



# **Ofcom: Harnessing the power of serious games to protect people against romance scams - qualitative findings**

Insights from Interviews by Thinks Insight & Strategy

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01.

Key findings

# Key Findings

- **The serious game is seen as an effective learning tool.**
  - Participants remark that the learning mechanisms feel effective (in particular, repeated feedback).
  - The game does a good job of condensing down a long and complicated fraud journey into something bite-sized and accessible whilst also educational.

# What else was interesting?

- The **red flag concept works well as a motivator** for playing the game and facilitating learning.
- The game could be enhanced if it can be **tailored** to player demographics and preferences.
- The game has the **potential to be modular, more immersive and include competitive elements to drive greater engagement.** There was a positive response to introducing different difficulty levels and versions of the game.
- The game could **expand beyond romance fraud** e.g. banking/ financial fraud.
- **Consider where the game would be accessed to enhance engagement:** This could be from dating app companies at the times that a person might need it the most (e.g. onboarding, when chatting to a potential scammer online), or when learning about the risk of scams (as they are open to the information).

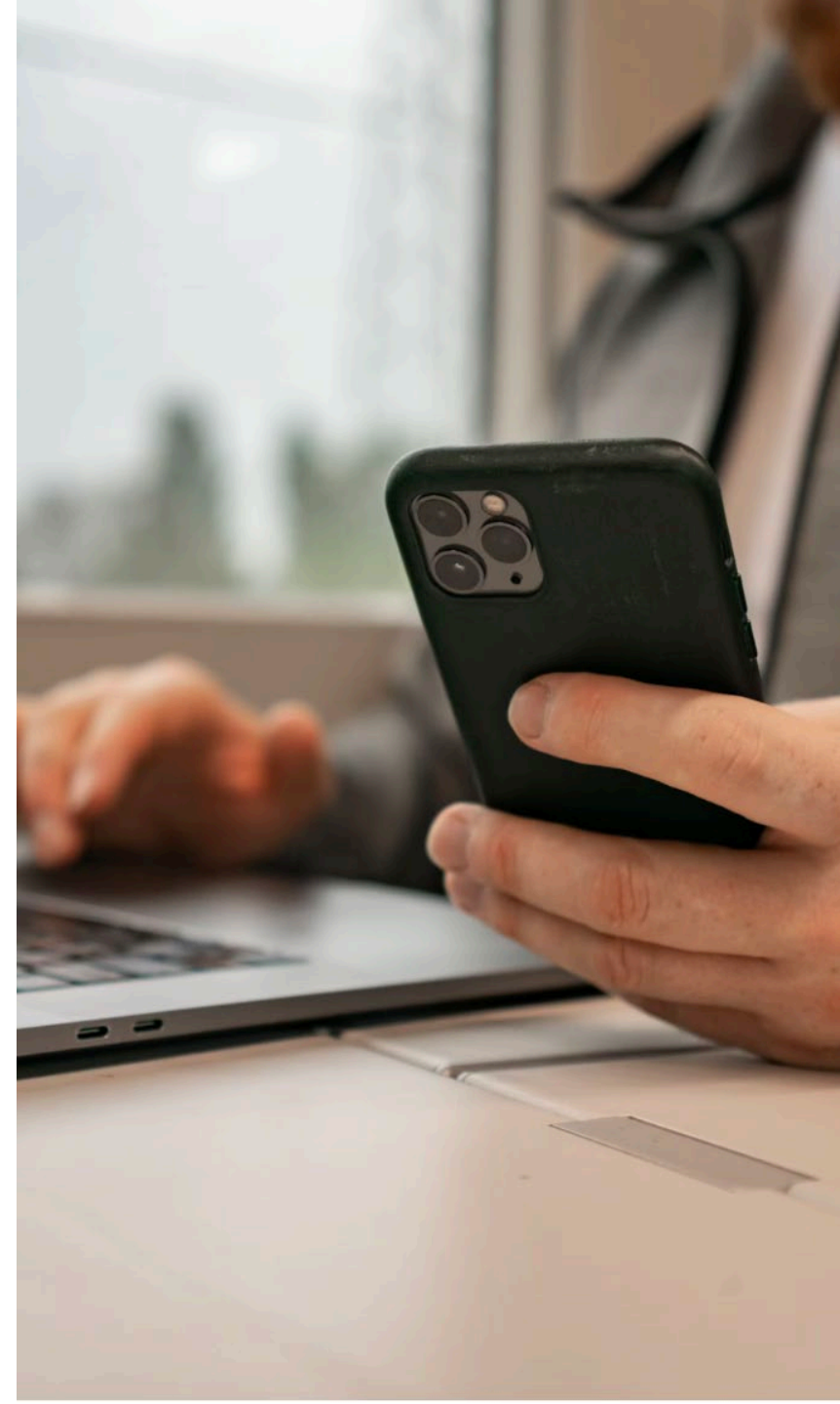
# 02.

## Background to the research



# Background and context to the research

- Ofcom has a duty under the Communications Act 2003 to promote and research media literacy and to carry out research into media literacy matters. Furthermore, the Online Safety Act (OSA) gives Ofcom responsibility for implementing online safety regulation. This research builds Ofcom's evidence in respect of our media literacy and online safety duties and informs Ofcom's understanding of the range of tools and interventions that can improve online safety.
- Ofcom and Thinks Behavioural Team, in collaboration with Dr. Harry Tattan-Birch (UCL), carried out a Randomised controlled trial (RCT) to test whether a serious game approach (i.e. using a game to promote behaviour change and educate) was an effective means of protecting people against romance scams.
- This qualitative research was commissioned to complement the RCT by providing contextual insights into participants' experiences and perceptions of the serious game. It was intended to enhance the interpretation of the trial's findings rather than serve as a standalone study. For information on the trial and the game, please refer to the [insights paper](#) and [technical report](#) ahead of reading this document.
- As such, the sample size of this qualitative research was relatively small (10), and findings should be treated as indicative only and considered alongside the findings of the RCT.



03.

Research objectives

# Research objectives and methodology

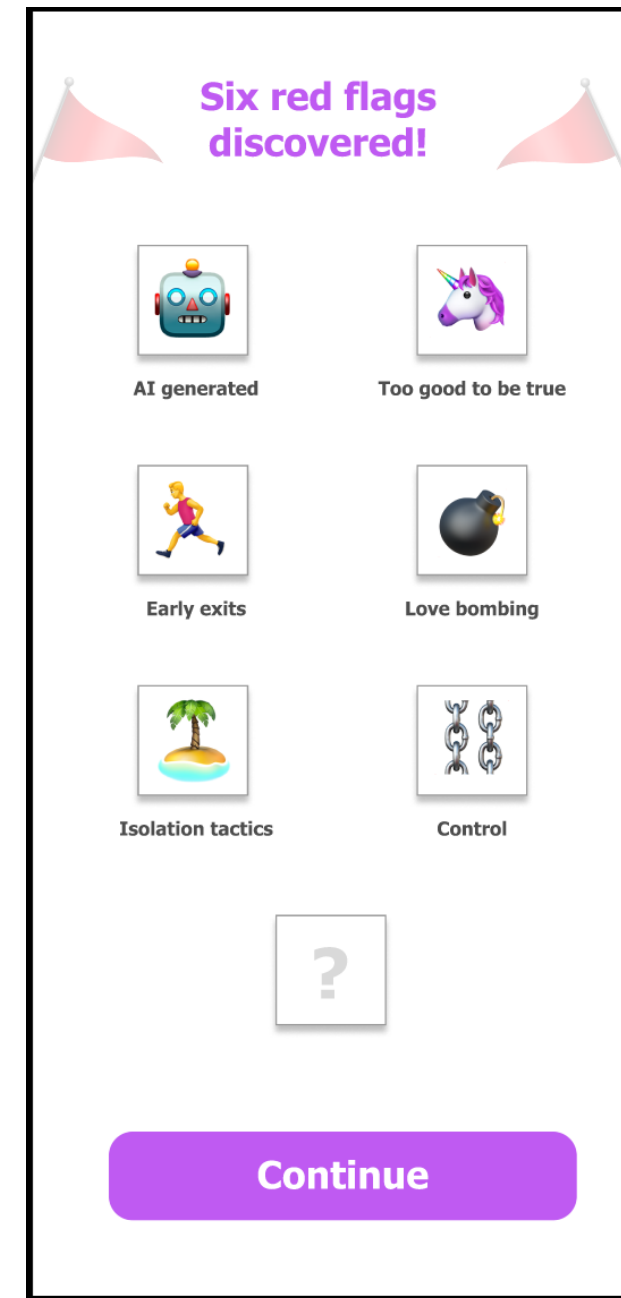
## Objectives

The aim of this qualitative research was to gain exploratory qualitative insight into the user experience of playing the serious game. Specific objectives were to explore:

- Responses to playing the game
- Potential improvements and ideas for scaling up the game
- Provide context to the findings of the RCT

## Methodology

Online in-depth interviews, lasting 45 minutes, were conducted with 10 participants who were asked to play the serious game, react in the moment and then reflect on their experience.



# The serious game: an overview

The serious game was developed by Ofcom and Thinks based on best practice behavioural science and principles for game design and input from a range of expert stakeholders.

The game was designed to be shorter and simpler than pre-existing serious games, such as the Bad News Game or Harmony Square, reducing the perceived effort of playing.

The game was broken down into three chapters:

- 1) set-up, where the context and rules of play were established;
- 2) choosing profiles, where initial red flags associated with profiles were uncovered;
- 3) messaging, where more nuanced red flags were uncovered within a few conversations.

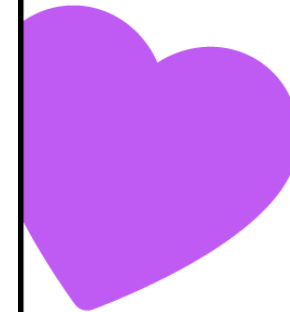
'Cognitive ease' was prioritised, with simple intuitive buttons and messages and easy-to-process language and visuals.

The design and interface of the game used existing 'mental models' of a dating app interface (e.g. clicking right to like a profile, clicking left to reject).

## Help your friend find their perfect match

For this game you need to help your friend Alex get back into dating after a breakup – it's time! ❤️

But beware... scammers lurk hiding their true intentions behind sweet words!



**Let's go**

Demo of game is [available here](#)

04.

Sample

# We recruited 10 participants from across the UK, adults (18+)

This research was used to gain exploratory qualitative insight into the user experience of playing the serious game.

A sample of 10 is relatively small, and we have focused this report on the user experience of engaging with the game. This helps to consider how the game could be further enhanced in the future.

Given the small sample size, **findings should be treated as indicative only and considered alongside the findings of the RCT.**

## Gender

Male	Female
5	5

## Age

18-30	31-50	51-69
4	4	2

## Ethnicity

White	Asian	Black	Mixed
6	1	2	1

## Sexual orientation

Homosexual	Bisexual	Heterosexual
1	1	8

## Relationship status

In a relationship	Single
3	7

## Dating app user

User	Non-user
6	4

Please note, we did not include previous experience of fraud/ scams within our screening process.

05.

Findings in detail

# Overall impressions of the game

# Overall, the game is well received, accessible, and felt to be reflective of real-life experiences

- It's a **powerful education tool**. Both the concept (of a game helping to spot scams) and gameplay (e.g. repeated feedback, learning by doing) are well received by participants.
- It's seen as a solid **foundation-level game**, and this version of the game is seen as a good introduction to the concept of romance scams.
- The game is felt to be **reflective of real-life experiences**. The game has broken down and condensed key warning signs that often appear over the course of a long romance fraud journey. It's acknowledged that the game makes these steps clear and feels realistic.
- Participants explicitly reference **effective learning mechanisms** (e.g. repeated feedback, badges) and interactions that help them easily understand the information throughout the play.

*"Fraud can be a long process. This does a good job of condensing it down into something bite-sized." – Male, 51-69*

*"As an education piece it's spot on in terms of length." – Female, 31-50*

*"About the right level. It's very easy to understand. Some people don't have a level of experience." – Female, 18-30*

*"I knew some of these already but there was definitely some new things (more subtle scams like control and isolation).. It actually made me think about some of the things a bit deeper." – Male, 31-50*

*"The steps and processes made sense – I got scammed through Instagram...I think something that's similar in that dating app simulation as they used things like fake pictures. I didn't notice it immediately Because it it was created so well... I went to the site and I was instructed to put in a certain amount of money. I had to reinvest a certain amount to get out. I almost took a loan to invest more. A lot of things are the same here [with the game]." – Female, 18-30*

# Users felt they learnt through repeated feedback, a key mechanism for effective 'debiasing' of responses to scam attempts

**Tina**  
6 km away

Hi there potential match! I'm seeking compatible partners.

Enjoy cooking, travelling, reading.

Let's chat!

**Signs for an AI generated profiles:**  
Polished or 'stock image' like photos  
Unnatural language

61% of game players chose to like the 'AI gen profile'. This is the 'incorrect' action.

**Kyle**  
6 km away

Captain in the British armed forces. Awarded a medal for service in Afghanistan.

Back in the UK to spend time with my family and my adorable baby niece. Ready to settle down and looking for the love of my life!

**Signs it's 'too good to be true':**  
Impressive or trustworthy jobs  
Bold romantic statements  
Overly perfect qualities

40% for the 'too good to be true profile'

**Toby**  
5 km away

I don't use this app a lot! Let's chat somewhere else. DM me @Toby38 or message me on whatsapp 07863810907.

**Signs for early app exits:**  
A bio that suggests chatting elsewhere  
Asking to chat on another platform very early on

Just 12% for the 'early exits profile'

"They do get easier to spot as the game progresses and you get feedback." – Female 31-50

"It lets me make the mistake then warns me rather than warning me in advance – I like this learning tactic." Male, 18-30

Feedback on incorrect answers appears to help players learn, enabling more participants to recognise and avoid scams as the game progresses.

# Engagement with the game may boost confidence and/or reinforce existing scam risk awareness

- Existing **stated levels of confidence in spotting scams are high** in the qualitative sample. Participants often referred to others, with less knowledge and skills, who may benefit more from the game.
- However, even those who claimed a high level of confidence felt the game helped them feel more reassured and educated. The game was felt to **reinforce existing knowledge**, act as a reminder, and further inform them of the complexity of scams.

*"Quite confident yes, It reinforced what I knew about fraud and also taught me some new things." – Male, 18-30*

*"It reassured me." Male 18-30*

*"I feel very confident because the game laid it out step by step... It's been reinforced – just the reinforcement. Also based on experience... It just gathers everything together in one place." – Female, 18-30*

*"Not learnt anything – already wary as don't trust anyone. Replay? Some scams are really complex – so I would be up for being educated on these more difficult ones." – Female, 51-69*

*"I don't think people will do it during sign-up as they're over-confident. It should be a check box thing that you should do before talking to anyone." Female, 18-30*

# There is scope for improvement and expansion in the presentation of the game to different audience groups

- For some, especially younger participants, the language and tone didn't feel pitched right to them.
- There were also comments that the game could be **more engaging and immersive** by incorporating more game-like elements, such as different levels, interactive graphics, and language tailored to the target audience, which would further enhance the experience, increasing immersion and motivation to encourage deeper player engagement.
- For some, the **term "game" may set expectations for fun, competition, or progression mechanics**. Participants remark that this version of the game may not comprehensively deliver this and could be expanded.

*"Less of a 'game' more of an interaction/demo... didn't work so well – calling it a game – feels more like an awareness piece than something that has rewards attached to it." – Female, 51-69*

*"Easy to use, design is appropriate... it works as a basic level and could be expanded!"  
– Female, 31-50*

# **Reflections on the 'red flags' terminology and key romance fraud warning signs**

# The red flag concept works well as a motivator for playing the game and facilitating learning


Overall, the concept of 'red flags' feels relatable to dating and clearly motivates to play the game.

- Each red flag was considered informative, though **some were more 'novel' and new (e.g. isolation tactics) than others (e.g. asks for money)** in terms of learning outcomes.
- All participants had **pre-conceived ideas of what the actual key warning signs or red flags are** based on their own previous experience.
- This **existing knowledge may need 'myth busting'** or updating in some cases for future iterations of the game (if perceived warning signs are felt to become out of date or to pitch it at different life stages/experience cohorts).


*"The wording is relatable, people use the term red flags there's cross over beyond dating there." – Male, 18-30*

**It's over to you...**

Choose who Alex should match with by clicking...




for 'no'



for 'yes'

Oh, and don't forget to keep an eye out for any scammers. Try and spot the red flags.



**Continue**

# Overview of key learnings and participant reflections on red flags

- **AI-generated profiles:** This includes polished or ‘stock image’ like photos and unnatural language. Participants viewed this red flag as a major risk and an important learning point. Participants often felt ‘caught off guard’ by this scam and note that it’s a constantly changing issue.
- **Too good to be true:** This includes very romantic or suspiciously perfect profiles that have trustworthy jobs or impressive achievements. They are considered an important but less obvious red flag. Participants desire more detailed explanations and concrete examples of this tactic to better understand how it works in practice.
- **Early exits:** This is encouraging an ‘early exit’ from a dating app to another messaging service. They are widely recognised as obvious red flags.
- **Love bombing:** This can include excessive affection and intense communication, asking for personal details early and mirroring interests. Participants thought that this tactic was effectively captured by the game, pointing out the gradually escalating nature of this red flag.
- **Isolation tactics:** This can include making outsiders feel like a threat and framing the relationship as ‘special’. This is seen as more subtle forms of red flags in a romance scam/fraud journey.
- **Control:** This can include framing themselves as vulnerable and masking control as care. This is also seen as a more subtle form of red flags in a romance scam/fraud journey.
- **Asks for money:** This can include urgent asks, starting small gradually escalating asks, and requests for gifts. Participants thought this red flag is obvious but still a crucial educational piece, helping to raise awareness of the consequences and risks of scams.

# Ideas on improving the game

# The game could be more interactive and immersive with 'real-life' narratives

- Participants called for **improved interactivity**, animation and more exciting gameplay.
- The game could provide more **information on the severity of the issue (through real-life stories and a more powerful outro)** and the prevalence of specific red flags. The outro could be more powerful.
- The **flag counter is seen as not an essential** part of gameplay. It could be adapted or even removed.
- One way to make the game more interactive may be to integrate an **AI (LLM) chatbot so players could chat back and forth** with matches within the dating app simulation (actually typing instead of clicking on template answers).

*"It would be great if it was more animated with swiping and flags that pop-up." – Male, 18-30*

*"I think it could be more interactive. I know it's just a prototype but it would be good to have more options and functionality" – Male, 30s*

*"The outro page could be enhanced with a more powerful stat or talking about the number of people affected by romance fraud." – Male, 18-30*

*"More on the consequences – what would happen if I fell for a scam [or real-life stories]." – Male, 18-30*

*"I'm not sure how common these red flags are or which ones are the priority. Maybe the game could tell me that." – Female, 18-30*

*"Could drop that red flag progress bar... you have the other [feedback] screens." – Male, 18-30*

*"Enjoyable – instead of pre-planned answers, could have AI answers/people write own responses and engage with the other person" – Female, 31-50*

# The game lends itself nicely to social and competitive features

- The game could be enhanced by having features that let **players compete against each other** and see other player's actions.
- The game could be **framed around helping others** e.g. share it with a person who might be at a higher risk of harm.
- The game could serve as **a tool to offer a second opinion to individuals who have doubts** about the identity of the person they are chatting with online. This could work alongside future intelligent dating app scam detection systems that could analyse a conversation and identify language that could be a red flag – and then recommend the game at a timely moment.

*"Sell it as a quiz... beat your score or beat others score." – Male, 18-30*

*It feel like Buzzfeed quiz. Fun... was getting more competitive." – Female, 18-30*

*"It would lend itself nicely to having a social element. This could include seeing other players, it could include other reactions." – Female, 31-50*

*"It could give you personalised feedback... e.g. this is what you missed out on... or tell you how you performed against others" – Male, 18-30*

*"Don't know how people fall for these things – but I suppose they do. Good at giving you the things to look out for – helpful for people like my friend who has autism and got scammed." – Female, 51-69*

*"If you are talking to someone and you are in doubt... you are not sure they are a real person. You could always try to play the game [the app could tell you]... it's like an eligibility thing, that you can always go back and requalify yourself." – Female, 31-50*

# A version of the game could be tailored to different target audiences, such as a younger audience

- Some younger interview participants mentioned the need to tailor the game for the younger generation (e.g. slang, broken sentences, memes, advanced levels).

*"The way they speak is too millennial and formal... use broken-up sentences, use memes."— Female, 18-30*

*"It's a really good idea... it just needs targeting to the right people."— Male, 18-30*

*"Game has provided food for thought – useful for more vulnerable, younger or older people or those who aren't digitally literate."  
— Female, 31-50*

*"Going forward, it's a very good concept. I don't think it needs anything tweaking to be honest. I think it's ready to rock and roll." – Female, 51-69*

*"I think it's good – the initiative is really really important. Advanced levels and for younger audiences. What people should do when they find out – signposting!! What can you do if you're really unsure? Is there a live chat or number to help people make a decision? Link off to more information."  
Female, 18-30*

*"It felt really scary.... I know it's just a game... you are doing a really good thing there and I really appreciate that you are trying to help people. It was quite easy to spot – you have to make it a lot more complicated to save people." – Male, 18-30*

# Future game iterations could be more challenging, feature different levels, alternative focuses and target specific red flags

- Future iterations of the game could become **more challenging** for players.
- Other versions of the game could take more **controversial and memorable approaches** (e.g. the player is the hacker or has to scam the scammer), focus more on the **right things to do rather than the wrong things** (e.g. green flags), or an entire game **focusing just on AI**.
- The game **could be modular** with different shorter teaser versions (e.g. just the matching stage) or broken up into levels. Participants talked about longer and shorter versions focusing on specific red flags.

*"It's just too easy – it could be more challenging." – Female, 31-50*

*"Ethical hacker – maybe you had to try scam the scammer back" – Male, 30s*

*"Green flags." – Male, 31-50*

*"Also give the dos not just the don'ts." [talks about verification ticks] – Male, 18-30*

*"It could be tweaked to provide different people [personalised on the user]. Different versions could have different lessons. It could include more non-red flags to make it harder." – Male 18-30*

*"A game just focusing on AI and being able to spot AI" – Male, 51-69*

# The game could expand beyond romance fraud

- All participants saw the **value in applying gamified mechanisms to other scam/fraud types** and online safety behaviour.

*"Banking apps make the most sense - around financial or investment fraud." – Female 31-50*

*"Banking apps already have this feature... You have sent out a payment... are you sure?, so this feature could be copied." – Female, 31-50*

- **Banking and finance fraud was seen as a clear future avenue** for application. Participants also noted that banking apps already send timely prompts (warning of fraud) when people make bank transfers. A game could be part of these prompts.

*"Banking apps / Facebook marketplace where people ask to send you money." – Female 31-50*

*" YouTube bots – health and finance – comments on YouTube video. Links to DM this person with messages like... this helped me to get my health on track." – Female, 18-30*

- Other applications included spotting **AI generated ads/messages on job sites, and health and well-being scams** on platforms.

*"Job sites like LinkedIn, the 'too good to be true' could be relevant... people are more vulnerable and desperate, so more susceptible to AI scam [for fake new job listings]." – Female, 18-30*

# **Ideas for promoting and rolling out into the real world**

# Considering the messenger and players context may support engagement and impact

- **App companies are seen as an appropriate messenger** or organisation to deliver the game. The game could also provide an opportunity for Ofcom to promote itself to members of the public who are less familiar with the organisation if they were a co-messenger.
- Context is key. Participants refer to **state or mood being a key factor that leads people to fall victim** to scams/fraud. The game could be delivered when people are more likely to be in a hot emotional state.
- The game lends itself to repeat play. Further research should be conducted to demonstrate how **different versions of the game could act as 'boosters'** reinforcing existing learnings or build on the foundation of a basic version of the game.

*"100% would play on a dating app. Go for people who are actively dating, use social media, sponsored ads based on app use." – Female, 18-30*

*"It could be used in onboarding for apps or regularly throughout app use." – Male, 51-69*

*"Ofcom... not sure... not everyone knows who they are." – Male, 18-30*

*"The timing matters. Like I'd say it depends on what kind of mood people are in or if they are tired or not... it would be good to give it to people when they need it most." – Female, 31-50*

*"One day you could wake up and be anxious or depressed and make totally different decisions." – Female, 31-50*

*"Needs to be shown to people a few times... You'd need to think about the gap in between plays and if they play again what they see." – Female, 31-50*

*"Every 2-3 months on a dating site – to refresh memory – Female, 51-69*

# Moving forward, using extrinsic motivations of users can benefit both players and businesses

- Participants see a successful roll-out of a game being tied to **app subscription models** and the business model of the dating service. A player could get rewards such as free premium service features in return for play.
- Other extrinsic rewards mentioned are free **coffees or drinks that could be redeemed on real dates** (encouraging positive interactions with legitimate people). These could be tied to in-game 'correct' play.

*"It could be like play to get a premium subscription or an extra day on the premium service" – Male, 31-50*

*"It has to work from a business perspective of the app... you could unlock a premium version of the app." – Male, 18-30*

*"Maybe a free coffee or a reward for correct play." – Male, 51-69*

*"Could advertise billboards/bus stops with QR codes. Bars/restaurants where people are going for dates." – Female, 31-50*

# It is also important not to overlook users' intrinsic motivations to enhance engagement and prevent backfire

- Mandatory play has the benefit of increasing overall participation among users on dating sites. However, **there's a risk that force play or defaulting play could backfire** if the game disrupts what they are already trying to do (e.g. getting started on an app).
- Real value of the game could come during the first few interactions with a dating site or via a **timely nudge when they are mid conversation.**
- **Time could be allocated to the player to revisit** the game. This could be delivered on a periodic basis with a notification similar in style to apps like BeReal.
- Others mention the **social element of promotion**, that if influencers play or if the game is promoted in the right social settings (e.g. universities) then it will become popular.
- Another promotion opportunity could be breaking any stigma around those who have been scammed and/or **making it clear that this can happen to anyone.**

*"Not during sign up – as they would just want to get on to it, and it would disrupt the process – however, it could be... before the first person you message?" – Female, 51-69*

*"Could also bake the game into the dating app itself – if you see a fraudulent profile... helpful in the moment advice 'are you sure this is a real person' [prompt]." – Female, 31-50*

*"I think there needs to be a specific time to play the game." [references BeReal giving you a prompt daily] – Male, 18-30*

*"Promote games like this through schools and universities." – Female, 18-30*

*"Influencers to show them doing it on their phone. Not boring ads, but fun ads e.g. skits like funny dating horror stories" – Female, 18-30*

*"The game is a reminder that it can happen to everyone. I think that's a way to promote it." – Male, 31-50*



**Thank you**

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