas that emerge during the conversation.

4.8.2 Developing an Interview Schedule

Smith et al. (2021, p.54) describe interviews as "a conversation with a purpose", emphasising the importance of allowing participants to narrate their stories in their own words. While the participants primarily lead the interview, the researcher encourages further exploration of their experiences.

Creating an interview schedule in advance is essential, as it helps the researcher to anticipate potential challenges, such as phrasing complex questions or introducing sensitive topics. This also provides a chance to reflect on the expectations regarding the interview's scope (Smith et al., 2021). The interview schedule should include open, non-leading questions, bracketing the researcher's preconceptions about the participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2021). (see Appendix B).

Through these semi-structured interviews, the study aims to capture the participants' subjective experiences dating with mild to moderate social anxiety, addressing the research objectives effectively. The transcriptions of these interviews form the primary data for analysis, offering a rich and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Following Smith et al.'s (2021) guidance, I crafted an interview schedule to allow participants to explore their dating experiences within the context of social anxiety symptoms. Initially, I considered including a question about sexual orientation (i.e., "Do you think your sexual orientation might affect the way you feel?") to explore whether it might intersect with their experiences of anxiety or perceptions of masculinity. However, upon reflection, I realised this question might unintentionally steer the conversation, potentially pressuring participants to disclose their sexual orientation or attribute undue

significance to it, thus diverging from the interview's core focus. Instead, I opted to give participants the autonomy to decide whether they wished to bring this factor into the discussion, empowering them to determine the relevance of their sexual orientation to their experiences.

In my preliminary design of the interview structure, I adhered to the 'funnelling' technique suggested by Smith et al. (2021). I started with a question about the current role of anxiety in the participants' lives to lay the groundwork for the subsequent questions. However, upon completing the first interview, it became clear that I had presumed the participants would precisely understand anxiety and its manifestation in their lives.

Furthermore, I acknowledged that the process of engaging in an interview, of meeting and conversing with someone for the first time, is in itself a core challenge for individuals with social anxiety. By asking them to delve into their experiences of anxiety from the outset, I may have inadvertently exacerbated this challenge, losing sight of the fact that feeling at ease during interpersonal interactions is precisely what they struggle with. Reflecting on these insights, I restructured my approach and initiated the interview with a more general question about their thoughts on the study and their motivations for participation. This adjustment allowed the participants to be eased into the interview, fostering a stronger rapport before we delved into discussions around their experiences of dating and social anxiety. This reflexivity improved the richness of the collected data and better aligned with my commitment to ensuring a respectful, participant-led research process. (Smith et al., 2021)

4.8.3 Conducting interviews

The researcher primarily relied on networking and social media channels to publicise the study. Interested male participants reached out to the researcher directly via email. Following this initial contact, the researcher provided the participant information sheet and the informed consent form (refer to Appendix C).

At this stage, the researcher proposed the possibility of a preliminary telephone conversation before scheduling the online interview. This allowed participants to pose any questions and understand the voluntary aspect of their participation. Thereafter, a Microsoft Teams link for the interview was dispatched in a subsequent email.

The interviews were designed to span approximately one hour each. The researcher devoted initial time at the onset of each interview to familiarise participants with the interview's objectives. Participants were reassured that there were no right or wrong responses and that the researcher was primarily interested in their narratives and perspectives.

The researcher prioritised transparency about the interview process to foster a rapport with the participants and build momentum while also gaining insight into the participants' expectations of the process. After each interview, the researcher invited participants to reflect upon the conversation, eliciting feedback on whether any significant points had been overlooked or left unasked.

As suggested by Smith et al. (2021), during an interview process, the researcher should employ the interview schedule flexibly without adherence to a rigid script. Instead, the researcher should be prepared to navigate the uncertainty of the flow of an organic

conversation, abstaining from making premature interpretations during the interview. As a novice in qualitative research, I confronted my own anxiety during the initial interview, which, in turn, impacted the flexibility of my use of the interview schedule.

I became overly concerned with the sequence of the questions rather than focusing on active listening and spontaneous probing. I noticed that my anxiety tended to fill in the pauses, limiting the participant's time for reflection and response. Reflecting on my experience of the first interview, I felt better equipped to approach the second interview with a different mindset; I allowed myself to delve deeper into the unknown and prompted my participant for more in-depth elaboration, especially when stumbling upon a 'gem' (e.g., a metaphor, or an emotionally charged topic).

This self-awareness and my willingness to reflect and adapt my approach improved the subsequent interviews. It helped me create a safer, more comfortable space for participants, allowing them to take their time and share their experiences more authentically. This process reinforced the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, as it allows for personal growth and enhances the quality and depth of the data collected.

4.9 Data Interpretation

The data underwent an analysis process following the stages established by Smith et al. (2021). The IPA analysis process is often called an "iterative and inductive cycle" (Smith et al., 2021, p. 75). Consequently, the following steps do not provide a rigid formula but a set of guidelines and principles that the researcher applied flexibly. These include:

1. Single case reading and re-reading
2. Exploratory noting
3. Developing experiential statements

4. Identifying links across experiential statements
5. Establishing Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)
6. Repeating steps 1-5 for all cases
7. Identifying Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

Step 1: Single case reading and re-reading

The initial stage of IPA analysis calls for deep immersion in the data. This stage prioritises the interviewee's perspective and compels the researcher to process the data thoroughly. The researcher first read the transcript of each interview with the six millennial males, cross-referencing it with the audio recording to ensure its accuracy and completeness. Subsequent repetitions of reading the transcript and listening to the recording allowed the researcher to be deeply immersed in the data, assess rapport, identify rich personal narratives, and consider preconceptions. The researcher's reflections and personal impressions from the interviews, particularly regarding participants' experiences of social anxiety in dating contexts, were recorded in a journal throughout this process.

Step 2: Exploratory noting

As Smith et al. (2021) described, this stage concentrates on the semantic content and the language used to articulate the experience. Exploratory noting ensured a more profound familiarity with the transcript and helped identify how participants understand social anxiety in modern dating (Smith et al., 2021). The researcher annotated the transcript, creating a commentary that included descriptive notes (content), linguistic notes (specific language use, metaphors, pauses, laughter), and conceptual notes (posing questions, analysing meaning). This phase offers a fluid engagement with the text, nudging the analysis towards greater interpretive depth for each case, particularly focusing on how

societal norms, personal expectations, and digital interactions influenced their dating experiences.

Step 3: Develop experiential statements

At this stage, the researcher seeks to distil and synthesise preliminary notes into interpretative statements. The process aimed to maintain the complexity of the participants' experiences with social anxiety while reducing the volume of detail. Here, the researcher segmented the transcript, reorganising the data and preserving the overall narrative structure. This iterative process embodied the hermeneutic circle concept where "the part is interpreted in relation to the whole; the whole is interpreted in relation to the part" (Smith et al., 2021, p.87). Hence, forming interpretative statements is a synergistic process, reflecting both participants' expressions and the researcher's interpretations of their social anxiety within the dating context (see Appendix D for an example of stages 2 and 3).

Step 4: Identifying links across experiential statements

At this stage, the researcher identified connections among the interpretative statements from stage 3 (Smith et al., 2021). This procedure involved isolating each statement and rearranging them on a large surface for an overarching view, focusing on how various aspects of social anxiety manifested in dating experiences. This broad perspective fostered flexibility in forming clusters of interpretative statements related to themes such as societal and cultural baggage, the anxious self in dating, and the impact of technology on dating experiences (Smith et al., 2021, p.91) (see Appendix E).

Step 5: Establishing Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Each cluster from Step 4 received a descriptive title, forming the basis for a Personal Experiential Theme (PET). PETs comprised sub-themes, and each sub-theme consisted of interpretative statements, each traceable back to participants' accounts of social anxiety in dating contexts. This data reorganisation is presented in a table (see Appendix E for an example).

Step 6: Repeating Steps 1-5 for Each Case

This stage involved replicating steps 1-5 for all participants. As Smith et al. (2021) highlight, each case should be considered independently to maintain the idiographic nature of IPA, avoiding the repetition of similar concepts. Although the analysis of subsequent transcripts is informed by the findings from previous ones (i.e., hermeneutic circle), the researcher aimed to remain receptive to novel analytic patterns. This meant paying attention to each participant's unique experiences and narratives about social anxiety in dating, ensuring that common and divergent themes were appropriately identified.

Step 7: Identifying Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

During this cross-case analysis phase, the researcher looked for commonalities among the PETs from previous steps to derive Group Experiential Themes (GETs). The researcher juxtaposed PET tables for each participant to identify common and unique aspects of their experiences with social anxiety in dating (Appendix E). The goal was not to create a 'group norm' but to highlight common and unique aspects of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2021).

4.10 Quality within IPA research

In keeping with my epistemological position of critical realism, I aligned my research with the principles of IPA by applying Yardley's (2000) four principles for conducting reliable qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance.

Sensitivity to context was mainly addressed through the comprehensive literature review, providing an understanding of existing research and sociohistorical perspectives on individuals living with social anxiety and how it affects their dating experiences. The critical realist approach recognises that our interpretations are informed by the broader context (Smith et al., 2021). Emphasising the idiographic nature of IPA, I strove to honour the uniqueness of each participant and their narratives, achieved through reflexivity and transparency. For instance, I kept a research diary to examine how my selfhood (e.g., age, gender, experiences) and the recruitment and interview processes could have influenced the participants' narratives.

Utilising my existing counselling skills (e.g., active listening, empathy, rapport building), I collected rich experiential data while attempting to reduce the power imbalance between the interviewer and the interviewee, clarifying that the objective of the interview was to give them a platform to share their experiences. However, I remained aware of the power dynamics throughout the analysis process, acknowledging that power shifts between the interviewer and interviewee are inherent and achieving a complete power equilibrium is not feasible (Anyan, 2013; Edwards & Holland, 2013).

As Yardley (2000) identifies, commitment and rigour involve sustained engagement with the topic, developing competence and skills in the methodologies used, and immersing in

the relevant data. Accordingly, I followed Smith et al.'s (2021) steps for conducting IPA and adhered to Nizza, Farr, and Smith's (2021) quality guidelines for robust IPA research. These guidelines include the following:

- Crafting an engaging, evolving narrative (i.e., findings should narrate a coherent story).
- Developing a solid experiential and/or existential account (i.e., in-depth focus on experiential/existential meaning of participant's accounts).
- In-depth analytical reading of participants' words (i.e., analysis should involve thorough interpretation of quotes).
- Accounting for convergence and divergence (i.e., patterns of similarity and individuality should be contemplated).

These four qualities also foster transparency and coherence within the research process. Additionally, I attended an online workshop by Jonathan Smith on February 10, 2023, which provided practical exercises on analysing raw data and reinforced Smith et al.'s (2021) analysis steps.

Regarding impact and importance, Yardley (2000) suggests that a research's true significance and effect must be evaluated based on its alignment with the aims of the analysis, its intended uses, and the relevance of its outcomes to the targeted audience. This research aims to generate fresh insights into the experiences of dating within the context of social anxiety relevant to individuals living with social anxiety and professionals who support them. Although the findings are not generalisable (i.e., they cannot be replicated), qualitative research offers valuable insights that can be applied to similar contexts (Yardley, 2015). Hence, this research contributes novelty as it explores what dating signifies for individuals experiencing social anxiety.

4.11 Ethical considerations

This study strictly adheres to the guidelines of ethical research specified by the University of East London's Code of Practice for Research Ethics (2015) and The British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (2014), which protect individuals' rights and outline the responsibilities of psychologists and those conducting research under UEL's supervision.

Following these guidelines, the study has been designed to maximise benefit and minimise harm, reflecting the researcher's scientific integrity and social responsibility (BPS, 2021). The University of East London's ethics committee approved the study on 7 October 2022 (see Appendix F), confirming adherence to these principles.

The recruitment process was an initial step in maximising benefits. Interested male participants contacted the researcher via email following the study's publicity through networking and social media channels. The researcher provided each participant with an information sheet and the informed consent form (Appendix C), allowing them to make an informed decision about their participation. A preliminary telephone conversation was also proposed, further empowering participants to ask questions and understand the voluntary nature of their involvement.

To minimise harm, particularly for individuals experiencing anxiety in social situations, the interviews were conducted online, a method that might be perceived as less threatening than real-life interactions (Yen et al., 2012). Participants were also assured of their autonomy to withdraw at any point during the study if they felt discomfort or significant distress and were recommended to seek advice from their GP or local mental health service providers such as The Samaritans or Mind.

In line with the commitment to social responsibility (BPS, 2021), all identifying information was anonymised during transcription, and pseudonyms replaced participants' names. All data (recorded interviews, transcripts, reflective notes) were securely stored in the UEL OneDrive and accessed solely through the researcher's password-protected laptop. In this way, the study prioritises confidentiality and anonymity, key components of the ethical guidelines.

Participants were provided with a debriefing form (Appendix G) upon completion of the interview, contributing to beneficial outcomes. They were also informed about their right to request the removal of their data within two weeks post-interview, highlighting the study's respect for continued participant autonomy.

The common good is served by preserving participants' data for five years following the completion of the study, as indicated by the Code of Human Research Ethics of the British Psychological Society (2014). Furthermore, transparency is promoted by making the final paper publicly available in the UEL Research Repository, allowing participants and others to understand the study's outcomes. Through this commitment to integrity, responsibility, and the common good, the study aligns with the ethical guidelines outlined by the BPS (2021).

4.12 Conclusion

This qualitative study employs a critical realist epistemology, acknowledging subjective experiences and objective realities. Reflexivity and transparency have been integral throughout the research process. Following Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) guidelines, purposive homogeneous sampling identified men meeting the inclusion criteria for online semi-structured interviews. As previously detailed,

transcript analysis adhered to Smith et al.'s (2021) guidelines. The next chapter will present the findings from this analysis.

5. Analysis

5.1 Overview

This chapter presents the results of an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of semi-structured interviews with six male participants who reported experiencing anxiety in social situations. Four Group Experiential Themes and ten subthemes were identified.

5.2 Introduction to the Themes

The four Group Experiential Themes, represented in Figure 1, encapsulate the nuanced experiences of participants grappling with anxiety in social contexts, particularly within the dating domain. The first theme dissects the pervasive influence of societal and cultural norms on the participants' self-concept, highlighting the silent yet profound struggles against entrenched notions of masculinity. Progressing to the second theme, we delve into the anxious self's perception within romantic frameworks, shedding light on participants' internal dialogues and their adaptive strategies, including the increasingly pivotal role of online dating. The third theme offers a dynamic exploration of dating interactions, scrutinising the confluence of personal, relational, and circumstantial elements that coalesce to shape the live dating experience. Culminating in the fourth theme, the focus shifts to post-date introspection, where transient emotional responses and long-term personal revelations converge, influencing self-perception and the evolution of relational paradigms. Together, these themes construct a comprehensive narrative that traverses the continuum from societal imprints to the intimate evolution of self in the aftermath of dating.

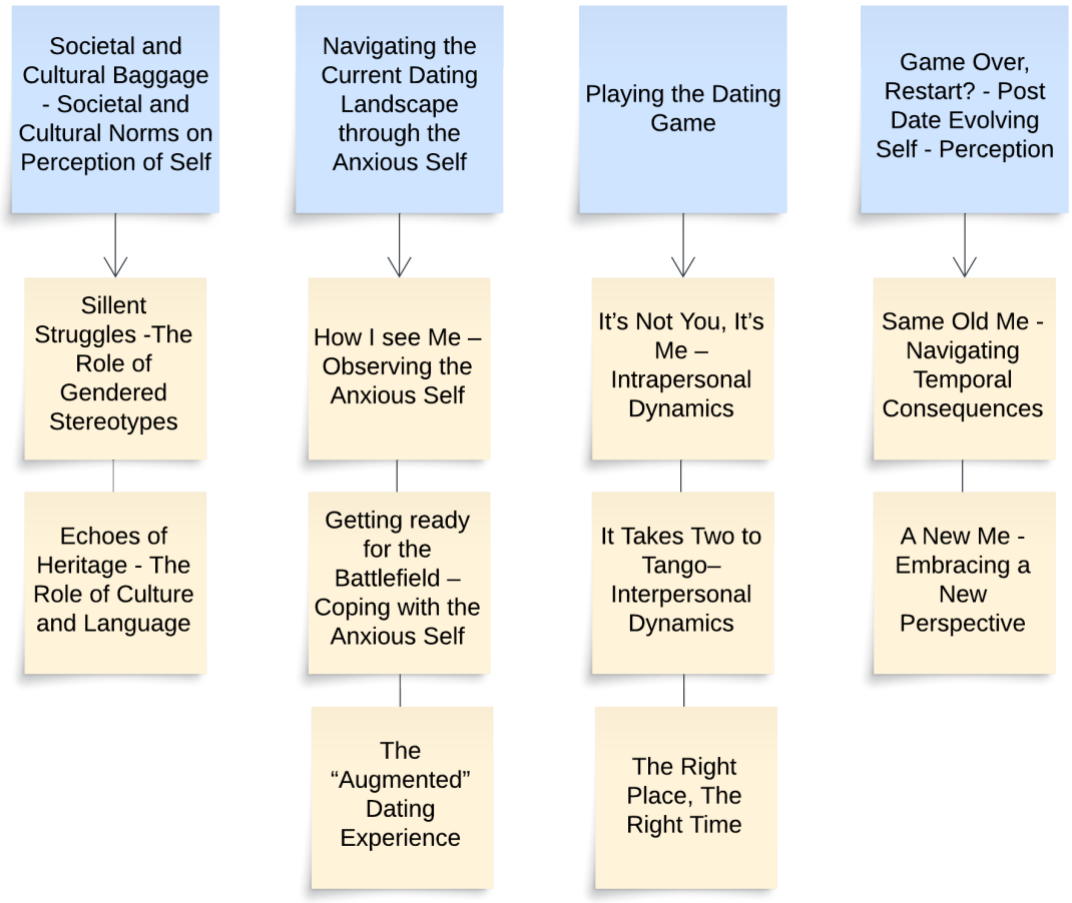

Figure 1

5.3 Theme 1: Societal and Cultural Baggage - Societal and Cultural Norms on Perception of Self

In exploring men's emotional journeys, this subtheme delves into the heart of how deeply embedded societal constructs influence personal experiences. This examination seeks to unravel the intricate ways the threads of gender expectations and cultural constructs are interwoven into the fabric of male identity. As we navigate this terrain, we will uncover the silent battles fought by individuals against the rigid norms of masculinity that dictate emotional expression and the complex interplay with language and cultural nuance that further shape their lived realities.

5.3.1 Silent Struggles - The Role of Gendered Stereotypes

Within this study, the discourse surrounding gendered stereotypes appears to significantly inform the participants' narratives, suggesting that these stereotypes considerably influence their emotional expressivity and self-concept. The accounts from William, James, Michael, and Paul seemingly reflect an internal conflict that arises from the juxtaposition of societal expectations against their personal experiences of vulnerability and anxiety.

William's account evokes a picture of a societal landscape where the 'performance' of masculinity is intricately tied to romantic conquests and the concealment of any emotional turmoil associated with romantic endeavours. His experiences may illuminate a cultural script that equates masculinity with emotional stoicism, where discussions about anxiety or insecurity are perceived as aberrations from the norm, thus potentially exacerbating his internal struggle with such feelings. This suggests a societal paradox where men are recognised for their assertiveness in the romantic domain yet are expected to quietly navigate their emotional vulnerabilities, an expectation that can lead to a dissonance between their public and private selves.

> …because people don't talk much about it, especially the bad parts of it. Like, the frustration, or the anxiety. Especially in men, only talk about the good things, when you get dates and you hang out with a girl, or you-- You know, but the bad parts, when you get anxious, you don't get enough dates, you feel insecure, it's not really talked about. (William, Lines 13-15)

James's narrative suggests an underlying societal narrative that positions men in a hierarchy of emotional expression, where the display of uncertainty or emotional need

could be viewed as a departure from the socially constructed ideal of the ‘alpha male.’ This societal posture could contribute to a nuanced emotional landscape where James may feel the need to perform a certain level of emotional detachment, potentially leading to a deep-seated sense of isolation from his own emotional realities and from those around him.

> …there's still this thing that the man has to be, uh, not unemotional but not sure when he is struggling. So, uh, you're expected to be sort of the alpha of the room…. So, yes, that's definitely-- it's not something expected from women in any contest 'cause if they are like, "Oh, I don't feel well," or something, then it's always like, "Okay, yes, don't worry, da, da, da." Um, but if it's a man, then it's something that people still don't expect to happen. (James, Lines 84-92)

The reflections offered by Michael point to a potentially systemic issue within societal constructs that may fail to equip men with the tools necessary for emotional articulation and management. This lack of an emotional ‘toolbox’ could contribute to a form of emotional underdevelopment, where societal norms do not support the growth of emotional literacy and resilience Michael, potentially leaving him to navigate emotional challenges with limited resources.

> So women are more allowed or more open about talking about their feelings and they might have better tools to deal with it because that is something that they grew up with already. Um, whereas to men, we've been always told to suppress our feelings and we had, literally, zero tools to deal with these kind of feelings when growing up. And if we picked up any tools during the ways because we

> either went to therapy or read about it or we have more open, we're surrounded by more open, uh minded people, you know? (Michael, Lines 185-192)

James's personal journey exemplifies the possibility of individual resistance against the restrictive societal moulds of masculinity that discourage emotional openness. His narrative suggests a movement towards a more open communication style, an evolution that may represent a broader potential for change in the cultural understanding of masculinity towards a more emotionally inclusive norm.

> I think on me, yes. I'm not the most communicative person, so of course, in the years in the relationships I had not-- I mean with people in general, not on the-- mental ones. But I started like trying to, um, express when something was wrong instead of closing or saying, you know, just raise your hand and say this I don't like, or this doesn't make me feel good, or I don't like that you behave like that, and stuff like that. While before it would be more, uh, ""Well, this is not for me, I'm just gonna change." (James, Lines 101-107)

William's expression of anxiety in the context of dating could illustrate the intricacies of gender roles within the dynamic of dating, where the unstated expectation for him, as the man, to take the initiative in romantic interactions can lead to a heightened sense of responsibility and performance anxiety. This suggests that his experience of dating may be entangled with societal expectations, potentially transforming what could be a personal and intimate interaction into a performative act laden with cultural mandates.

> Yeah, because I have, in-- Because, as I mentioned, I have the pressure of being the one to ask the other person out. So it's-- So that the-- To the date, to be good

> is kind of my thing. The place, you know, it's not too crowded. The weather is nice, the idea was good, we can walk on the park, but maybe something happens. It's like-- It's kind of my responsibility that the date goes well. (William, Lines 675-680)

Paul's narrative provides a thought-provoking challenge to conventional masculinity by validating the emotional experiences of men in defiance of societal disapproval. His viewpoint, particularly from the perspective of a gay man, suggests that while emotional suppression is commonly imposed upon men, there are cultural spaces where this norm is actively resisted. In Paul's experience, the gay community often rejects the notion that expressing emotion is unmasculine, creating a subculture that permits a broader range of emotional expression. He contrasts his own social experiences with those of heterosexual men, whom he perceives as being pressured to "bottle up" to conform to masculine ideals of stoicism and strength. Paul's observation that gay men casually use feminised terms for each other might underscore a deliberate departure from viewing femininity or emotional vulnerability as weaknesses. This behaviour may reflect an intentional dismantling of the stigma around emotional expression and a redefinition of strength that is inclusive of vulnerability.

> With that being said, I have to mention in my life that I've carved for myself in London, 98% of my friends, male friends are LGBT. And I do think that-that makes a difference because there's still-- There's some sort of stigma on straight men to kind of bottled up because then they have to-- it's more masculine and then you need to provide, they need to be strong all the time. So I think-- I would think that even still today, people of my age who are very much in that heteronormative lifestyle it's probably harder for them-- To talk about their emotions… You know,

> um, gay men, we never really care and we even indulge in calling each other with feminized-feminized names like sister, that kind of thing because we don't have that thing in our head of being a woman or feminine is a weakness, is a bad thing. (Paul, Lines 49-59)

Furthermore, Paul's reflection on the LGBTQ+ community's quest for validation highlights a reaction to societal marginalisation—a collective journey towards self-acceptance and affirmation. The need for validation, as described by Paul, is a poignant aspect of the gay experience, where seeking affirmation serves as emotional redress for the historical devaluation of their identities. This pursuit of validation among gay men, according to Paul, is an act of asserting their worth in a society that has often invalidated their existence.

> Because I guess in a way, really, particularly gay people, because we all grew up- we all grew up othered and undesirable, and, you know, everybody's telling you that you are an abomination and whatever… And I think most gay guys, we always, even if it's unconscious, we always looking for validation because we've been told our whole life that what you are is not valid, right? (Paul, Lines 453-459)

This detailed examination of the narratives points towards a cultural ethos that may unconsciously guide men to navigate their social realities with restricted emotional expressiveness. The stories shared by the participants interlace a rich tapestry of individual and shared experiences, where they both internalise and resist societal pressures, striving for a selfhood that encompasses emotional authenticity and vulnerability. The tension between societal dictates and personal well-being may

underscore a pressing need for a cultural re-assessment of masculinity norms, potentially nurturing a more encompassing view of emotional expression, one that allows men to actively seek support and develop a holistic identity that embraces the full spectrum of emotional experiences.

5.3.2 Echoes of Heritage - The Role of Culture and Language

The subtheme of culture and language within the context of gendered experiences emerges as a multifaceted landscape in which individuals navigate a complex network of societal expectations, familial norms, and linguistic barriers. The participants' reflections suggest that these factors collectively shape their emotional and personal identity, often leading to restrained self-expression and increased anxiety.

Michael's reflections suggest that cultural imprints from his family and society at large play a profound role in the development and management of his anxiety. His narrative suggests that the masculine archetype, which traditionally values stoicism over vulnerability, has been deeply ingrained in his upbringing. Michael implies that cultural imprinting may have contributed to an internalised belief system that equates emotional restraint with strength, potentially leading to a suppression of emotional expression and a subsequent increase in anxiety.

> Um, yes. I guess this kind of having to live, uh, with, to these expect-expectations have a role in developing my anxiety. Um, yes, uh, 100%. [coughs] Um, and, yes, I think these also stereotypes of- because, obviously I threw, I grew up, um, with that being told that, uh, basically, to suppress my feelings and in my household feelings is never something that were never talked about or I was never encouraged to talk about my feelings. … Um, so it took me a long time to realize

> that this is called anxiety, um, and even longer to start looking for tools to deal with it... Um, so, yes, I think if I grew up- if I had grown up in a household where this was more openly talked about or they let me develop my feelings as they would've naturally developed or my coping mechanisms or, yeah, the tools to deal with anxiety, basically, uh, it is something that I would be nowadays able to work much better with. (Michael, Lines 199-211)

James offers a narrative that reveals a guarded approach to emotional expression within his family context, suggesting that only certain facets of his life are open for discussion while others are kept private. This selective sharing can be seen as a protective mechanism, a shield against potential judgment, but it may also contribute to a sense of disconnection and isolation from those closest to him.

> Um, I think, uh, it affects in the way that sometimes you're not 100% transparent. So, at the beginning, you're not totally open and you start to select the information you give- 'cause you-you want to say, oh, this person, um, it's better if they perceive me like this, or I just give this sort of information, family wouldn't understand another thing, so I'll give this sort of information. … And same with the family, they don't know all the details about your life and they don't have to. (James, Lines 179-186)

Paul's account brings a unique perspective to the discussion, highlighting the cultural specificity of emotional expression. His experience growing up in France presents a stark contrast between the emotional allowances granted to his sister and the expectations placed on him as a male. This gendered disparity in the cultural script regarding emotional expression may have had a significant impact on Paul's self-perception and emotional

well-being. Interestingly, his separateness from his family serves as a form of liberation from these gendered expectations, suggesting that freedom from familial pressures can sometimes provide the space needed for individuals to explore and express their emotions more freely.

> Particularly, um, when I was still living in-in France, when I was still living in-- with the people that I grew up with and all-- as I said, all those preconceptions, they were imposed on me, it was-it was a big-big pressure. But for example, my sister, I don't think had the same experience because it was more okay for her to feel emotional or feel down or feel downtrodden. See what I mean? So there's definitely, for me, if you-- if I think about the past, definitely a correlation between being male and being-- and feeling as if-- and feeling of—that you are a failure because you are feeling what should be normal human emotions and anxiety being one of them. (Paul, Lines 121-128)

> Family is a bit tricky for me because I've never, ever been close to my family. So, okay... Because growing up I felt so different from the rest of my family, like extended family or nuclear family, I felt so different that I always felt very disenfranchised and they were-- it was just very separate. … In a way because I had no bond, that freed me from any, uh, pressure. Because nothing was expected of me. (Paul, Lines 247-254)

William's narrative introduces the additional complexity of language as a barrier to authentic self-expression. His experiences as a non-native English speaker living in London exemplify how language can act as a filter through which one's true self is distorted, complicating the ability to form genuine connections. The metaphor of

language as a filter underscores the ways in which William may feel lost in translation, both literally and figuratively, as he strives to communicate his true self in a language that may not fully capture the nuances of his emotional experiences.

> Sometimes-- Well, in social interactions, you feel out of place, or like-- Uh, I don't know. Especially, for example, in my case, living in London, as a foreigner, English is not my first language. So, sometimes, I feel anxious about talking with someone, or I don't understand completely. I can feel like I'm lost in the conversation, like everyone is speaking and I don't really follow it, or something. That makes me anxious. (William, Lines 107-113)

> It's not like I'm censoring on purpose, but I'm not-- I can't show myself how I am really…. With a language, it's like a filter, so that person is not knowing- - I feel like that person is not meeting me-me, it's just like a, you know, filtered version, in language, because you can express yourself in English, but you are not-- I don't know how to put it in words. Like, you are not being yourself, yourself, you know--you can express a thought, or a want, or something, but it's not really your way of talking, or how you express-- (William, Lines 237-244)

James's brief acknowledgement of language barriers: "*And I've added the language barrier on that, so it's a lot of fun."* (James, Line 131) hints at the added layer of complexity that non-native speakers face in social interactions, albeit without recognising it as a significant impediment. This mention, though brief, is telling of the subtle ways in which language can influence one's integration into social settings.

Through the lens of these narratives, the subtheme of culture and language in the context of gendered experiences highlights a dynamic interplay that shapes the emotional lives of men. This interplay acts as both a constraining and propelling force, compelling individuals to navigate a labyrinth of societal expectations, language barriers, and their own quest for authentic self-expression. The participants' stories reveal the challenges and resilience inherent in this journey as they seek to find harmony between their inner emotional worlds and the external cultural landscapes they inhabit.

5.4 Theme 2: Navigating the Current Dating Landscape through the Anxious Self

In the intricate tapestry of modern dating, this cluster of subthemes presents a contemplative journey across the psychological terrains shaped by societal and cultural expectations. It illuminates the internal dialogues of the participants who confront the vulnerabilities of the self even before romantic encounters commence. Their narratives offer a window into the anxious self, navigating through the oscillating self-perceptions influenced by romantic contexts. The emergent patterns depict not merely momentary states but a complex interplay of self-evaluation, shaped by the anticipatory tremors of anxiety and the subsequent navigation through digital avenues in search of romantic connection. These reflections form a bridge linking the broader societal impositions with the intimate, real-time dynamics of engaging in the 'game' of dating, each narrative adding depth to the collective understanding of the anxious self in the quest for romantic intimacy.

5.4.1 How I see Me – Observing the Anxious Self

This subtheme within the broader narrative delicately unravels the nuanced self-perceptions that the participants experience in the modern dating scene, marked by an

undercurrent of anxiety that flows beneath their interactions and self-awareness. It is this very anxiety that is not merely episodic but rather a constant companion, casting a long shadow on their relational experiences and self-image.

William's contemplation reveals anxiety as an insidious barrier—almost like a silent gatekeeper—that influences not just the potential for new connections but also the authenticity and depth of existing relationships. This barrier is characterised not by its visibility but by its ability to persistently linger, subtly shaping his relational engagements and the possibility of closeness, hinting at a deeper, more entrenched impact on his social experiences:

> Um, I feel like it's a bit of a barrier to meet-- Not to meet people, but to get closer to people. To get, like, really close friends. It's a bit of a barrier, so you never feel you are really that close to that person, if that makes sense. (William, Lines 224-226)

John’s musings take us deeper into the psyche, where anxiety is not confined to the present but stretches its tendrils into the fabric of his future, touching upon a fear that speaks to a universal human concern—the dread of solitude and the yearning for a supportive presence in one's moments of vulnerability: "*I'm wondering if I will end up one day, sometimes in a, uh, some kind of, uh, in some condition when I require help. I do require support, and who's gonna be beside?"* (John, Lines 128-129). His anxiety is thus woven into his narrative not as a separate thread but as an integral part of the tapestry of his life, casting a poignant spotlight on the profound implications of his internal struggle. His concern with the post-date phase—where the other person might "banish" after

getting to know him—exposes a raw vulnerability, where his anxiety paints a foreboding image of his relational destiny:

> Um, sometimes. Sometimes when I feel with-with the person, with someone that I connect with, I think I would like to have the kind of feeling not to do it right away, of course, but to have the feeling, okay after, you know, uh, a meet, or after one date, a person is gonna banish. (John, Lines 201-204)

Paul's narrative stands as a stark revelation of the chasm between how one perceives oneself and how one fears being perceived by significant others. His raw admission of fear—of being seen as lacking and thus being abandoned—lays bare a tumultuous inner battle with self-worth, painting a vivid picture of the internal strife that can accompany the quest for romantic fulfilment:

> I was so insecure and so stressed about the fact that he was socially, uh, adept, uh, uh, apt, and he was very socially fluid that I used to think that, "Oh, if he is like that, at some point, he's gonna realize that I'm not like that, so he's probably gonna fuck off." (Paul, Lines 229-232)

In juxtaposition, Michael's account sheds light on a contrasting aspect of relational anxiety: a form of dependency rooted not in the joy of companionship but in the desperate search for stability and validation. His reliance on relationships emerges as a coping mechanism, a shield against the unpredictable waves of external appraisal, suggesting a complex interplay between self-esteem and the search for relational security:

> Yes. So, um, this is something that I realized after ending those relationships, um, is not something that I was aware of while I was in the relationship. Um, but, yeah, it was kind of, uh, one relationship ends, uh, short after I get into another relationship. It's not like short relationships, like they lasted between one year and three years each. Um, but I never really was on my own. And, yes, I was- I realized that I- in a way, I was doing it because of the validation or that security that provides being with someone. And like, I don't need to think so much about how the rest of the world perceives me--or, um, my self-esteem is not up and down. (Michael, Lines 336-344)

In engaging with the introspective accounts of the participants, it appears there may be an undercurrent of anxiety influencing the expression of their authentic selves. This influence of anxiety might be less a conscious choice and more akin to a subconscious defence mechanism, potentially shaping the way they navigate the uncertain terrain of dating. It seems that individuals such as Michael and Nick articulate a form of self-doubt that could be understood as an ingrained response to deeper, perhaps unacknowledged, anxieties. The emergence of these automatic self-assessments, unbidden during our discussions and unrecognised until reflection was prompted, suggests the workings of a subconscious process.

Michael expresses a sentiment that could suggest an internalised self-critique, questioning his own adequacy and appeal: *“I tend to undermine myself. Like, "Um, I am not good enough. I am not attractive enough. Um, my body's not good enough. Um, and uh, the person is not gonna find me funny enough or interesting enough."* (Michael, Lines 96-98). Nick's reflection might also point to an automatic internal questioning of his likability in the eyes of others: *"If the other person is gonna like me, is not gonna like me, if I'm*

gonna be good enough." (Nick, Line 113). These expressions of self-doubt, while not explicit decisions, could be indicative of automatic, ingrained responses to deep-seated anxiety.

The concept of 'self-filtering', where behaviours and self-presentation are adjusted, emerges from the narratives not necessarily as deliberate strategies to manage anxiety but perhaps as involuntary adaptations. For example, William's account suggests a sense of not fully presenting his true self, which could be seen as an unconscious protective mechanism rather than an intentional act of pretence: *"Because, in the same way that I mentioned, it's like I'm not being myself, myself. I'm just-- Not pretending, but I am filtering myself, in a sense. So it's not--that person knows me that well."* (William, Lines 230-232). Similarly, John's description of his own behaviour during interactions might reflect a tension between his desire to understand the other person and his own wish to be perceived positively, which could be interpreted as an instinctive response to anxiety: *"Uh, kind of electric, because I wanna listen to the other person feeling, uh, how-how is the other person and I wanna know him, but at the same time, I want the other person to have a good impression on me."* (John, Lines 457-459). Additionally, Michael's description of his behaviour among friends as opposed to dating scenarios might point to a natural alteration in behaviour when faced with social stressors, hinting at a subconscious process rather than a calculated approach to social interactions:

> I can see that I'm not being myself like, um, when I'm relaxed or with people that I know, with my friends, um, I am often perceived as, um, a naturally funny person. … I tend to be like really quiet, really... not serious, but I can tell that I'm- I'm not even able to process thoughts, um, or repond as- respond accordingly to, um, conversations, like really simple social interactions. (Michael, Lines 79-83)

Delving into this subtheme, it becomes clear that the behaviours and internal conflicts unearthed here are deeply seated responses to anxiety. These are not the calculated coping strategies one might consciously deploy but rather intrinsic reactions to the profound emotional struggles these men face. This exploration is critical to understanding the broader picture of the anxious self within the dating landscape, bridging the gap between societal expectations and the reality of their psychological experiences. The candid reflections pave the way to the subsequent subtheme, contrasting the involuntary, instinctive behaviours explored here against the deliberate, active coping mechanisms that these men employ to navigate the tumultuous waters of modern dating.

5.4.2 Getting ready for the battlefield – Coping with the Anxious Self

In the intricate landscape of modern dating, the preparatory rituals of men are revealed as not just self-grooming practices but as nuanced psychological strategies deeply entwined with managing the pervasive anxiety that accompanies the anticipation of romantic encounters. The subtheme here aims to shed light on the spectrum of preparatory behaviours that serve as both armour and Achilles' heel in the pursuit of romantic connection. This conceptualisation, particularly the use of 'armour', was inspired by the narrative of Paul, who described his pre-date preparations as akin to donning armour for a 'romantic fight', directly influencing the naming of this subtheme.

Nick and Michael's approach, which leans towards minimalism, might suggest a strategic or perhaps unintentional exposure to the elements of dating, potentially intensifying the anxiety experienced during the encounter itself. Their streamlined routines, which focus on fundamental aspects such as hygiene and a balance between comfort and aesthetic appeal in clothing, seem to reflect an underlying belief in the value of simplicity, even if

it may leave them more susceptible to the arrows of judgment and rejection once the date is underway:

> I don't prepare... I just have a shower (laughs) and get dressed in a nice outfit or something that I feel comfortable with, and I think I look good... and that's about it. (Nick, Lines 208-210)

> Yeah, yeah, it is music. And, um, if I know that, for example, I'm wearing a nice outfit, that I smell good, uh, I don't know, that I trimmed my beard, you know, things like that, that will be perceived as attractive from the other person--it kind of builds up the confidence. (Michael, Lines 537-539)

The simplicity of their approach might be interpreted as an implicit choice to focus on personality over appearance, investing less in their external facade and more in navigating the interpersonal dance of impressions during the date. This could lead to an increased need for strategic self-presentation and anxiety management as the date progresses, embodying a paradox: the less elaborate the preparatory practices, the more effort may be needed to steer the narrative and manage impressions during the date. This necessitates a delicate balance—revealing enough to pique interest while retaining enough to inspire further curiosity and potential subsequent encounters:

> You don't want to give too much of yourself on the first date, otherwise, the person might not have any interest... if you give everything, what's the point of the other person coming back or wanting to meet again? (Nick, Lines 504-507)

> I'm not being fully myself, so I'm sh- kind of showing to the world some-someone that I am not really. And I think the goal of that is, um, for people to like me. … I think if I put this façade or this mask on of someone who will be perceived as someone fun or … that will increase my chances of … having a successful date or making someone, um, select me more. (Michael, Lines 232-238)

Michael's use of a 'mask' to shape how he is perceived hints at a broader narrative of protective self-styling among the participants. This theme of psychological armament is further exemplified in the meticulous pre-date rituals of James and Paul. Described metaphorically as donning armour, their substantial investment in preparation reflects a proactive approach to managing pre-date anxiety. Such thoroughness potentially serves to mitigate their nervousness, allowing them to present a more composed and self-assured demeanour:

> But I have to have-- I have a ritual-- where, okay, every step of this ritual is almost like putting a piece of suit of armor. So it's like I'm putting-- I'm getting ready for, um, romantic fight. (Paul, Lines 376-378)

> Uh, it takes me hours. Because I'm very like-- um, personally, I want to be at my best when I walk out the door for any reason. (James, Lines 365-366)

> I pick the day of the date based on the fact that I know I'm gonna have to have the time to prepare, otherwise, I'm gonna freak out. (James, Lines 375-377)

Their emphasis on refining their appearance could be seen as a strategy that potentially reduces the need for adjusting personality during the date. The detailed attention to

grooming and attire could be indicative of their intent to use physical appearance as a vehicle for instilling confidence and deflecting anxiety. Paul's routine is especially illustrative of this approach, as he notes:

> So when I'm fully, uh, I've, uh, washed, I have a shower and I've shaved, I always put perfume on. And also I do put, um, coconut oil down there. It's just like a ritual I have. Do you see what I mean? Because it worked for so many times, it's just reassuring. (Paul, Lines 428-431).

These acts of grooming and fragrance application might be less about the act itself and more about the psychological comfort and control it provides: *"But I-- when it comes to physical, I want to be able to control what I'm projecting." (*Paul, Lines 422-425). It suggests an almost superstitious adherence to a personal ritual that has proven effective in the past, reinforcing not just his physical attractiveness but his mental readiness for the date ahead: *"I must say probably dating, being on the date, first contact, and then the beginning of the relationship is probably what I'm-I'm very good at.*" (Paul, Lines 274-275).

James's extensive preparation could be interpreted as ensuring his external appearance acts as a defence against anxiety, enabling his genuine personality to emerge more freely, without the encumbrance of nervousness. This may indicate a level of comfort that establishes itself once the initial awkwardness of the date has been navigated: *"Um, but then when I get there, apart from the initial cringe of, you know, starting the conversation and everything, uh, then it's-it's-it's quite comfortable."* (James, Lines 454-456).

This divergence in coping strategies illustrates a continuum of anxiety management within the dating scene. Those who opt for minimal preparation may save time and energy yet could encounter increased anxiety during the date, necessitating a more nuanced management of the interaction and possibly a greater reliance on personality portrayal. Conversely, those who commit to detailed pre-date rituals might encounter a smoother interaction, their anxiety assuaged by the assurance found in their physical presentation, albeit possibly with an inordinate investment of time and mental energy before the date. Both approaches reveal a shared aim: to manoeuvre through the potential pitfalls of judgment and rejection.

The analysis, therefore, might suggest a dual narrative: on the one hand, an economy of preparation leading to a potentially richer investment in managing the real-time dynamics of a date and a focus on personality portrayal; on the other, an indulgence in ritual serving as a pre-emptive defence against anxiety through careful attention to physical appearance, potentially allowing for a more controlled interaction. Both strategies might be seen as defences against the deep-seated apprehension of an anxious self being exposed, and both highlight the extent to which individuals might go to manage the uncertainty and vulnerability that is inherent in the pursuit of romantic connections.

5.4.3 The “Augmented” Dating Experience

In the intricate dance of contemporary romance, the prelude to face-to-face encounters often begins with the digital actuation of profiles and the tactful artistry of presenting oneself online. This "augmented" dating experience, as lived and described by the study's participants, opens up a complex stage where virtual and actual interactions interweave, creating an essential aspect of today's romantic pursuit.

The digital realm, as depicted through John's accounts, is not merely an adjunct to traditional dating practices but appears to have become an integral component, particularly in the dense and fast-paced environments of urban living. The transition of initial romantic vetting to online platforms is experienced less as a matter of choice and more as an exigency, underscored by John's later admission of primarily using apps to form connections: *"Well, lately, it is been mostly through apps."* (John, Line 258). This reliance on digital interactions is especially resonant in metropolitan life where forming meaningful connections is intricately linked to navigating the digital space*: "I think it's quite, um, it's quite real, as in, especially, connecting ... from a social point ... in a city like London, or any big city ... I think this is the main problem."* (John, Lines 15-18).

Paul's account introduces an additional layer of complexity to the online dating scenario, illustrating the particular challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in finding potential partners within a restricted social circle. *"Because back then I had a very small social circle, so it was harder for me to meet other gay guys, right? So that was almost exclusively app based."* (Paul, Lines 615-616). The significance of dating apps for Paul resonates with a broader theme of inclusivity and accessibility that digital platforms can provide for minority groups.

In contrast, Michael represents a demographic that, while not limited by social constraints, still turns to digital platforms as a sieve to filter potential dates. *"But I-I guess you can tell a little bit whether the conversation in person is gonna flow, or it is gonna bomb and die."* (Michael, Lines 478-479). The online pre-interaction could be interpreted not only as test for compatibility but also a strategic move to alleviate anxiety and to craft an image of oneself that is perceived to be more likely to be favoured by a potential partner *"Um, I think it's easier to talk to someone online before seeing them in-person.*

Because, uh, for a person with anxiety ... it helps a lot knowing a bit, uh, about that person, not just out of the blue." (Michael, Lines 382-385). Michael further elaborates on this strategy by expressing that familiarity gained through online interaction can lead to better predictions about future encounters. *"So if you know a bit about that person, like if you chatted with them online before meeting, it's easier to predict, um, what to expect or how is that person gonna behave or, you know...?"* (Michael, Lines 415-417). This anticipation seems to be a calculated aspect of the modern dating process, leveraging digital foreknowledge to navigate the complexities of initial in-person interactions.

However, as suggested by Michael, this pre-interaction phase, while potentially easing anxiety, might also introduce a tension between the curated self and the authentic self. The strategic construction of an online persona, intended to be favourably received, might raise questions of authenticity and the possibility of incongruence between the virtual and the actual self, a concern that underscores the problematic nature of online self-representation:

> Um, because many times, for example, if you start chatting to that person online and then you meet in person, there is that chance that they don't look like- [laughs] like in the pictures or, um, they use like way old pictures and they don't look at all like they used to in the pictures. Um, so it's always that in-person, um, type of, uh, attraction. (Michael, Lines 646-650)

This might lead to the significant labour of discernment that James speaks of – the need to excavate the "real" person from behind their digital persona, a task that is both cognitively demanding and emotionally exhausting. This "manual labour" of uncovering

truth from embellishment adds a layer of complexity to the already challenging process of establishing a romantic connection:

> … it's just at the very tip of the iceberg because, of course, you know that you put yourself in- uh, in a certain image through the profile pictures and everything. And so you are very aware of the fact that the other person does as well. …. And, uh, if I want really to meet and know this person, there's a lot of digging to do. … So, and, uh, this makes feel-- make you feel more, uh, exhausted sometimes 'cause uh, the process is longer. (James, Lines 278-288)

This labour is underscored by a collective desire, as expressed by Nick, for an expedient transition from the virtual overture to the tangible encounter, driven by a preference for the immediacy and authenticity that in-person interactions can provide: *"I don't like to create much expectations, so once I start chatting with someone, meeting needs to happen like... quite soon."* (Nick, Lines 235-236).

This narrative suggests that the "augmented" dating experience, while offering new avenues for connection, might also introduce a paradoxical dynamic: the more individuals engage with the virtual side of dating, the more they crave the simplicity and directness of in-person interaction. This might reflect a deeper cultural tension between the efficiencies provided by technology and the enduring human need for genuine connection and immediacy in romantic relationships.

5.5 Theme 3: Playing the Dating Game

In the evolving narrative of modern dating, where the journey to the actual date is often as significant as the date itself, participants navigate a complex interplay of self-

perception, societal norms, and the strategies they adopt to negotiate this terrain. This theme delves into the real-time dynamics of dating, examining the interweaving of intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics alongside external factors to understand how these influence and shape the dating experiences and outcomes for the participants.

5.5.1 It's Not You, It's Me – Intrapersonal Dynamics

The subtheme emerges from the intricate tapestry of intrapersonal dynamics that govern the participants' internal states during a date. It underscores the significance of self-perception and the internal dialogues that echo within the minds of the individuals as they navigate the dating landscape. Nick's insights are particularly illuminating here, as he attributes the success of a date not to the expectations or actions of the other but to his own internal narrative—a cinematic reel playing within his psyche, influencing his emotional state and conduct during the date: *"Mine. Mine. I don't count on other people's expectations. This is my expectation or what I, as I said, what a movie I made in my head."* (Nick, Lines 439-440). The theme's very title, inspired by Nick's reflections, captures the essence of self-accountability and introspection that pervades the dating experience.

William's account resonates with this concept of an internal movie, where he acknowledges the role of self-spun stories in shaping his emotional disposition during a date. His narrative reveals a dynamic where he actively seeks behavioural cues from his date as a form of reassurance, an external lifeline to counterbalance the self-generated anxiety and uncertainty:

> Yeah, in my mind, it's like—Maybe I tell myself that anything can go wrong, this can go wrong. Maybe it's just raining, or something, and then, once I'm there and I meet the person—The other person is really nice, or is happy to be there, so I

> feel more relaxed, but it's just something that I can—Like stories I tell myself, like, it's going to rain, or maybe this person doesn't like me, or she's going to not have fun, but then, once you are there, people normally are very kind and very—You know. (William, Lines, 545-551)

The impact of the other person's perceived attractiveness is another salient feature that emerges from the participants' narratives. It appears that the more they find their date appealing, the greater the influence on their levels of anxiety. James notes that if the other person is "perfect" then he gets more anxious during the date. However, his use of "this looks perfect" might not indicate that the perfection is only attributed to the external characteristics of the person but the whole experience of them during the date. As William mentioned before, when a person seems "nice" or "kind", that makes them more ideal. Maybe this is what perfection might mean for James in the abstract below, and maybe his anxiety is linked to the fear of losing this sensation of calmness if the other person does not find him "perfect" enough. *"If you match with someone that is like, oh my god, this looks perfect, then you get much more, um, anxious about it."* (James, Lines 353-354). James articulates this phenomenon by noting the correlation between perceived perfection in a date and the surge of anxiety it induces, suggesting a ripple effect that extends to his sense of self-worth and the pressure to perform or behave in a manner that may not wholly reflect his true self in order to win the "game":

> You try to sound more brilliant, or to impress more the person because, uh, usually when this-- you're very attracted to a person, I dunno why automatically you think they're out of your range. So you think you have to work harder to get them. (James, Lines 544-546)

This strategy of enhancing one's self-presentation, as articulated by James and echoed by Nick, might suggest a conscious effort to project an optimised version of oneself, a performance calibrated to captivate and retain the other's interest. This behavioural adjustment hints at a deeper, perhaps unconscious belief in one's relative position of inferiority, propelling them to exert more effort to bridge the perceived gap between themselves and their date: *"Obviously, if you're interested in the person to try... and the conversation to flow for the other person, to not get bored, for yourself to not get bored, to try and..., yeah, try... and show the best version of you."* (Nick, Lines 287-290).

Paul's reflections add another layer to this discussion, revealing that intimidation can stem not only from physical or interpersonal attributes but also from the social status of the other person. His candid admission that he feels 'intimidated' by individuals who appear more established in various aspects of life underscores the pervasive impact of social comparisons on self-esteem and dating behaviour:

> I must say when I'm confronted with guys, that are a bit older potentially, or that have very good jobs, or very good positions, or very- they are very sorted in life, they're very grown up, I- that's the only time I tend to be intimidated. (Paul, Lines 587-590)

In sum, this subtheme captures the essence of the individual's internal world during the dating process—a world rich with self-narratives, emotional fluctuations, and the constant recalibration of self-image. It underscores the participants' efforts to reconcile their authentic selves with the versions they present in pursuit of romantic success. Each narrative contributes to a broader understanding of the 'dating game,' revealing a spectrum of coping mechanisms, self-perceptions, and the overarching influence of societal norms.

This theme not only reflects the participants' personal journeys but also resonates with the broader human experiences of seeking connection, belonging, and self-acceptance within the romantic domain, without presupposing that such quests are universal or compulsory for all individuals.

5.5.2 It Takes Two to Tango– Interpersonal Dynamics

This subtheme explores the co-created dance of interaction where participants grapple with their internal dialogues while synchronising steps with one another. This exploration is not just about personal introspection; it is a relational tango that hinges on the give and take between two individuals, each bringing their own societal and cultural baggage, their vulnerabilities, and their unique coping strategies into the fray.

The participants' narratives reveal that while physical appearance may be a preliminary filter prior to a date, it is the emotional and mental synchrony during the encounter that truly determines its trajectory. Michael's insight into the importance of emotional resonance—rooted in shared interests and mutual attraction—highlights the intricate nature of connection that transcends the visual and taps into the essence of relational compatibility, easing anxiety and fostering a sense of mutual comfort: *"But yeah, for me, it's mainly, um, making sort of an emotional connection, um, in terms of sharing interests and also feeling physically attracted to that person as well."* (Michael, Lines 658-660).

James, through his reflections, adds depth to this dynamic, suggesting that a genuine connection is marked by an easy flow of conversation and a mutual willingness to be vulnerable. He describes it as a feeling of effortless relief, and maybe that is what he defined as "perfection" in the previous subtheme. His methodical approach to self-

disclosure, paced to the rhythm of the interaction, hints at a protective strategy against potential rejection, a safeguard perhaps born from an internal well of self-doubt:

> I-I think the good date is when then there's- first of all, there's a connection at the beginning. So you're like, okay. There's a good conversation, things are going smoothly. So you know that both-- you both are happy with the other one, um, and at the same time that you can-- you realize that the person is sort of relieving his layers and opening, starting opening and so you start opening as well, uh, at the right, um, timing. (James, Lines 556-561)

John's narrative ties the sense of connection to the attentiveness and presence offered by the other. His experience speaks to a desire for reciprocal engagement and respect, suggesting that even when dates falter, a maintained decorum can preserve dignity. His use of humour as a tool to signal a need for attention or to navigate disengagement reveals the adaptive strategies he might employ to manage the uncertainty inherent in dating:

> Cause, um, I get frustrated and, uh, especially I think I reached, uh-- There was a time when, um, I think I made a joke like, um, okay, if you want I can check my phone as well. So, you know, I kind of turn a twist the vibe saying, ""Hey, I'm here. I want attention. If you don't want it, we can end it up here." (John, Lines 517-520)

Paul's insight adds another dimension, positing that the perceived effort required to foster a connection could be a signal of its viability. His narrative suggests that an intuitive sense of struggle may serve as an indicator that the dynamic is misaligned, pointing toward a self-protective withdrawal rather than an investment in a possibly fruitless effort:

> To me, the bad date is when it feels like a massive effort. That's what it is. That's what it is. Yeah. Because I think that-- i-if it's so laborious, and it takes so much effort, maybe something is telling you that it's not quite working. (Paul, Lines 711-714)

Michael summarises the group's collective wisdom, affirming that the presence of a connection, the seamless flow of conversation, and reciprocal interest are the cornerstones of a promising date. The absence of these elements, or the need to overly strive to sustain interaction, signals a discordant rhythm, leading to a natural cessation of the dance. His stance reflects a pragmatic acceptance of the natural course of interpersonal dynamics, choosing to step away rather than engage in a futile effort:

> …how would I know if I have a connection with that person? So…we share interests. … the conversation flows … there's no need to bring up, um, topics all the time in order to keep the conversation alive or it feels awkward, you know? Um, or I feel like the other person is not receptive at all to-to me…. Um, that would be like a bad date. You know, if the conversation doesn't flow at all, I don't feel attracted to that person or we don't have any really interests in common, um, then no point. (Michael, Lines 651-658)

In sum, this subtheme reveals the nuanced and often complex interplay of individual psyches converging in the pursuit of connection. The tango – at times smooth, at times strained – is emblematic of the participants' search for a harmonious interlude within the broader narrative of their relational lives. Each participant's account underscores the inherent tension between personal vulnerabilities and the desire for a shared experience

that resonates with the profound human longing for understanding, acceptance, and meaningful human interactions.

5.5.3 The Right Place, The Right Time

This subtheme explores the delicate interplay between external factors and the personal dating experience. Here, the emphasis is on how the choice of venue and time can subtly yet significantly sway the participants' internal state and the interrelational dynamics at play. There is an emergent theme of participants' engagement with their surroundings, a pattern that unfolds in the nuanced reflections on how such settings might influence the intimate fabric of a date.

Exploring further participants' narratives, it becomes evident that they place considerable emphasis on the influence that ambience and location have on their dating experiences. Nick underscores the significance of setting in framing their emotional and psychological state during a date. The familiar locale emerges as an emotional anchor, a touchstone for self-assurance, hinting at the intricate ways familiarity is interlaced with comfort and self-efficacy in social interactions. This reliance on known environments can be seen as a protective buffer against the unpredictability inherent in the dating process, which, if unmet, may lead Nick to seek solace in alcohol to temper his discomfort: *"I mean, if you're in a comfortable place, um, or unfamiliar place for you, um, if you're drinking, obviously, your inhibitions are a bit out, so..."* (Nick, Lines 302-304). " Nick's strategic selection of a comfortable setting reveals a conscious effort to exert control over external variables, thereby mitigating feelings of anxiety and vulnerability. This intentional manipulation of the environment possibly serves as a testament to the proactive measures he might take to cultivate a sense of security in the inherently uncertain context of dating.

In contrast, Paul's narrative brings forth a poignant dimension of the external environment as a crucible for identity expression and safety. His reflections seem to reveal an acute awareness of how the socio-cultural climate of a place can amplify feelings of vulnerability or acceptance, particularly for individuals within the LGBTQ+ community. The pursuit of inclusivity and safety is not just a preference but a prerequisite for genuine engagement and self-expression, highlighting the additional emotional labour required to navigate spaces that may not be inherently affirming:

> I usually try to pick the spot because I want to have the right environment. I've been on a few dates, one recently, actually, where… it was full of straight people. So you-you don't feel particularly comfortable as a gay guy on a date surrounded by, like, football fans, right? … And it was so rowdy, so loud that, you know, after a while when you're trying to create a bond with someone, and then every three seconds you have to be like, "What? What did you say?" It is just, my-my-my social stamina—tends to go down. … So, environment is very important. That's why I usually choose the spot. (Paul, Lines 467-474)

Paul's deliberate choice of venue indicates a proactive stance in safeguarding his identity and emotional well-being. It underscores a thoughtful curation of the environment that goes beyond mere aesthetics, potentially serving as a bulwark against the societal pressures and potential judgment pervasive in less inclusive spaces.

James echoes the importance of ambience but also the element of time as a conduit for conveying respect and seriousness in their dating intentions. James suggests punctuality is not just about timekeeping but is emblematic of reliability and courtesy, qualities that he seems to perceive as foundational for a promising interaction. His reflection suggests

an internalised code of conduct where external factors like timeliness are imbued with personal values and expectations, shaping the initial impressions and possibly the entire trajectory of the encounter:

> Yes, that's totally the place … it has to be a place where you can have a conversation and actually connect with the person. So if it's like, let's meet at this club or at a festival or even a place that wouldn't go, … not in your comfort zone, so it's a bit more difficult. Uh, then external things, uh, yes, totally. Like, uh, I don't know, the bus is late or some tube is not working or something and I get re- - I really get pissed-off for that [laughs] for anything so, because I like to be punctual and everything, and I think it's part of the image you give. (James, Lines 514-522)

James' attention to punctuality and setting suggests an acute awareness of how these external factors are interpreted as extensions of personal values and respect towards the other person. By intentionally aligning these elements with his values, James might be actively sculpting the narrative of the date to convey sincerity and thoughtfulness.

William's insights further cement the idea that the choice of venue is an extension of the self, a stage set for presenting one's interests and understanding towards the date. His adaptive approach suggests a flexible self-presentation, attuned to the preferences of the other person, where his comfort is inextricably linked to the satisfaction and ease of his date. This adaptability, however, is also indicative of the internal pressure to perform and provide an experience that is conducive to connection and approval:

> I will find someplace that is good for both of us, for example, London is really big, so I will find someone-- Someplace in between, or maybe, if the person has something in common with me, that climb-- For example, a climber, I will go out climbing with that person, to a gym, that is— Suits us more or less better. I would change depending on the person, I would say. (William, Lines 520-525)

William's intentional adaptability in choosing a venue illustrates his efforts to create a shared experience that is conducive to connection and comfort. His conscious choice to accommodate reflects an underlying strategy to mitigate vulnerabilities, exert control over the interaction, and present himself in a way that is most likely to be received positively by his date.

This subtheme illuminates the complex choreography where external settings act as an extension of the self and a mediator in the relational tango of dating. Each participant's narrative underscores a strategic engagement with time and place, an attempt to harness these elements in service of creating a favourable context for personal and interpersonal unfolding. The external is interwoven with the internal, with each domain influencing and reflecting the other, shaping the dating experience in profound, often imperceptible, ways.

5.6 Theme 4: Game Over, Restart? - Post Date Evolving Self - Perception

This final theme navigates the aftermath of the dating 'game,' exploring the consequent shifts in self-perception that emerge from romantic engagements. It examines the interplay of transient feelings of validation or self-doubt with more enduring insights into personal growth, revealing how these experiences can redefine one's approach to relationships and self-affirmation. This theme elucidates the temporal effects of dating on the individual's psyche and the potential for transformation in the ongoing journey of self-discovery.

5.6.1 Same Old Me - Navigating Temporal Consequences

This subtheme captures the shifting self-perceptions that participants experience following dating interactions. Their narratives delineate a temporal and emotional journey that fluctuates with the outcomes of social encounters, illuminating the interplay between external validation, self-concept, and emotional resilience.

Michael's account suggests that a successful date serves as an affirming mirror, momentarily reflecting a version of himself imbued with enhanced security and self-worth. He notes a marked contrast between his pre-date trepidations and the post-date validation, suggesting a temporal boost in self-assurance that might arm him with greater confidence for future encounters. However, this bolstered self-image is painted as fleeting, hinting at the transient power of external validation in the construction of self-esteem.

> Um, and I myself, I see-- I might see myself differently, but temporarily, like I'm feeling great about myself. Um, I feel attractive and I feel, uh, beautiful and I feel interesting and funny, you know, after good dates, um, and the opposite after a bad date, you know? (Michael, Lines 700-704)"

When dealing with the less favourable outcomes of dating, Michael appears to oscillate between two modes of self-reflection: one, a path of acceptance and progression, and the other, a more punitive self-examination. This latter mode, where he holds himself accountable for perceived inadequacies, may indicate a harsh internal critic that surfaces in times of vulnerability. Yet, within this self-critique lies a silver lining – an awareness of its temporary influence and an ability to marshal personal resources to restore

equilibrium to his self-concept. As implied in the excerpt below, the oscillation between those two modes might be linked to the attractiveness of the other person and the effort he might have put into connecting with them.

> Um, and after a bad, um, uh, bad date, could go either way, really like, "I don't care, let's move on." Um, or I might blame it on myself, um, like, this person didn't find you attractive or find you-- found you boring, or, um, you didn't have-- uh, you were- you were not enough. Um, so I kind of punished myself a little bit after that. It's not something that it really, um, takes a toll on me as such. Although it does undermine my self-esteem, uh, if I blame it on myself, but it's more temporarily, you know, that, um, I punish myself a little bit and, um, my self-esteem gets compromised, but then, you know, luckily I have some tools to deal with that. (Michael, Lines 674-681)

James, while echoing the positive afterglow of a good date, seems to invest less in the date itself and more in the personal growth derived from navigating the social challenge. The importance he places on overcoming his own boundaries indicates an intrinsic value system where self-efficacy is built on personal achievements rather than solely on external validation: *"Maybe you are just more, um, confident because you've done the effort of doing this thing. So, it feels a bit-- uh, quite-quite an importance to social situations." (*James, Lines 644-646). His light-hearted approach to disappointing dates, masked by humour and a casual dismissal, might serve as his armour against the potential sting of rejection, although the nuanced undertones of his laughter suggest a deeper, perhaps more conflicted emotional response: *"With the bad date, I usually eat. [laughs] I usually eat. And, uh, and then I just-- I don't care."* (James, Lines 622-623).

In contrast, Paul's experience with successful dates paints a picture of a cyclical quest for affirmation, where each positive encounter is akin to a hit of dopamine – intense but fleeting. This pattern, while recognised as problematic, seems to reveal an entrenched behaviour seeking validation through others, a validation that is craved yet recognised as a temporary “fix” for deeper emotional needs.

> And after a good date, well this is problematic, isn't it? Because I have this tendency where it's all going good, and then we fuck on the first night, a lot of times I don't particularly have the appetite for more and a repeat. Does that make sense? So it's, um, it's a quick fix. (Paul, Lines 824-827)

Conversely, his approach to less successful dates is marked by a pragmatic acceptance. His lack of emotional turmoil in the wake of a "bad" date speaks to a secure self-concept, one that does not hinge on the validation of every single social interaction. This attitude suggests a detachment from the outcome, perceiving each encounter as a standalone event rather than a cumulative measure of self-worth: *"After a bad date, I don't feel bad at all. I don't feel bad at all because the-the bad date, the one that didn't work, I know for a fact that it's just-- It is not a match."* (Paul, Lines 816-818)

The participants' narratives collectively illustrate the temporal dance of self-perception as it responds to the rhythm of dating outcomes. These stories highlight the complex ways in which individuals reconcile their need for external affirmation with the fluctuations of dating successes and failures. The insights gleaned from these experiences underscore the nuanced interplay between self-esteem, emotional resilience, and the social dimensions of dating, providing a multifaceted view of the temporal consequences of seeking connection in the social arena.

5.6.2 A New Me - Embracing a New Perspective

This last subtheme illuminates the transformational journeys of participants, suggesting that their experiences with dating have been conduits for profound self-discovery and personal evolution. This journey is marked by an iterative process of self-reflection, revealing insights that may have reshaped their internal dialogue and, consequently, their approach to relationships and self-validation. Michael's narrative indicates a significant shift in his internal validation mechanisms. He recounts a pivotal realisation during a period of solitude enforced by the global pandemic—a realisation that external validation was not the panacea for his anxiety. Instead, he discovered an inner source of fulfilment and confidence, suggesting that his prior reliance on others for affirmation was perhaps misplaced:

> It's a lesson that I am really glad that I learned, um, that you don't really need to be with someone in order to feel fulfilled and have a fulfilled life. Um, and you don't need that validation from others. Like it can- it can come from within yourself. (Michael, Lines 351-354)

It appears that this introspective process led Michael to value authentic connections over superficial encounters, indicating a maturation in his relational approach. His current dating experiences, as described, seem to reflect a more relaxed and authentic engagement, where the outcome is secondary to the experience itself:

> Um, I like going on date, like truly, I like going on a date. Like, I just like going for a drink with someone, get to know someone, even if just if it's just a drink and nothing else happens, you know? (Michael, Lines 290-293)"

Nonetheless, Michael acknowledges the lingering presence of anxiety, yet with a newfound sense of agency, he employs acquired emotional tools to manage such feelings, a strategy that seems to have mitigated the impact of anxiety on his dating life: *"Um, so when there's a next date with another person, not necessarily the same person, I kind of remind myself about those moments after there was a good date."* (Michael, Lines 696-698).

James's commentary resonates with Michael's experiences, positing that familiarity through repeated experiences can lead to a diminution of anxiety. He suggests that the accumulation of dating experiences has armed him with tools to better navigate the associated stressors, leading to a deeper understanding of his emotional triggers: *"Well, yes, yes, 'cause I think it's, uh, still one of those things that you get comfortable with, uh, experience. So, uh, it gives you less anxiety for sure."* (James, Lines 663-665*)*. James also introduces a pragmatic reframing of dating as a 'game,' a perspective that seems to alleviate the pressure associated with dating by normalising the possibility of both "victory" and "defeat". This stance implies a detachment from the outcomes and a more light-hearted engagement with the dating process: "*You know, it's part of the- the game. You cannot be liked by everybody as you don't like everybody. So, uh, it's simple like that. I'm very practical on this. I'm very pragmatic."* (James, Lines 627-629).

Paul's narrative provides a striking counterpoint to the common thread of seeking external validation. His story is one of emancipation from the crippling desire to be universally liked, a desire that once dictated his interactions and self-esteem. The revelation that one's worth need not be held hostage to the fickle tides of others' opinions seems to have liberated him, dislodging the foundations of his social anxiety. This newfound freedom is portrayed as an awakening to the reality that just as he does not find everyone he meets

appealing, he too will not be everyone's preferred choice—and this is not only acceptable but normal. The simplicity and power of this realisation are emphasised as a pivotal moment in his journey towards self-acceptance and authenticity:

> I really changed my life, and I went from absolute social anxiety around guys to the person I am today it was just, I literally saw that on a meme on Instagram that literally said, um, "When you realize people have the right to dislike you, you take away their power to- you take away their power to reject you." … But then I thought, "Well, thing is, I-I can't fancy everybody," right? Like, you don't fancy everybody that you see. So then-then it's-it's okay if somebody doesn't fancy you. … But when I think you accept the fact that it's normal that some people don't find you attractive or sexually eligible or whatever, then it just kind of, the pressure disappears. (Paul, Lines 858-868)

The narratives within this subtheme suggest that the participants' engagements with dating have been instrumental in their personal growth. Their experiences seem to have fostered a reorientation from seeking external validation to cultivating internal sources of self-worth. Each narrative contributes to a tapestry of change, illustrating a movement towards embracing a new perspective—one characterised by self-compassion, resilience, and a redefined approach to the search for connection. This subtheme encapsulates the participants' stories of growth and serves as a testament to the transformative potential inherent in the human spirit when confronted with the challenges of social intimacy and self-doubt.

5.7 Analysis Summary

The analysis chronicles a layered journey through the landscape of dating with anxiety, beginning with the profound influence of societal and cultural norms on self-perception (Theme 1). Here, the narratives reveal a struggle against the rigid confines of gender stereotypes, hinting at a pervasive discord between societal expectations and authentic emotional expression. The second theme delves into the pre-dating anxieties that shape self-perception, highlighting the role of societal norms and the increasingly digital nature of initiating romantic connections. This theme reflects the participants' internal negotiations, balancing their anxious selves with the persona they project in the quest for intimacy.

As we navigate the dynamics of the dating process, the third theme captures the delicate interplay between self-reflection and relational interactions, emphasising the real-time interplay of emotions and strategies (Theme 3). Participants' accounts here illustrate how the dance of dating is as much about managing internal dialogues as it is about engaging with a partner. The concluding theme addresses the aftermath of dating interactions, exploring the evolving self-perception shaped by these experiences (Theme 4). It underscores how romantic encounters act as both mirrors and catalysts, reflecting and influencing one's sense of self and potential for growth.

Together, these themes construct a narrative that is both sequential and symbiotic, each one adding depth and context to the intricate story of dating with anxiety. The structure of the analysis, therefore, not only maps the complexities and paradoxes of the dating process but also reflects the transformative journey from societal influence on self-realisation.

6. Discussion

6.1 Overview

This chapter synthesises findings by comparing the results with existing literature from Chapter Two and includes additional studies reflecting the exploratory nature of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) described by Smith et al. (2021).

Through semi-structured interviews with six millennial males who self-identify as socially anxious, this research probes deep into their dating experiences. An interview schedule was designed to address the following research questions: 1) How do millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations experience dating? 2) What does being anxious in social situations mean for millennial males? 3) How does an understanding of participants' experience help inform future practice in counselling psychology and psychological therapy?

Discussion themes reveal influences from societal norms, cultural conditioning, and personal dynamics shaped by social anxiety. They highlight internal conflicts in modern dating, evolving masculinity definitions, and the quest for emotional expression and acceptance.

The study highlights the silent struggles and identity searches amid societal pressures and modern dating. It calls for reevaluating traditional masculinity norms and supports an inclusive research agenda that embraces various emotional experiences.

Through the narratives of millennial men, the research captures the paradox of modern dating—its digital aspects and the desire for authentic connections. It emphasises dating

experiences' potential for personal growth and identity evolution, aligning with cognitive-behavioural therapy principles.

In conclusion, the chapter synthesises the study's findings within a broader socio-cultural and clinical context, guiding future research and practice attuned to the millennial generation's unique challenges.

6.2 Understanding the emergent themes in the context of existing literature on social anxiety and dating

This section delves into the interplay between the emergent themes identified from participant narratives and the broader literature on social anxiety in dating. It examines how societal, cultural, and linguistic elements intertwine with intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics and the environmental factors influencing individuals with social anxiety. Through this exploration, we consider how these interactions contribute to the reconfiguration of self-concept, shedding light on the transformative journey of self-discovery and the redefinition of personal identity within social contexts. The discussion aligns with existing theoretical constructs and extends the dialogue, offering new perspectives on the multifaceted experiences of social anxiety amid the complexities of modern romantic relationships.

6.2.1 Theme 1: Societal and Cultural Baggage - Societal and Cultural Norms on Perception of Self

This theme delves into the complex interplay between societal expectations, cultural conditioning, and their profound impact on self-perception among men with social anxiety. It mainly focuses on the millennial demographic, born between 1981 and 1996, who navigate both traditional and modern societal influences in dating and social

interactions, as outlined by Rauch (2018) and Dimock (2019). The collective experiences of these participants reveal intense internal conflicts within the realm of gendered stereotypes and cultural complexities. Their journey through dating, intensified by millennials' inclination towards long-term relationships, amplifies the impact of societal norms on their self-perception and social anxiety, resonating with the findings of Watkins and Beckmeyer (2019) and Dalessandro (2021).

The accounts highlight the cognitive model of social anxiety proposed by Clark and Wells (1995), showing how diverse societal, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds complicate the communication and cultural integration challenges millennials face. This model explains how feared social situations activate a response that reinforces social anxiety, a concept supported by Kim (1994) and Oetzel (1998a, 1998b). These experiences reflect a generational shift in attitudes towards masculinity and vulnerability, particularly in the context of emotional expression among millennial men (Asher et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the findings align with cognitive theories by Clark and Wells (1995) and Rapee & Heimberg (1997), discussing the societal paradox of maintaining assertiveness and emotional stoicism, core to traditional masculinity. This paradox contrasts with personal experiences of social anxiety, leading to dissonance and reserved behaviour, as observed by Alden and Bieling (1998). The narrative also sheds light on the heightened performance anxiety and the burden of managing romantic pursuits within the confines of gender norms (Eaton & Rose, 2011).

The study enriches the discourse by examining the role of self-presentation in managing familial, societal, and cultural pressures, as per Goffman (1959) and Leary (1995). This strategic self-presentation is aimed at maintaining a favourable image to mitigate the risk

of negative judgment, reflecting a guarded approach to emotional expression influencing the intensity of social anxiety. The collective narratives reveal a restrictive emotional mould that can lead to isolation and hinder emotional literacy development, supporting Hofmann, Asnaani, and Hinton's (2010) findings on cultural variance in social anxiety. Moreover, recurring negative social experiences, especially in dating and social integration, may lead to a 'shattering' of fundamental beliefs about self and the world, in line with Janoff-Bulman's (1992) theory. The study highlights how parental styles and early familial interactions shape social anxiety and self-perception, echoing broader literature on the link between parenting behaviours and social anxiety symptoms in children (Verhoeven et al., 2012; Zhang & Li, 2011).

Adding another layer to this narrative, the experiences within the LGBTQ+ community offer a counterpoint to traditional narratives. Emotional expression within this community is seen as a form of resistance to societal disapproval, a theme echoed in Fullwood et al.'s (2019) qualitative data and Kimmel's (2008) discourse on marginalisation and self-acceptance. This highlights the dynamic of pursuing validation as an act of asserting worth in a society that often marginalises these identities.

The study also dissects the profound role of culture and language in shaping emotional experiences. Insights from Kapoor (2020) and Gulati (2017) suggest that a guarded approach to emotional expression serves as a protective mechanism against judgment. The challenges of language as a barrier to emotional expression and cultural integration resonate with the broader discussions by Kim (1994) and Oetzel (1998a, 1998b).

The study's exploration of personal and shared experiences underscores the pressing need for a cultural reassessment of masculinity norms, as suggested by Asher, Asnaani, &

Aderka (2017), emphasising the necessity for more inclusive and diverse research to fully understand the complexities of social anxiety in the context of modern relationships. Millennials, including the participants, encounter varied challenges and opportunities in navigating online and traditional dating platforms, reflecting distinct dynamics in their social interactions and self-perception (Dalessandro, 2021; Tashiro, 2014; Twenge et al., 2019). These narratives collectively advocate for a more encompassing view of emotional expression that allows men to seek support and develop a holistic identity that embraces the full spectrum of emotional experiences.

By providing a vivid illustration of the silent yet profound struggles and negotiations that men undergo, the study makes a distinctive contribution to the literature. It offers fresh insights into the systemic issues surrounding emotional expression and resilience development. Moreover, by elucidating the role of language as a nuanced barrier to emotional expression and social connection, the study adds a novel dimension to the discourse on social anxiety. It also highlights the intersectionality of social anxiety with sexuality, which underlines the diverse challenges and pathways to validation for men within the LGBTQ+ community, a theme underlined by Mahon et al. (2021). Their research notes that sexual minority individuals consistently appear at a higher risk for social anxiety symptoms than heterosexuals, highlighting the amplified social anxiety risks within these communities. Participants' narratives echo this finding, portraying how societal disapproval and the internalised need for self-validation intertwine to shape their social interactions and self-perception.

The study's findings emphasise the need for a cultural and linguistic re-evaluation of traditional masculinity norms, advocating for a broader understanding of emotional expression and identity formation among men across different cultures and linguistic

backgrounds. This contribution is a testament to the study's qualitative approach, which enriches the understanding of how societal expectations and cultural heritage shape the internal emotional landscape of men, suggesting pathways for future research to explore these dynamics further.

6.2.2 Theme 2: Navigating the Current Dating Landscape through the Anxious Self

This theme weaves a narrative that traverses the inner terrains of social anxiety within the realm of modern romance. Representative of the millennial generation, the cohort in this study engages in both traditional and contemporary dating practices, reflecting the evolving nature of romantic connections (Dixon, 2022; Tashiro, 2014; Twenge et al., 2019). This collective experience underlines the complexities and nuances of dating while managing social anxiety.

Millennials' inclination towards long-term relationships adds significant weight to their social interactions, complicating their navigation through an already anxious landscape (Dalessandro, 2021; Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2019). As proposed by Clark and Wells (1995), the cognitive model of social anxiety speaks to the maladaptive beliefs and assumptions that shape these interactions. Furthermore, the study delves into the anticipatory anxiety characteristic of social anxiety disorder (SAD), as described by Clark (2001), highlighting concerns such as the fear of judgment and future solitude.

The study reveals the conflict between self-perception and the fear of being perceived as inadequate, aligning with Goffman’s (1959) and Leary’s (1995) self-presentation theory. This struggle is particularly acute in the context of evolving norms of masculinity and emotional expression, as discussed by Asher, Asnaani, and Aderka (2017). In the

LGBTQ+ community, these concerns are heightened, as evidenced by Mahon et al. (2021), who note the increased social anxiety risks faced by sexual minorities.

The narratives also illuminate the theory of shattered assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), where negative social experiences challenge core beliefs and contribute to the persistence of social anxiety. The study shows how this phenomenon impacts romantic relationships, with fears of instability and early termination characteristic of those with SAD (Aderka et al., 2012; Alden & Taylor, 2004).

As participants prepare for dating, the analysis explores different approaches to managing self-presentation. Some adopt minimalist strategies, potentially increasing anxiety during dates, while others employ meticulous routines to mitigate anticipatory anxiety and post-event rumination, as identified by Clark and Wells (1995) as maintaining factors of SAD. The concept of preparing psychological 'armour' for dating reflects the use of protective strategies to manage vulnerabilities in dating, as per Janoff-Bulman (1992). This preparation signifies the intricate relationship between self-esteem, social anxiety, and the quest for relational security.

The theme expands into the "augmented" dating experience, highlighting the critical role of digital platforms in forming connections, especially for individuals with limited social circles. The reliance on dating apps and the anxiety surrounding online engagements reflect societal concerns about judgment in online dating environments (Gibbs et al., 2011; Stephure et al., 2009). For sexual minorities, these platforms offer essential opportunities for interaction, as noted by Mahon et al. (2021).

Millennials face unique challenges in dating, such as navigating the intersection of digital and face-to-face interactions. This blurring of lines can intensify anxiety, making the dating landscape increasingly complex (Dalessandro, 2021). The narratives indicate that online interactions serve as a means to filter potential dates and manage anxiety, but this can lead to tensions between the presented and the actual self. The ambiguous nature of online communication can heighten social anxiety, especially in initial encounters (Poley & Luo, 2012; Stevens & Morris, 2007; Stinson & Jeske, 2016).

The stories of these men illustrate the paradox of modern dating: the greater the engagement with the virtual aspect, the stronger the craving for the authenticity and immediacy of real-life connections. This paradox is particularly relevant to the millennial generation, who are redefining the norms of dating and intimacy in an era marked by technological advancements and shifting cultural values (Tashiro, 2014; Twenge et al., 2019). While the participants' accounts are deeply personal, it is essential to consider the cultural context which informs their anxiety. As Hofmann, Asnaani, and Hinton (2010) note, cultural norms dictate social conduct and success, thereby influencing the manifestation of social anxiety and its impact on individuals' perceptions and behaviours. This dynamic underscores the need for genuine interactions, a theme deeply felt within the LGBTQ+ community, where digital inclusivity can be both a bridge to relationships and a reflection of the barriers faced in traditional dating scenarios. The research by Mahon et al. (2021) further substantiates the unique psychological challenges faced by sexual minorities, amplifying the complexity and intensity of the social anxiety experienced in the dating landscape.

This theme uniquely contributes to the existing literature on social anxiety, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community, by providing an in-depth exploration of individual

experiences in the contemporary dating landscape. While prior research, such as the study by Mahon et al. (2021), has highlighted higher risks of social anxiety symptoms among sexual minorities, this research delves deeper into the personal narratives of these individuals. It offers rich, qualitative insights into their daily realities and their specific challenges. Focusing on the nuanced interplay between internal anxieties and external social interactions in dating scenarios, this study uncovers the intricate coping mechanisms and psychological strategies employed in digital and face-to-face dating environments. The emphasis on personal stories and lived experiences enriches the theoretical frameworks of social anxiety and provides a more holistic view of the emotional landscapes navigated by individuals in their pursuit of romantic connections. This approach significantly enhances our understanding of social anxiety within diverse populations, offering a comprehensive and empathetic perspective on the experiences of sexual minorities in the realm of dating. Additionally, by situating these individual experiences within the broader context of millennial dating behaviours, which intertwine traditional courtship with the dynamic realm of digital interaction, the study sheds light on the complex fabric of romantic pursuit that is unique to this generation's quest for long-term relationships (Dalessandro, 2021; Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2019).

6.2.3 Theme 3: Playing the Dating Game

In the multifaceted realm of modern dating, individuals with social anxiety navigate through a labyrinth of challenges and experiences. This theme, "Playing the Dating Game," encapsulates a journey that intertwines the intricate interplay of intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics set against the evolving backdrop of the digital era. Here, the complexities of internal states, heightened self-awareness, and the nuances of relational interactions coalesce, further influenced by the choice of setting and timing. For millennials, this presents a unique landscape where traditional aspects of romance blend

seamlessly with the challenges and opportunities of contemporary dating (Twenge et al., 2019).

Central to this narrative is the intrapersonal dynamics that govern the internal states of individuals with social anxiety during dating. Participants collectively describe heightened self-focused attention and intense self-monitoring, resonating with the cognitive models of social anxiety proposed by Clark and Wells (1995) and further elaborated by Clark (2001). This process creates an 'internal movie' that often amplifies fears, leading to a tendency to overlook or discount external feedback that could contradict negative self-perceptions. Such cognitive distortions activate an 'anxiety program,' resulting in biased feedback loops and the maintenance of erroneous schemas. The digital age, with its lens of social media, further exacerbates these fears by amplifying the dread of judgment and reinforcing patterns of self-criticism (Asher et al., 2017; Dalessandro, 2021). Additionally, the omnipresence of digital dating intensifies the challenge of self-presentation, requiring individuals to negotiate a balance between authentic self-expression and the societal expectations of crafting an online persona (Tashiro, 2014). The participants shared experiences underscore the intense pressure of self-presentation inherent in social anxiety, where the drive to make a favourable impression is constantly challenged by the fear of falling short, a concept that aligns with the motivational aspects of self-presentation theories (Leary, 1983; Leary & Kowalski, 1995)

In examining interpersonal dynamics, the theme reveals how internal narratives and the quest for emotional and mental synchrony during a date mirror the cognitive assessments influencing social anxiety (Clark, 1995). As participants navigate the intricacies of romantic encounters, their shared experiences bring to light concerns about personal

presentation and the fear of negative evaluation. These aspects are firmly rooted in the motivational components of self-presentation theories, as described by Leary (1983) and Leary & Kowalski (1995). The empirical literature provides further context to these experiences, highlighting that individuals with SAD often encounter significant challenges in forming and sustaining intimate relationships. This often results in relationships characterised by reduced intimacy, disclosure, and emotional expression, as evidenced in studies by Aderka et al. (2012) and Davila and Beck (2002). Additionally, societal standards regarding attractiveness and the pressures to make favourable impressions can intensify these interpersonal challenges, as Vriends et al. (2017) noted.

The theme then explores the critical role of setting and timing in shaping the dating experience. Participants' strategic choices of date venues and moments are revealed as collective tactics to manage internal anxieties. Familiar environments or social lubricants emerge as methods to mitigate the unpredictability and anxiety of dating encounters (Kashdan et al., 2014). The selection of date venues, especially for individuals within the LGBTQ+ community, underscores the need for environments that align with identity and minimise social anxiety, resonating with research on authenticity in social functioning (Mahon et al., 2021; Plasencia et al., 2016). Punctuality, ambience, and venue selection are highlighted as factors that influence the course and outcome of a date, illustrating the role of social context in fostering deeper engagement despite potential anxiety (Hope et al., 2006; Kashdan et al., 2014).

Synthesising these various elements, "Playing the Dating Game" emerges as an integrated narrative that reflects millennials' collective efforts and experiences contending with social anxiety in the dating landscape. This story weaves together internal self-perceptions with the complexities of interpersonal dynamics, all set within the external

environment of a modern, digitally-influenced dating world. It offers a unique perspective on how individuals with social anxiety approach and experience dating, illuminating both the transformative potential and the inherent challenges in their quest for romantic connections. This comprehensive view, blending individual narratives with cognitive-behavioural insights and empirical findings, elucidates how millennials navigate the challenges and opportunities of dating in the digital age.

This study's exploration uniquely contributes to understanding social anxiety in dating by unveiling the complex interplay of internal narratives and external influences among millennials. A distinctive finding is the concept of an 'internal movie,' a term coined by participants to describe the heightened self-focused attention and introspection that govern their dating experiences. This internal lens, often amplified by societal pressures and the omnipresence of digital platforms, profoundly shapes their self-perception, emotional responses, and interpersonal interactions. Moreover, a significant revelation from this study is how participants, particularly those within the LGBTQ+ community, actively modify their environments to manage their social anxiety. This finding diverges from previous research that predominantly focused on the passive impact of environments on emotional states. It highlights the proactive strategies individuals employ to shape their surroundings, a crucial factor in navigating the dating landscape with social anxiety. This active engagement in altering environments is not just a coping mechanism but also a form of empowerment, especially in contexts where inclusivity and safety are paramount. These findings enrich the literature by providing deeper insights into the multifaceted dimensions of social anxiety in dating, particularly emphasising millennials' unique challenges and adaptive strategies in navigating the intricate landscape of modern romance.

6.2.4 Theme 4: Game Over, Restart? - Post Date Evolving Self - Perception

In synthesising the narratives from the study participants, "Game Over, Restart? - Post Date Evolving Self-Perception" serves as an overarching theme encompassing the multifaceted experiences of individuals with Social Anxiety in the context of dating. This theme examines the temporal shifts in self-perception post-dating and the enduring changes that emerge from the dating process, articulating a journey from transient self-assessment influenced by immediate social feedback to lasting personal transformation through self-reflection and growth.

Drawing from the cognitive model of social anxiety by Clark and Wells (1995), the theme explores how dating experiences act as both mirrors and catalysts. On the one hand, they reflect momentary self-appraisals shaped by social interactions; on the other, they serve as platforms for deeper self-discovery and evolution. This duality highlights the ephemerality of self-esteem boosts following successful dates and the reliance on external validation, counterbalanced by a realisation of the importance of internal fulfilment.

The cognitive and affective fluctuations experienced during and after dates resonate with Clark and Wells' model, where short-lived relief from social anxiety disorder (SAD) symptoms depends on others' approval. This reliance is juxtaposed with the eventual shift towards self-validation mechanisms, illustrating a pivotal change in personal growth and self-concept.

The theme delves into the cyclical nature of SAD, where anticipatory anxiety and post-event rumination create a complex tapestry of self-assessment. Participants' coping mechanisms, spanning from humour to self-blame, reflect the self-efficacy principles by Bandura (1997) and the shattered assumptions theory by Janoff-Bulman (1992). These

strategies, emblematic of the cognitive model by Clark and Wells, highlight the quest for external validation and the harsh internal critic's narrative upon perceived social failures.

The narratives also showcase an evolution towards authentic self-representation and reduced performance anxiety in dating contexts. This aligns with the research by Plasencia, Taylor, and Alden (2016) regarding authenticity and social functioning, particularly in the context of evolving norms of masculinity and emotional expression.

Additionally, the insights from Fullwood et al. (2019) offer a broader sociocultural context, delving into the psychological effects of online dating and traditional gender norms. This research parallels the participants' experiences, underscoring the interplay between societal expectations, individual resilience, and identity formation within the digital dating milieu.

This theme delves into the transformative potential inherent in the dating experiences of individuals with SAD. It traces the oscillating self-perceptions post-dating, shaped by cognitive and affective components of social anxiety, to a deeper, more enduring process of self-discovery. The millennial context further colours these experiences, as the digital landscape often accelerates and intensifies the temporal shifts in self-perception. The ubiquitous nature of online dating, social media, and real-time feedback loops can magnify the impact of dating experiences, challenging millennials to navigate a complex web of self-presentation and authenticity (Twenge et al., 2019). The participants' stories collectively reveal the transformative potential of dating as an experiential crucible that refines and redefines the self, fostering resilience and self-compassion in the face of social adversity, with the added layer of navigating the digital zeitgeist. This synthesis of cognitive-behavioural insights with individual narratives underscores the significance of

personal growth and the gradual evolution towards an internally validated and self-assured identity within the unique milieu of the millennial generation.

Reflecting on these narratives, it becomes evident that the participants' dating experiences closely mirror the process of behavioural experiments advocated by Clark and Beck (2011) in cognitive-behavioural therapy. These self-guided encounters in the dating world, amplified by the immediacy and pervasiveness of digital interaction, can be viewed as natural, real-world behavioural experiments where participants test and confront their social anxiety-related beliefs. This synthesis of cognitive-behavioural insights with individual narratives underscores the significance of personal growth and the gradual evolution towards an internally validated and self-assured identity. Through these experiences, participants challenge their fears and engage in cognitive restructuring, an essential component of therapeutic change. This alignment with therapeutic principles within the digital zeitgeist suggests a subconscious yet effective journey towards self-improvement, further solidifying the role of experiential learning in managing and potentially alleviating symptoms of SAD within the millennial generation.

The unique contribution of this study to the existing literature lies in its detailed exploration of how millennials' dating experiences serve as a platform for cognitive restructuring and personal growth, particularly for individuals with social anxiety. By meticulously analysing the oscillation between reliance on external validation and the development of internal resilience mechanisms, this research uncovers the nuanced process of self-transformation post-dating. This study distinctively highlights the interplay between transient self-assessment and enduring personal evolution, offering fresh insights into the role of social interactions in shaping self-perception. Moreover, the emphasis on the millennial generation’s engagement with digital dating platforms sheds

light on the contemporary challenges and opportunities these platforms present in managing social anxiety. These findings contribute a novel perspective to understanding social anxiety in romantic contexts, emphasising the transformative power of dating experiences and their role in fostering an internally validated and self-assured identity.

6.3 Implications on Clinical Practice

An in-depth analysis of participant narratives through the lens of the existing literature on social anxiety and dating reveals that no single theoretical framework can encapsulate the nuanced and complex realities of individuals. Diverse factors like stereotypes, age, gender expression, sexual orientation, and cultural backgrounds demand a tailored approach to clinical intervention (Cooper, 2016; Turnamian & Liu, 2023). Integrating considerations of gender identity and cultural specificity into therapeutic modalities has proven effective in ameliorating anxiety and depression (Cho, 2019; Graham-LoPresti et al., 2017). This multifocal lens aligns with the ethos of counselling psychology, which values the richness of individual narratives and the spectrum of human emotions (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2008; Walsh & Frankland, 2009; Woolfe, 1996).

For millennial men with social anxiety in the dating sphere, an intersectional approach unveils layers of complexity shaped by generational influences, shifting gender norms, and the digital milieu. Online dating apps and social media platforms offer safer initial contact points but also impose stressors like managing online personas and dealing with varnished portrayals of others' lives, which can exacerbate anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.

Moreover, entrenched societal expectations around masculinity add hurdles, especially for those with social anxiety. The pressure to conform to traditional masculine roles in

romantic settings often clashes with personal comfort, creating dissonance further complicated by men's reluctance to express vulnerability and seek support (rooted in deep-seated gender norms). Addressing these dynamics necessitates bespoke therapeutic strategies, including skill-building for effective digital communication, bolstering self-confidence, and nurturing emotional openness. Practitioners could deconstruct and redefine outdated notions of masculinity to facilitate satisfying romantic relationships. Comprehending millennials' unique socioeconomic, cultural, and technological fabric is instrumental in crafting empathetic therapeutic environments that resonate with their distinctive experiences.

The unique insights from this study indicate that a tailored approach to therapy can significantly benefit millennial men dealing with social anxiety in dating contexts. Specifically, the concept of 'internal movies'—the heightened self-focus and introspection experienced by participants—should be addressed in therapy. Clinicians can help clients identify these internal narratives and work towards reframing them to reduce anxiety and enhance self-perception. Additionally, the study's findings on proactive environment modification strategies used by participants, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community, suggest that therapy should incorporate discussions about safe and empowering environments. Encouraging clients to seek or create supportive social contexts can enhance their dating experiences and overall mental well-being.

Furthermore, the digital landscape's role in modern dating for millennials underscores the need for therapeutic interventions to include digital literacy and etiquette in the treatment plan. Helping clients navigate online dating platforms, manage their online personas, and cope with the unique stressors of digital communication can empower them to engage more confidently in online and offline romantic interactions.

Employing an intersectional stance in counselling psychology ensures therapeutic practices are finely tuned to the lived realities of millennial men facing social anxiety, especially in dating. This approach seeks to endow them with coping mechanisms and insights pertinent to their social context, enabling them to journey through their romantic lives with enhanced self-assurance and insight. When integrated with CBT—endorsed by NICE (2013) for social anxiety treatment—this intersectional approach can constitute a powerful therapeutic framework. CBT's emphasis on reshaping unhelpful thought patterns and behaviours (Clark & Beck, 2011) is congruent with addressing the distinctive challenges millennial men confront in dating. A culturally responsive CBT approach would involve identifying cognitive distortions and behaviours informed by intersectional identities and the distinct pressures of a digitally dominated dating scene. Techniques such as cognitive restructuring can be customised to dismantle thoughts grounded in societal and generational pressures. Similarly, behavioural experiments and exposure strategies—central to CBT— can be adapted to help clients gradually face and manage their anxieties in real-world dating scenarios, considering the unique social dynamics of the digital age.

Merging intersectional principles with CBT's methodical nature offers a comprehensive and effective treatment modality for millennial men with social anxiety, supporting them in navigating their dating experiences with increased self-awareness, confidence, and resilience. This integrated method not only aids in alleviating the symptoms of social anxiety but also addresses the broader societal and cultural forces that mould their dating experiences.

6.4 Future research

The findings of this study open several pathways for future research. One crucial area is the exploration of longitudinal outcomes of millennial men with social anxiety in the

evolving landscape of dating, particularly examining the long-term efficacy of tailored intersectional therapeutic approaches. Investigating the nuanced impact of digital dating platforms on social anxiety over time could provide deeper insights into the cyclic nature of anxiety in virtual versus in-person contexts. Additionally, the research could expand to include a more diverse cohort, examining how various intersectional identities beyond gender, such as race, socio-economic status, and cultural background, interact with social anxiety in dating. The role of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality and AI-driven simulations, in therapeutic settings warrants exploration, assessing their potential to create safe, controlled environments for exposure therapy and social skills training. Finally, a comparative analysis of different generational responses to social anxiety within dating contexts could highlight shifts in societal norms and their psychological implications, contributing to a generational theory of social anxiety.

6.5 Reflexivity: The Researcher's Lens

My journey as a millennial male, a foreigner in the U.K., and a non-native English speaker intersects with the participants' experiences. This shared demographic and experiential landscape offered both empathy and challenges in maintaining objectivity.

As part of the demographic I studied, my understanding of participants' experiences was uniquely deep, but it also raised questions about my biases and preconceptions. Continuous self-reflection was essential to discern how my background might colour my data interpretation. I consistently sought to separate my experiences from those of the participants. Reflecting on the narratives, I found parallels with my journey, offering insights into my biases and stereotypes, which I worked to acknowledge and set aside. This reflexivity involved understanding that my research journey was also a learning experience.

As a non-native English speaker analysing others' experiences, I was aware of the language nuances and cultural complexities, especially in the context of dating and social anxiety. This awareness guided my interpretations, ensuring linguistic subtleties were considered. Conducting this research provided insights into my perceptions of societal pressures and stereotypes related to dating and social anxiety. Analysing these narratives became a reflective mirror, revealing how societal norms shaped my thinking and interactions.

In conclusion, my reflexivity involved constant engagement with my background, perspectives, and experiences, navigating the line between empathy and objectivity, understanding and interpretation. This process ensured that the research accurately represented participants' lived experiences while offering personal growth and self-awareness.

6.6 Quality Assurance in IPA Research

Ensuring quality, this IPA study adhered to Yardley's (2000) principles: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. Sensitivity to context was achieved through a comprehensive literature review on social anxiety and dating. Commitment and rigour were demonstrated by following Smith et al.'s (2021) methodological steps and attending specialised workshops. Transparency was maintained through a detailed research diary documenting potential influences on interpretations. The study's design aimed to generate insights relevant to individuals with social anxiety and professionals, contributing novel perspectives to the field. Refer to the methodology chapter for a detailed explanation of these quality measures.

6.7 Conclusion

This study explored the interplay between social anxiety and dating among millennial men using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Through personal narratives, it highlighted how social anxiety manifests and evolves in modern dating's challenges and dynamics. The findings underscored the need for a multifaceted therapeutic approach embracing intersectionality and cultural, digital, and generational influences.

The research revealed that for millennial men, social anxiety in dating is both a barrier and a catalyst for self-reflection and identity transformation. Digital platforms' dual nature as sources of anxiety and tools for connection highlighted technology's role in millennials' romantic lives.

The insights gained extend beyond current literature, uniquely contributing to understanding social anxiety within digital dating and millennial socio-cultural dynamics. The study advocates for personalised and contextually relevant interventions, paving the way for future research and clinical practice enhancements.

Acknowledging the limitations of this research, recommendations for future studies and clinical practice have been proposed. These aim to broaden the knowledge base, inform evidence-based practice, and enhance support for millennials grappling with social anxiety in romantic relationships. This study enriches the academic discourse and advocates for nuanced and empathetic clinical support of a generation navigating the complex interweaving of personal, societal, and digital realms.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Study Advertisement

Dear x,

I am a third-year DPsych student at the University of East London, and I am conducting a qualitative research study as part of my Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology degree.

Title of the study: Exploring the dating experience of millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

The purpose of the study:

Research has shown that individuals who feel anxious in social situations tend to experience difficulties forming and maintaining close romantic relationships (Rodebaugh, 2009; Alden & Taylor, 2004, 2010). Several studies explore how social anxiety might affect initial interactions (dating), which is an imperative first step in forming long-term relationships (Berscheid & Regan, 2016). Most studies focus on improving psychological tools such as anxiety scales (Cuming & Rapee, 2010; Porter & Chambless, 2014) and are usually conducted in lab settings (Vriends et al., 2017; Vöncken & Dijk, 2013; Aderka et al., 2012). Therefore, they do not sufficiently represent "real-world" interactions and disregard the role of gender and context, which play a significant role in the expression of social anxiety (Vöncken & Dijk, 2013; Vriends et al., 2017). Finally, there is no study focusing on the most active age group in the dating scene (Statista, 2020) currently – Us, the millennials.

Therefore, using an interpretative phenomenological analysis design to explore the feelings, perceptions and unique experiences of millennial males who self-identify as

being anxious in social situations will bring their expectations and needs to the centre of future practices, facilitating Counselling Psychologists to deliver more nuanced interventions.

I am looking for males of every sexual orientation between 26 and 41 (millennials) who self-identify as anxious in social situations and have dated at least once over the past three months. Participants should not currently use any psychotropic medication and have not had under psychological therapy over the past year. Men interested in the study will be invited to participate in an online semi-structured interview, which will take place through MS Teams (if not an option over the phone) and will last about one hour. During the interview, participants will be encouraged to reflect on a recent dating experience.

Contact details: Lazaros Leonidis – Counselling Psychologist in training

University of East London

Email: u1615075@uel.ac.uk

Appendix B – Interview Schedule

- How does it feel being a male who identifies as being anxious? Possible prompts: How do you see yourself?
- Can you tell me what place anxiety has in your life at the moment? Possible prompts: What happens? How do you feel? How do you cope?
- Can you describe if and how anxiety affects your relationships with other people? Possible prompts: family, friends, work colleagues?
- Can you describe how your experience with dating is? Possible prompts: Can you give me a recent example?
- What is a typical way of meeting someone?
- Does how you meet someone affect how you feel when you go on a date with them?
- How do you go about getting ready for a date? Possible prompts: How do you prepare? How do you feel before going on a date? Any physical sensations?
- Can you tell me more about how you feel while being on a date? Possible prompts: How does this feeling manifest in your body? Are there any factors that impact the way you feel during the date? (e.g., environment)
- What does a good date look like for you? What does a bad date look like for you?

Appendix C – Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Exploring the dating experience of millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Contact person: Lazaros Leonidis

Email: u1615075@uel.ac.uk

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part or not, please carefully read through the following information which outlines what your participation would involve. Feel free to talk with others about the study (e.g., friends, family, etc.) before making your decision. If anything is unclear or you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on the above email.

Who am I?

My name is Lazaros Leonidis and I am a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology at the University of East London (UEL) and am studying for a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. As part of my studies, I am conducting the research that you are being invited to participate in.

What is the purpose of the research?

I am conducting research to explore and understand the dating experience of millennial males between the age of 26 and 41 who self-identify as being anxious in social situations. Studies suggest that people with social anxiety tend to have difficulties forming and maintaining romantic relationships, especially during the initial interactions' (dating) phase. Additionally, it was found that the gender and age of individuals play a significant role in the expression of social anxiety. To date, there is no qualitative research exploring the unique subjective experiences of millennial males, which leaves their needs unexplored and unaddressed. Therefore, exploring this topic can potentially inform and contribute to therapeutic practice as well as help to understand barriers to providing appropriate support to men with social anxiety.

Why have I been invited to take part?

To address the study aims, I am inviting males of every sexual orientation between 26 and 41 (millennials) who self-identify as anxious in social situations and have dated at least once over the past three months. Participants should not currently use any psychotropic medication and have not had under psychological therapy over the past year. Please note, it is entirely up to you whether you take part or not, participation is voluntary.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to take part?

If you agree to participate, you will be invited to attend an online semi-structured informal interview via Microsoft Teams or alternatively a telephone interview, which will be recorded. The interview will take about one hour of your time, and you will be asked to reflect on your experience of dating, i.e., what it means or meant for you to date as a man

who self identifies as being anxious in social situations, how whether it has impacted the way you see yourself etc.

Can I change my mind?

Yes, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw without explanation, disadvantage or consequence. Participation is voluntary and if you choose to withdraw from the interview or not participate, you can do so at any point of the study. Separately, you can also request to withdraw your data from being used even after you have taken part in the study, provided that this request is made within 3 weeks of the data being collected (after which point the data analysis will begin, and withdrawal will not be possible). If you withdraw, your data will not be used as part of the research.

Are there any disadvantages to taking part?

It is not anticipated that you will be adversely affected by taking part in the research, and all reasonable steps have been taken to minimise distress or harm of any kind. However, it is possible that your participation – or its after-effects – may make you feel uncomfortable in some way, therefore, information on additional supportive agencies will be provided.

How will the information I provide be kept secure and confidential?

All personal information will be anonymised and kept strictly confidential. Moreover, recorded interviews will be safely saved on OneDrive under pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants. All collected information will be stored under protected passwords. Any data shared will be in an anonymised form, and you will not be able to be identified or identifiable in any of the written reports or transcripts. The data of each participant will be identified with the help of a unique identifier, and it will be completely

anonymised and scrambled before sharing. Details of the unique identifier will be held securely with the researcher, and there will be no information within the shared data which will disclose the identity of any participant.

Anonymised interview transcripts and related data will not be shared with the general public; however, they will be shared with the research supervisor via secure UEL emails. This is needed to monitor the analysis and interpretation process. Anonymised transcripts might also be shared with the examiners for examinations purposes only. Examples of the analysed sections of the transcripts will be partially included within the appendices section of the final written thesis.

All recorded interviews, transcripts, analysis and notes will be securely stored upon the end of the assessment submission. Data will be deposited as soon as is practicable after the completion of the research, and as stated by the guidelines of the British Psychological Society (2021), data will be kept for five years following the completion of the study. Personal details of the participants will be kept safely stored by the researcher in case they request a summary of the research following its completion.

Please note that confidentiality will be subjected to legal and ethical practice constraints. For example, disclosing anything that raises the researcher's legal duty to report and disclosing serious or life-threatening risks to self or others may lead to a breach of confidentiality.

For the purposes of data protection, the University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University processes this information under the 'public task' condition contained in the General Data

Protection Regulation (GDPR). Where the University processes particularly sensitive data (known as 'special category data' in the GDPR), it does so because the processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information about how the University processes personal data please see www.uel.ac.uk/about/about-uel/governance/information-assurance/data-protection

What will happen to the results of the research?

The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publicly available on UEL's online Repository. Findings will also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, clinicians, public, etc.) through journal articles, conference presentations, talks, magazine articles, blogs. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally.

You will be given the option to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed for which relevant contact details will need to be provided.

I will securely store the anonymised research data for a maximum of 5 years, following which all data will be deleted.

Who has reviewed the research?

My research has been approved by the School of Psychology Ethics Committee. This means that the Committee's evaluation of this ethics application has been guided by the standards of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Lazaros Leonidis

Email: U1615075@uel.ac.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact my research supervisor ***Dr Sharon Cahill,*** School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,

Email: ***Cahill@uel.ac.uk***

or

Chair of School Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.

(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Exploring the dating experience of millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Contact person: Lazaros Leonidis

Email: u1615075@uel.ac.uk

	Please initial
I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet dated XX/XX/XXXX (version X) for the above study and that I have been given a copy to keep.	
I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time, without explanation or disadvantage.	
I understand that if I withdraw during the study, my data will not be used.	

I understand that I have 3 weeks from the date of the interview to withdraw my data from the study.	
I understand that the interview will be recorded using Microsoft Teams or in case of a telephone interview, a securely stored recording device will be used.	
I understand that my personal information and data, including audio/video recordings from the research will be securely stored and remain confidential. Only the research team will have access to this information, to which I give my permission.	
It has been explained to me what will happen to the data once the research has been completed.	
I understand that short, anonymised quotes from my interview may be used in material such as conference presentations, reports, articles in academic journals resulting from the study and that these will include personally identifiable information.	
I would like to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed and am willing to provide contact details for this to be sent to.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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Participant's Signature

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Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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……

Researcher's Signature

……

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Date

……..……

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Appendix D – Example Analysis Process

Experiential Statements	Transcript	Exploratory Notes
	371. do you prepare? Uh, do you do anything before going on a date?	(373-383)
	372.	
Rituals as a Protective Mechanism (373-377)	373. **Paul:** Oh, yes. I have a whole thing. I have a whole-- Okay. Because I've suffered for a long 374. time with massive low self-esteem, massive body dysmorphia, like to the max, um, I-- when I go 375. on the date-- and it's never a question of impressing the person 'cause I don't wanna impress, 376. 'cause I wanna be myself, right? But I have to have-- I have a ritual-- where, okay, every step of 377. this ritual is almost like putting a piece of suit of armor. So it's like I'm putting-- I'm getting ready	Descriptive: Describes a pre-date ritual due to past insecurities. Linguistic: Use of phrases "massive low self-esteem" and "body dysmorphia" highlighting profound emotional challenges, while "romantic fight" metaphorically frames the date as a battleground.
Familiarity and Reassurance through Rituals (380-383)	378. for, um, romantic fight. See what I mean? So rarely I would go on a date, um, straight after work. 379. Do you see what I mean? I would always go home, then get ready, then go on the date. And 380. also, because I've been on so many dates, I've really perfected the scenario of the date. And I 381. always do the same-I always do the same thing. It's literally almost like a step-by-step guide. 382. It's always the same. And I guess because that becomes a routine and it's familiar, then it's 383. reassuring. See what I mean?	Conceptual: Ritual as a protective "suit of armor" for Paul. Emphasises importance of preparation for confidence.
	384.	(389-393)
	385. **Researcher:** So it's like the way, uh, to make sure that the date will go-- it's like more as you 386. mentioned, like a ritual to cope with the date and feel like reassured and comfortable to go on 387. the date.	Descriptive: The ritual ensures he presents his best self and regains control.
	388.	
Regaining Control through Preparedness (389-392)	389. **Paul:** Exactly. Yeah, exactly. Because I know-I know that if I feel 100% good because of my 390. ritual, then I will-I will-I will present and be the very best version of me. Therefore, that's gonna 391. kill all-- potentially, hopefully, that will kill all un-comfortability or, you know, timidity in the other 392. person. And in-in a way, it's-it's a-it's a way of-- for me to regain control. Because if I'm prepared, 393. not a lot can go wrong. Do you see what I mean?	Linguistic: Phrases such as "100% good" underline an aspiration for perfection, "very best version of me" indicates a self-awareness, and "regain control" underscores his need for agency. Conceptual: Ritual boosts his confidence, giving control in dates. Importance of preparation in handling date uncertainties.
	394.	
	395. **Researcher:** Yeah. So like, you are trying to control again, to be like, as perfect as possible to 396. control any perceptions that the other person might receive from you, for example?	
	397.	
	398. **Paul:** I don't know. See, I don't know because when it comes to dates, whether it's purely sexual	(398-407)
	399. or romantic, deep down, I do feel very confident. Because in a way I would never go on a date	
Confidence in Dating but Physical Insecurity (404-406)	400. with a guy that intimidates me. Right? And there's not a lot. I'm gonna-I'm gonna be honest, 401. there's not a lot of people from the dating pool that would intimidate me because I've been doing 402. this for so long. But I don't think it's a question of, um, I think they're gonna see me in a certain 403. way. I don't think it's that because, um, I always make the conscious effort to be my-my normal 404. self. Okay. But that's when it comes to discussion, um, intellect, simula-stimulation. But when it 405. comes to physic-- like physically, that's where I need to have-- Um, I guess you're right, 'cause 406. physically I need to have my ritual to know that I'm now my best physical version. So I think 407. you're right. Yeah.	Descriptive: Paul is confident in dating but values his appearance ritual. Linguistic: "Feel very confident" conveys assurance; "best physical version" focuses on appearance. Conceptual: He is conversationally confident but needs physical assurance.

Appendix E – Example of Forming Group Experiential Statements

Group Experiential Theme (GET)	Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)	Subthemes (PET)	Experiential Statements	Quotes
Societal and Cultural Baggage (Societal and Cultural Norms on Perception of Self)	Navigating Masculinity Perceptions - Nick	Gendered Dynamics of Anxiety - Nick	Navigating masculinity amidst anxiety.	" What do you mean? How do- how do I feel being a male and being anxious like? Like...??" (Line 24-25) " Well, I think maybe because I'm too hard of myself, on myself, I think it's a bit sad, but I mean, now we live in these days where, um, everybody's coming forward with the, um, mental health issues. So I guess I just need to face that I'm not different than the rest of the people, I guess, ...you know?" (Line 30-33)
	Silent Struggles: Society, Culture and Family - Michael	Silent Struggles: Emotional and Mental Obstacles in the Dating Scene - Michael	Sexual Orientation and its Role in Anxiety	"Um, being a male, just for being a male, uh, I don't think so. Um, I think it has more maybe to do with my sexual orientation. Um, I date men, so I guess from my perspective, it's more a matter of sexual orientation than, um, sexual identity or gender. Um, because, for example, within the gay community, you have all these expectations or set of expectations that you need to meet, otherwise you're outside of the mainstream, uh, gay type of person. Like if you're not masculine enough or you're not masculine enough, funnily enough, [chuckles] uh, um, or you're not tall enough, you know, these kind of things that, um..." (139-146)
			Anxiety Across Identities: Gender and Orientation Interplay	"Yeah, it's true- it's true that I, um, women have all the expectations, of course. Like they have to look pretty, they have to wear makeup, they have to, you know, be skinny. Um, but it applies to us as well. Um, as gay people or male gay people, I guess straight males, from my perspective, I think it's easier for them. Um, but I don't have that experience as myself, so, um, I don't think I can comment from that. But from my perspective, yeah, it's way-- you could compare being a woman or being a gay man in this dating scene in terms of, um, anxiety or try to meet the expectations of, um, dating opposed to a straight man." (152-159)
			Unspoken Dating Anxieties	"Yes, because I don't think it is something that people really talk about." (24) "But it is something that happens to most of us, if not to all of us. Um, so it's important sometimes to bring up this conversation, um, and how you can tackle, uh, this anxiety and how to be more yourself and realize..re--realize that it, actually, happens to a lot of people because you- when it comes to anxiety or mental health, um, issues, you tend to isolate yourself." (28-32)
			Collective Emotional Landscapes	"Um, so I guess this is a good way of, kind of, openly talking-talking about it and sharing your experiences with, um, all other people and realizing that we are all in the same boat." (36-38)
			Emotional Stereotypes of Masculinity	"Yes. I mean, it's true that, um, men, in general, um, have these imposed, um, rule of- because that- of not talking about our feelings, in general." (167-168)
			Generational Emotion Revolution	"Because that is something that we were taught while growing up- Researcher: Mm-hmm. Michael: -um, by our older generation that is not okay to talk about your feelings. Men don't cry. Um, you know, so you have to be tough. And it's not until our inte- our generation grew up where we found out that it's, actually, okay to have feelings, to talk about your feelings, to have anxiety, depression, or any other mental health issues and, actually, talk about it, do something about it. Um, but, yes. I think that's the, um, only difference that I can see in regards to gender." (172-180)
			The Emotional Terrain: Men vs. Women	"So women are more allowed or more open about talking about their feelings and they might have better tools to deal with it because that is something that they grew up with already. Um, whereas to men, we've been always told to suppress our feelings and we had, literally, zero tools to deal with these kind of feelings when growing up. And if we picked up any tools during the ways because we either went to therapy or read about it or we have more open, we're surrounded by more open, uh minded people, you know?" (Michael, Lines 185-192)
		Perception of Self and Societal Constructs - Michael	Delayed Self-awareness and Navigation of Anxiety	"Um, so it took me a long time to realize that this is called anxiety, um, and even longer to start looking for tools to deal with it... Um, so, yes, I think if I grew up- if I had grown up in a household where this was more openly talked about or they let me develop my feelings as they would've naturally developed or my coping mechanisms or, yeah, the tools to deal with anxiety, basically, uh, it is something that I would be nowadays able to work much better with." (205-211)
			Gender Norms and Their Influence on Emotional Coping	"But, yes, I think by the way that I was brought up because I'm a man, it has a big role, not a big role, a role in how to- I am able to cope with my anxiety nowadays. Yes..." (214-216)
			Societal Constructs & Relationship Pressures	"Um, because also there are these, um, social stereotypes or constructions that, "Uh, you can be alone. You need to be with someone and form a family," and, uh, having ano, um, another half, you know what I mean?" (348-350)
			Cultural and Familial Impositions on Emotional Expression	"Um, yes. I guess this kind of having to live, uh, with, to these expect-expectations have a role in developing my anxiety. Um, yes, uh, 100%. [coughs] Um, and, yes, I think these also stereotypes of- because, obviously I threw, I grew up, um, with that being told that, uh, basically, to suppress my feelings and in my household feelings is never something that were never talked about or I was never encouraged to talk about my feelings" (199-204)
	Navigating Social, Cultural and Linguistic Norms - William	Societal Pressure, Silence, Dating Norms and Date Logistics - William	Societal Silence on Male Dating Struggles	"...because people don't talk much about it, especially the bad parts of it. Like, the frustration, or the anxiety. Especially in men, only talk about the good things, when you get dates and you hang out with a girl, or you-- You know, but the bad parts, when you get anxious, you don't get enough dates, you feel insecure, it's not really talked about." (William, Lines 13-15)
			Societal Expectations, Positive Reinforcement and Pressure to Co	"Yeah, the positive things. Yeah. Especially like, in gender roles, male, generally, like, when you get dates and you get with girls, it's something that you are proud of it, and you speak about it, but in no position when you don't get dates, it's like something to-- Like, shameful thing, I would say." (Lines 22-25)
			Evolution of Societal Perceptions on Male Mental Health	"Yeah, it's a little bit sad. Yeah. It's something that, well-- With tim— Which-- Yeah, with time, it's changing little by little, but still, we don't talk that much about it." (Lines 77-79)
			Pressure to Perform and Entertain	"About like-- When you are dating a girl, it's like, you have to perform, you have to entertain her. So you feel a bit of pressure of being, like, uh, leading the date, if that makes sense. I say yes, like, following along, but you are the one who has to invite her and do something funny, and be there, and like, uh, play a game, something like that. So it's a bit of pressure." (389-393)
			Expectation to Lead the Date	"Yes, because it's kind of expected of me to lead the date, so, yeah. Mm-hmm." (399-400)
			Influence of Gender Roles and Personal Experiences	"I would say the gender roles, or the tradition, or like-- All the girls I have met, my experiences." (404-405)
			Pressure to choose the Date Location	"William: I would say me, yeah. Researcher: And is this just because you want to, or because you are asked to? William: Mm, I'm asked to, or-- Yeah, normally I'm asked to, yeah." (497-502)
			Pressure to Initiate the Date	"I-- More like the-- I have the pressure of asking out the-the other person, the-the girl, so I have to be the one who plans the date, because it's very rare for me, to someone to ask me out, instead of the other way around, you know, I have to be-- Yeah, they want to ask someone out, so I am the one who does the plan or invites the person to do something, or-- Yeah." (510-514)
			Feeling of responsibility due to societal gender roles	"Yeah, because I have, in-- Because, as I mentioned, I have the pressure of being the one to ask the other person out. So it's-- So that the-- To the date, to be good is kind of my thing. The place, you know, it's not too crowded. The weather is nice, the idea was good, we can walk on the park, but maybe something happens. It's like-- It's kind of my responsibility that the date goes well." (William, Lines 675-680)
			Acknowledgment of perceived need for perfection in dating	" Researcher: So all of that is your responsibility, to make sure that everything will be perfect in order--for it to be good? William: Yeah, that's the thing, yeah." (682-685)
		Linguistic and Cultural Navigation in Relationships - William	The Confluence of Anxiety, Culture, and Language	"Sometimes-- Well, in social interactions, you feel out of place, or like-- Uh, I don't know. Especially, for example, in my case, living in London, as a foreigner, English is not my first language. So, sometimes, I feel anxious about talking with someone, or I don't understand completely. I can feel like I'm lost in the conversation, like everyone is speaking and I don't really follow it, or something. That makes me anxious." (William, Lines 107-113)
			Language & Cultural Challenges	"Mm, I don't think so, especially because this normally happens with, for example, like, I will say, British people, so they cannot relate to that feeling, so they don't realize it. (196-198_ "If I'm surrounded by Spanish people or something like that, maybe, sometimes, or more international people. But normally, with the people that happen, it's because they speak, like, native language and they speak, like, fast, or something. So they can't relate to that feeling. So, from my point of view, they don't really know what's happening with me in that moment." (202-207)
			Mutual Misunderstanding	"Researcher: Oh, okay. So that-- Ah, so you-you think that they might don't understand you, at the same time, you're also afraid that they might not understand you as well? William: Yeah-Yeah. That's right—"(209-213)
			Language as a Barrier to Authentic Expression	"It's not like I'm censoring on purpose, but I'm not-- I can't show myself how I am really.... With a language, it's like a filter, so that person is not knowing- - I feel like that person is not meeting me-me, it's just like a, you know, filtered version, in language, because you can express yourself in English, but you are not- - I don't know how to put it in words. Like, you are not being yourself, yourself, you know--you can express a thought, or a want, or something, but it's not really your way of talking, or how you express-- " (William, Lines 237-244)
			Simplification for Understandability	"Researcher: Ah, so you-you say that you filter yourself 'cause you try to make yourself more simple, in a way that other people might understand it. William: Yes. Sort of thing. Yeah." (Lines 246-249)
			Effort of Expression in a Second Language	"Yeah, it can happen. But also, instead of some- - Being something that I- that I feel good at doing it, only just speaking myself, it's more like a work that I have to put it in. (Mm-hmm.) So it's a bit little bit tiring, because also, I'm not really good in social situations, so it's-- I don't know, it's more tiring, instead of just relaxing and being myself. I'm talking to this person, I'm doing an effort to try to express myself. So, at the end, it's more like work than really feeling comfortable with that person." (Lines 258-264)
			Struggle to Connect due to Language Effort	"Researcher: Mm. Okay. So it's more like, I need to put way more effort to speak in English, (Yeah) -for example, and to connect with someone, and that makes it more, like, difficult for you to engage in that type of conversation? William: Yes. Yes. That's it." (266-270)

Societal and Cultural Baggage (Societal and Cultural Norms on Perception of Self)	**Social and Cultural Influnces of Anxiety - James**	**Societal Influences of Anxiety - James**	Change in Dating Dynamics Over Time	"it concerns a demography range that has experienced a lot of change in terms of how people approach each other in dating." (Line 17-19) " So with the technological evolution and everything, and in my personal experience as a gay man of course, also the fact that everything is more open and it's been more easy throughout the years. " (Line 19-20) " I think our age, our specific millennials have lived through this change both technologically and socially." (Line 22-23) "Researcher: And, um, do you think that it, as you mentioned, like it changed throughout the years, right, from more like classical dating to now apps? James: Totally. In terms of expectations, in terms of how you, uh, get in touch with people as well and also in the way also they present themselves." (26-30)
			Anxiety, Identity, & Societal Expectations	"I think it's about-- so to me, it's more about expectations." (Line 41-42) "as a man, probably the fact that I had sort of turned the expectation in what the dating system was" (Line 42-43) "as a gay person, you get inside a world that was underground. So you have to discover yourself without the rules" (Line 49-52) " And I guess in terms of not only having anxiety in relating to other people, you also have anxiety cause you don't know what to expect 'cause you've never been talking about it or hearing about it or you don't have any reference or model to follow. " (Line 52-55)
			Gender Stereotypes & Societal Expectations	"there's still this thing that the man has to be, uh, not unemotional but not sure when he is struggling. So, uh, you're expected to be sort of the alpha of the room.... So, yes, that's definitely-- it's not something expected from women in any context 'cause if they are like, "Oh, I don't feel well," or something, then it's always like, "Okay, yes, don't worry, da, da, da." Um, but if it's a man, then it's something that people still don't expect to happen." (James, Lines 84-92)
			Societal Stereotypes and Their Influence on Communication	"I think on me, yes. I'm not the most communicative person, so of course, in the years in the relationships I had not-- I mean with people in general, not on the--mental ones. But I started like trying to, um, express when something was wrong instead of closing or saying, you know, just raise your hand and say this I don't like, or this doesn't make me feel good, or I don't like that you behave like that, and stuff like that. While before it would be more, uh, ""Well, this is not for me, I'm just gonna change." (James, Lines 101-107)
		Cultural Influences of Anxiety - James	Influence of Language Barrier	"And I've added the language barrier on that, so it's a lot of fun." (Line 131)
			Manifestation of Anxiety in Social and Professional Contexts	"I think it has places in, uh, work--in terms of expectations. Uh, probably I would say family a little bit, uh, although less, always less and less, uh, in always for expectations." (Lines 112-114) "It's more like, uh, public context somehow. Like, um, the, I dunno even-- Um, I don't know, even at the supermarket when you're doing something and maybe you drop something like off ...cringe.., it's like that." (Lines 114-117)
			Concerns about Physical Appearance in the Gay Community	"And unfortunately, the gay community is very related to the body." (740-741)
			Compartmentalization in Relationships	"Um, I'm not sure if they are. Um, I would say maybe sometimes it's a bit, uh, reductive in-in the way that it's difficult, for example, to develop a friendship with a coworker because, of course, you put them in the coworker box so you-you don't want to go further than that. And, uh, um, well, with the family it's not actually a big deal 'cause, uh, you-- yeah, it's like you-you don't give the information about certain parts of your life, but, you know, you already know that you're in-- they're not interested in joining and you don't want them there anyway. So that's-that's more manageable I guess because you grew up with them, so it's easier. It's not like a stranger, like a coworker. Uh, but then at the same time, for someone new that you-you didn't know before, like a coworker, for me, it's like, it changes dramatically. So, I start very-- um, well, very working environment friendly, and then I just, uh, slowly start releasing things and-and yes. So--" (195-206)
	Social Expectations and External Factors in Anxiety Development - John	**External Factors affecting Anxiety**	The Challenge of Social Connections	"...I think it's quite, um, it's quite real, as in, especially, connecting ... from a social point ... in a city like London, or any big city ... I think this is the main problem. (John, Lines 15-18)
			Feeling Pessimistic About Society	"Mm, either myself-- It get-- It-it-it makes me kind of sad, I will say, because, um, you can-- you-- of course, you can-- i-it could happen that you're not a match with me, uh, especially when-- in some occasion, I was feeling not very good because I d-- maybe I didn't want to see that some personality were-were on this planet. It makes me sad in this-in the sense because I consider myself strong enough to react to some kind of, you know, to a bad word, or to some kind of feelings." (657-662)
			Concern for Others in the Dating Environment	"I always think, what about another guy that maybe is more insecure? What about someone else that is new to the, you know, to the kind of environment, to the co-community, let's say, but that makes me think that maybe this person, you know, this person could actually be dangerous, and, uh, could actually make s-someone else sad." (662-666)
			Concerns About Societal Isolation	"I will say more globally is about, um, maybe something that could give me more anxiety could be, where are we all going because it's-- Mm. The feeling is that, sometimes I have is that, we tend to be much, much more isolated, each of us." (125-127)
		The perception of Self in Society	Transient Nature of Relationships in Gay Culture	"The problem is lately what-what is happening is, literally, uh, a spike, and then it goes back to normal, you know, because it's that moment. Okay, we-we have a dating, maybe we spend good time together, but after that, it just vanish, or it comes back after very long time. Which makes me-- Which gives me a lot of assumptions, especially, in the- in the gay culture, [clears throat] to be fair." (244-248)
			Struggle with Personal Identity vs. Social Expectation	"I don't understand if actually is, um, the-- That the actual- the actual kind of meeting, ki-kind of dating, or is actually the picture that I'm giving, or is actually the average that people wants because I don't think they can- they can actually see sometimes, or I don't wanna show I'm-I'm still undecided about this, what is, um, that I'm also, you know, a person. I'm not only okay, I just wanna, you know, have sex and that's it...Yeah...." (276-281)
			Creation of Expectations in Relationships - Expectations and Socia	"you create some kind of expectation. You create- you create an image, sometimes, of course, you wanna put, or, uh, you wanna see the best pictures in, uh, yourself with, or the other person. And then, your mind start projecting a lot of, um, you know, expectation, you know, expectation as usual." (18-21)
			Dating Experiences and Expectations across Locations and Culture	"In general, because even when I was in Italy, I-I, um, I had the same, um, kind of experience sometimes." (30-31)
	Societal and Cultural Obstacles of Emotional Expression - Paul	**Societal Obstacles of Emotional Expression - Paul**	Curiosity and Surprise at Study's Novelty	"I think-I think it's something that is-- because I'm absolutely flabbergasted that it hasn't been done before. And I think again, maybe it's a generational issue that's been going on, but, um, I'm very curious-- When this is all gonna be digested. I'll be very curious to see what's the gist of all of it. Um, because I think it's such an interesting topic and I'm just absolutely surprised that nobody ever explored that. It's just a weird-- the weirdest thing." (24-28)
			Shift in Emotional Acceptance in Contemporary Times	"So when I look around me today, everybody, more or less in my age, I think we divested ourselves a little bit from that and we are a bit more-- well, a lot more okay with discussing our feelings." (46-48)
			Influence of Sexual Orientation on Emotional Expressiveness	"With that being said, I have to mention in my life that I've curved for myself in London, 98% of my friends, male friends are LGBT. And I do think that-that makes a difference because there's still-- There's some sort of stigma on straight men to kind of bottled up because then they have to-- it's more masculine and then you need to provide, they need to be strong all the time. So I think-- I would think that even still today, people of my age who are very much in that heteronormative lifestyle it's probably harder for them-- To talk about their emotions... You know, um, gay men, we never really care and we even indulge in calling each other with feminized-feminized names like sister, that kind of thing because we don't have that thing in our head of being a woman or feminine is a weakness, is a bad thing." (Paul, Lines 49-59)
			Challenge to Traditional Notions of Masculinity	"100% because-because we don't have that stigma of masculinity where you shouldn't be feeling all this and you shouldn't be crying or feel emotional or discussing your inner thoughts is then seen as either a weakness or something that's very feminine, which to me-- is a crazy concept, but I'm sure it's very much anchored in the hetero psyche." (67-70)
			Societal Expectations on Masculinity	"Well, because when you think about it, to me it makes even more sense. And if-- it-it's-- it-it should be even more acceptable to feel anxious as a man because you have all those pre-concepts, like preconceptions put on you. Right? As I said before, that you have to be strong no matter what and you shouldn't really be crying and you-you shouldn't-shouldn't be, um, opening up left, right, and center with your friend or family or whatever " (87-91)
			Personal Acceptance vs. Societal Imposition	"I don't. I don't because I don't see that as a weakness or a, um, a detrimental side of-of being male or masculine. Does that make sense? So for me, in my very personal case, that's never been, uh, a conflict." (104-106)
			Struggles with Societal Preconceptions	"when I was very much in my nuclear family and I was in a-another-another environment that I didn't choose that was imposed on me, you know, when I was growing up, that was very different because you're-- I was constantly feeling that any type of anxiety will be seen as a failure. Do you see what I mean? And that-that-that's even worse, isn't it?" (107-111)
			Quest for Validation due to Past Societal Rejections	"Because I guess in a way, really, particularly gay people, because we all grew up- we all grew up othered and undesirable, and, you know, everybody's telling you that you are an abomination and whatever... And I think most gay guys, we always, even if it's unconscious, we always looking for validation because we've been told our whole life that what you are is not valid, right? "(Paul, lines 453-459)
		Cultural Obstacles of Emotional Expression - Paul	Gendered Emotions	And at the time I was failing not society, but I was failing the preconception of what I should-should be. Because I was male. But if I had been woman, uh, female, I don't think I would ever have felt that. (114-116)
			Contrast of Gendered Cultural Experiences	"Particularly, um, when I was still living in-in France, when I was still living in-- with the people that I grew up with and all-- as I said, all those preconceptions, they were imposed on me, it was-it was a big-big pressure. But for example, my sister, I don't think had the same experience because it was more okay for her to feel emotional or feel down or feel downtrodden. See what I mean? So there's definitely, for me, if you-- if I think about the past, definitely a correlation between being male and being-- and feeling as if-- and feeling of—that you are a failure because you are feeling what should be normal human emotions and anxiety being one of them." (Paul, Lines 121-128)
			Translocation and Heightened Anxiety	"So I used to be absolutely crippled with anxiety. So when I arrived-- when I left my home country and I moved to the UK, the first five years, I had, uh, a-- a social anxiety that was so through the roof-- -that it-- at some point, I-I reached a point where I-I would-I would fear to talk to people in shops like a cashier." (133-136)
			Generational Gap in Emotional Expressiveness	"Well, I think if you look at-- if I look even in the generation of my brother-- Who is 11 years-11 years older, which I guess, I don't know if technically is a milleni-millennial because he was born in 79. So I'm not sure. But if I was thinking of my brother and up in my family or the people I grew up with-- Um, particularly men, it's just anything that has to do with emotions, it seems like it's a bit of a no-no to discuss-- Because it clearly that it was seen as a weakness." (41-45)
			Detachment from Family	"Family is a bit tricky for me because I've never, ever been close to my family. So, okay... Because growing up I felt so different from the rest of my family, like extended family or nuclear family, I felt so different that I always felt very disenfranchised and they were-- it was just very separate. ... In a way because I had no bond, that freed me from any, uh, pressure. Because nothing was expected of me". (Paul, Lines 247-254)

Appendix F – Ethics Approval

School of Psychology Ethics Committee

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

For research involving human participants

BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

Reviewer: Please complete sections in **blue** | **Student:** Please complete/read sections in **orange**

Details	
Reviewer:	**Angela Gosling**
Supervisor:	**Sharon Cahill**
Student:	**Lazaros Leonidis**
Course:	**Prof Doc Counselling**
Title of proposed study:	Exploring the dating experience of millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Checklist (Optional)			
	YES	**NO**	**N/A**
Concerns regarding study aims (e.g., ethically/morally questionable, unsuitable topic area for level of study, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Detailed account of participants, including inclusion and exclusion criteria	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding participants/target sample	☐	☐	☐
Detailed account of recruitment strategy	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding recruitment strategy	☐	☐	☐
All relevant study materials attached (e.g., freely available questionnaires, interview schedules, tests, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Study materials (e.g., questionnaires, tests, etc.) are appropriate for target sample	☐	☐	☐
Clear and detailed outline of data collection	☐	☐	☐
Data collection appropriate for target sample	☐	☐	☐
If deception being used, rationale provided, and appropriate steps followed to communicate study aims at a later point	☐	☐	☐
If data collection is not anonymous, appropriate steps taken at later stages to ensure participant anonymity (e.g., data analysis, dissemination, etc.) – anonymisation, pseudonymisation	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding data storage (e.g., location, type of data, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding data sharing (e.g., who will have access and how)	☐	☐	☐

Concerns regarding data retention (e.g., unspecified length of time, unclear why data will be retained/who will have access/where stored)	☐	☐	☐
If required, General Risk Assessment form attached	☐	☐	☐
Any physical/psychological risks/burdens to participants have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise	☐	☐	☐
Any physical/psychological risks to the researcher have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise	☐	☐	☐
If required, Country-Specific Risk Assessment form attached	☐	☐	☐
If required, a DBS or equivalent certificate number/information provided	☐	☐	☐
If required, permissions from recruiting organisations attached (e.g., school, charity organisation, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
All relevant information included in the participant information sheet (PIS)	☐	☐	☐
Information in the PIS is study specific	☐	☐	☐
Language used in the PIS is appropriate for the target audience	☐	☐	☐
All issues specific to the study are covered in the consent form	☐	☐	☐
Language used in the consent form is appropriate for the target audience	☐	☐	☐
All necessary information included in the participant debrief sheet	☐	☐	☐
Language used in the debrief sheet is appropriate for the target audience	☐	☐	☐
Study advertisement included	☐	☐	☐

Content of study advertisement is appropriate (e.g., researcher's personal contact details are not shared, appropriate language/visual material used, etc.)	☐	☐	☐

Decision options	
APPROVED	Ethics approval for the above-named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice), to the date it is submitted for assessment.
APPROVED - BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES	In this circumstance, the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made **before** the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box at the end of this form once all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to the supervisor. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records. **Minor amendments guidance:** typically involve clarifying/amending information presented to participants (e.g., in the PIS, instructions), further detailing of how data will be securely handled/stored, and/or ensuring consistency in information presented across materials.
NOT APPROVED - MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED	In this circumstance, a revised ethics application **must** be submitted and approved **before** any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application.

	Major amendments guidance: typically insufficient information has been provided, insufficient consideration given to several key aspects, there are serious concerns regarding any aspect of the project, and/or serious concerns in the candidate's ability to ethically, safely and sensitively execute the study.

Decision on the above-named proposed research study	
Please indicate the decision:	**APPROVED**

Minor amendments
Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

Major amendments
Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

Assessment of risk to researcher		
Has an adequate risk assessment been offered in the application form?	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐
	If no, please request resubmission with an **adequate risk assessment.**	
If the proposed research could expose the researcher to any kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard, please rate the degree of risk:		
HIGH	Please **do not approve a high-risk** application. Travel to countries/provinces/areas deemed to be high risk should not be permitted and an application not be approved on this basis. If unsure, please refer to the Chair of Ethics.	☐
MEDIUM	Approve but include appropriate recommendations in the below box.	☐
LOW	Approve and if necessary, include any recommendations in the below box.	☐

Reviewer recommendations in relation to risk (if any):	Please insert any recommendations

Reviewer's signature	
Reviewer: (Typed name to act as signature)	**agosling**
Date:	**07/10/2022**
This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Ethics Committee	
RESEARCHER PLEASE NOTE For the researcher and participants involved in the above-named study to be covered by UEL's Insurance, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place. For a copy of UEL's Personal Accident & Travel Insurance Policy, please see the Ethics Folder in the Psychology Noticeboard.	

Confirmation of minor amendments (Student to complete)	
I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data	
Student name:	Please type your full name

(Typed name to act as signature)	
Student number:	Please type your student number
Date:	Click or tap to enter a date
Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed if minor amendments to your ethics application are required	

Appendix G – Participant Debrief Sheet

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF SHEET

Exploring the dating experience of millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Thank you for participating in my research study on exploring the dating experience of millennial males that self-identify as being anxious in social situations This document offers information that may be relevant in light of you having now taken part.

How will my data be managed?

The University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. More detailed information is available in the Participant Information Sheet, which you received when you agreed to take part in the research.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publicly available on UEL's online Repository. Findings will also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, clinicians, public, etc.) through journal articles, conference presentations, talks, magazine articles, blogs. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally.

You will be given the option to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed for which relevant contact details will need to be provided.

What if I been adversely affected by taking part?

It is not anticipated that you will have been adversely affected by taking part in the research, and all reasonable steps have been taken to minimise distress or harm of any kind. Nevertheless, it is possible that your participation – or its after-effects – may have been challenging, distressing or uncomfortable in some way. If you have been affected in any of those ways, you may find the following resources/services helpful in relation to obtaining information and support:

- **HOPEline UK** — mental health crisis helpline 0800 068 41 41 (https://www.thehopeline.com/)
- **Shout** – 24/7 mental health text helpline 85258 (https://giveusashout.org/)
- **Together** – mental wellbeing service providing support to people involved in the Criminal Justice System (https://www.together-uk.org/our-mental-health-services/criminal-justice-mental-health/)
- **Samaritans** – 24/7 Emotional Support telephone line

116 123 (https://www.samaritans.org/)

- **Mind –** Mental Health Charity

  0300 123 3393 (https://www.mind.org.uk/)

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Lazaros Leonidis

Email: u1615075@uel.ac.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact my research supervisor **Dr Sharon Cahill**. School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,

Email: ***Cahill@uel.ac.uk***

or

Chair of School Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.

(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking part in my study