



LUND UNIVERSITY

Most men are not of value to you

*Female Dating Strategy – A case of existential resistance against
modern intimacy.*

MSc in Media and Communications Studies

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Abstract

This thesis deploys ethnographic tools in a qualitative case study to explore the internet community, Female Dating Strategy (FDS). As narratives surrounding the “crisis of masculinity” are popularised within politics and mainstream media, the objective of research becomes to scrutinise these conceptualisations. This thesis does so by focusing on the field of intimacy and sexuality, by raising the question of female romantic anguish. Thereby questioning the widespread idea that women are the “winners” of modern romance.

Female Dating Strategy is seen as a modern response to the many uncertainties and issues women face in contemporary intimacy. The study equips itself with theories on the individualisation and commodification of sexuality and heteropessimism. It relates these theories to the perspective of existential media, which highlights the media's existential capabilities and shortcomings within the deeply existential field of modern intimacy.

The study analysed posts on Female Dating Strategy’s forum, opinion pieces from Female Dating Strategy’s website, the Female Dating Strategy Handbook, and the expressions within The Female Dating Strategy Podcast.

The analysis results highlighted an orientation towards viewing romance and relationships as transactional and a part of the community member’s self-actualisation. As intimacy had become an important part of the member’s sense of self the members encouraged each other to act more autonomously. Urging each other to “ruthlessly evaluate men” and often act through negative choices. The feminist and conservative values within the community were recognised as useful ways of maximising achievement, rather than proposing any political projects. This all played out against a backdrop of deep technologisation and mediatisation. Female Dating Strategy created a sense of existential security for its members, however, it also created burdens, such as getting them stuck in a dependency on the strategies and advice on the forum. Media was also existential in the sense that it was constantly present within FDS members’ intimate lives, either through the pornification of sex or the introduction of dating applications.

Keywords: *Female Dating Strategy, Intimacy, Sexuality, Relationships, Dating, Romance, Existentialism, Existential Media.*

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1. Introduction

In 2020 Josefin De Gregorio published a heavily debated essay where she recounted several failed relationships with maybe-men. “Maybe-men” are emotionally distanced men who will date women but never fully commit to a relationship. De Gregorio’s experiences of these “maybe-men” became the basis of her critique of modern intimacy which she argues has redefined the ideal romantic relationship as effortless and self-centred (De Gregorio 2020). The essay started a discussion in the Swedish press that offered many different perspectives on modern intimacy and the role capitalist interests and technology play in shaping our romantic lives. For instance, Saga Cavallin argued that dating apps make women feel like unpaid prostitutes (Cavallin 2020). Linda Skugge somewhat agreed with this notion but argued that the practice was rather liberating (Skugge 2020). One of the few men who engaged in this debate was Victor Johansson who described himself as a “maybe-man”. In past relationships he would avoid making definitive decisions as the idea of being accountable or risk being hurt was intimidating (Johansson 2020).

De Gregorio’s article highlighted a feeling of disillusionment towards the modern norms of intimacy. Female Dating Strategy (FDS) could be understood as a response to this disillusionment. FDS has emerged as a distinctive community for women who are navigating the complexities of modern intimacy. It started as an online Reddit community which would offer women strategic dating advice but is now active on its website, which offers articles, podcasts and a forum based on advocating for relationships with maximum female benefit. FDS has been portrayed as a “way of taking back some control” (Cunningham 2021), and “beating the boys at their own game” (Scott 2020) as they offer women scripts and structures on how to date men safely and effectively. However, they have also been accused of being socially conservative as it places limitations on how women should act and what they should prioritise in a relationship (Taylor 2020). FDS is an interesting case as it represents a backlash and response towards many of the issues of modern intimacy raised within the Swedish debate. It also ties into a larger ecology of online backlash towards modern romance which has been popularised by several conservative groups of men on the internet.

In recent years there has been an invested interest in the concept of men being “left behind” and that masculinity is in crisis, especially in the romantic market (Kay 2021, 39). The idea of masculinity being in crisis, however, is not new. The concept has existed for over 100 years and stems from the idea that modern men are losing touch with their inner man (Frans

2023a). Traditionally, this was a fringe narrative but due to the recent rise of the manosphere, a collection of male communities loosely connected by their animosity towards feminism, and the deteriorating grades of young boys many of these ideas have begun reaching mainstream thought (Frans 2023a). Today “young men are particularly likely to perceive advances in women’s rights as a threat to men’s opportunities” (Off et.al 2022, 11). This has even had political consequences as the largest political party in Sweden recently argued that “our focus on feminism has caused us to overlook the boys” (Socialdemokraterna 2023, 25:20).

The narrative of a crisis of masculinity has become widely accepted within mainstream media and academia. However, there is no comparable crisis of femininity. The romantic anguish of women, as exemplified by De Gregorio, is rarely highlighted even though women’s risks of harm are often higher, and experiences of devaluation, as in demeaning jokes about women’s bodies or ranking appearances, have become the norm (Illouz 2019, 118). When we accept the male-centred narrative on the inequalities of intimacy we portray women as the “winners” within contemporary intimacy (Kay 2021, 39). With my thesis I intend to challenge this perception. As the dominant politicisation of intimacy now bases itself on the challenges men face, I argue that research should redirect its focus towards representing the challenges which women face rather than accepting the predominant narrative that depicts women as the winners of sexual liberation and modern romance. Exploring FDS, I believe, could highlight some of these challenges and give us insight into alternative narratives that challenge the predominant perceptions of the “winners” and “losers” in modern intimacy.

The previous discussion highlights how contemporary intimacy is wrought with experiences of disarray and may even cause existential uncertainties (Frans 2023b). Amanda Romare’s novel *Half of Malmö Consists of Guys Who Have Dumped Me* (eng.red) (2021) and the work of Michel Houellebecq (2017) touch on the conflicting experiences of contemporary intimacy, the search for authenticity in an individualised context, and often portray an intersection between modern romance and existential concerns. This intersection suggests that FDS’s role could be existential, as FDS could be viewed as not only offering dating advice but also offering potential answers to existential questions and concerns.

Our search for intimacy is a source of great uncertainty where we will often realise that so little of our lives is pre-ordained. However, as the debates regarding “maybe-men”, the manosphere and FDS highlight, the existential questions regarding meaning and purpose raised in discussions concerning modern romance have become deeply enmeshed in our mediatised culture. Amanda Lagerkvist introduces the term existential media to explain the role media has in contemporary society. The term highlights the media's existential capabilities, as they help

us shape and understand many different aspects of our world. Media is also existential in the sense that it can limit us (Lagerkvist 2022, 2-4). Paul Frosh exemplifies the limit, by describing a situation where the reader wakes up and realises that all their electronic devices are dead. The sudden feelings of isolation we would feel regarding this new imposed solitude exemplifies medias limit (Frosh 2019, 1). Our dependency on these digital and mediated environments can force us to reflect on the existential burden they pose. FDS, therefore, provides us with a unique lens to explore the existential dimensions of modern romance and demonstrate how these are understood and shaped within the context of FDS. The existential media perspective could also be advantageous in its ability to critically explore how we are limited by this mediation.

1.1. Research Aims & Questions

The research aim is to explore FDS ethnographically as FDS is viewed as an illustrative case of a contemporary response towards the many uncertainties that contemporary intimacy and relationships seem to inhibit. Previous research has predominantly focused on responses centred within a male narrative, this research intends to shift this by instead concentrating on female experiences and understandings of modern intimacy. The ambition is to comprehend the resistance against contemporary norms and gender dynamics which this group poses. The study is also seen as an advantageous opportunity to further explore the existential dimension of modern intimacy. FDS is a convenient community to study as it offers its members both a space to raise existential questions and concerns but could also demonstrate the existential capabilities and limitations of digital media. By exploring these themes within the context of FDS this study offers a more nuanced perspective on the dynamics and struggles within contemporary intimacy. The research also contributes to the growing understanding of media as an existential force within our lives and highlights how this can be applied and understood within the context of modern romance. The approach has been guided by two research questions:

What does Female Dating Strategy's approach reveal about the uncertainties of contemporary intimacy?

How do the expressions on Female Dating Strategy reflect the existential capacity of media?

1.2. Literature Review

The literature review reflects the theoretical basis of the thesis as I argue that as intimacy evolved from pre-modern courtship towards contemporary ideals, individual needs and desires have gained prominence. This has positioned intimacy and concepts such as relationships and love as integral parts of people's sense of self. I argue that these concepts of intimacy are no longer seen as cultural forces but as personal attributes or achievements which carry existential weight as these provide people with a sense of purpose, but also, vulnerability and uncertainty. Modern intimacy is formed in the backdrop of social, technological, and economic transformation. This has produced a mediatised and commodified turn within intimacy which provides another existential burden as it makes us question the authenticity of our interactions. FDS, I believe, embodies this burden and represents a form of resistance towards the pressures of contemporary intimacy. I will argue that media content created by FDS is a form of existential media as it offers a manifold of different mediated environments for reflection on the existential issues that ease its members into a sense of existential security. However, FDS is also existential in its ability to create limitations for its members which may provide uncertainty.

1.2.1. Intimacy Modernity and Heteropessimism

Gender dynamics within intimacy are far too often portrayed as a consequence of different internal biological forces which need to be contained by external powers. This essentialist understanding is frequently reproduced in popular literature as in Jonathan Gray (1992) and Louise Perry (2022) but it has also permeated certain academic works, like Catherine Hakim (2011). Susan McKinnon ties this into a wider neoliberal narrative which ultimately serves to naturalise individualism and its capitalist norms (McKinnon 2005, 149). These ideas are very prevalent in the manosphere communities which utilise this narrative to portray men as victims of their biological needs and women as gatekeepers who could potentially grant them a release (Cannito & Ferrero 2022, 599). These understandings become very problematic within intimacy. As Amia Srinivasan argues, this creates an “informal regulatory system of gendered sexual expectations” (Srinivasan 2021, 28). Women have become achievements for men to pursue and in their biologically ordained role, the act of giving consent is therefore the woman's burden (Angel 2021, 9). This understanding of gender dynamics within heterosexual intimacy is what the manosphere uses to incentivise men to use seductive techniques on women and negates any ethical or moral responsibilities as it is the woman's responsibility to make the right choice, as observed by Rachel O'Neill (2018, 126-128).

The essentialist representation of gender dynamics within intimacy simplifies many otherwise complex processes. As Michel Foucault argues, the insistence of biology in discussions concerning intimacy fails to account for the impact which social powers, such as norms and hierarchies, have on how we regulate our sexual expressions and sexuality (Foucault 1987, 68). As Srinivasan's previous argument exemplifies, there are certain gendered expectations which regulate how women respond and act in intimate encounters with men (Srinivasan 2021, 28). The biological representation of intimacy, therefore, fails to account for how it is socially constructed and influenced by institutions and powers such as religion, politics, and capitalism (Foucault 1987, 105).

Foucault gives us a useful point of departure, however, as Anthony Giddens argues, Foucault's explanations mainly illustrate a one-way intrusion of power (Giddens 1992, 28). An illustrative example of this is Foucault's depiction of the historical relation between sexuality and identity. He describes how homosexuality was essentially re-defined in society once the judicial system started judging homosexuality as an identity rather than as an act (Foucault 1978, 43). These societal changes, however, do not occur in a vacuum, this urges us to be mindful of the broader context and see the changes as a social and reflexive process, rather than a mere systematic one (Giddens 1992, 29). The content on FDS revolves mainly around heterosexual relationships, however, the historical relation between sexuality and identity is relevant as allows us to effectively analyse how our individual needs and desires can be shaped by external factors, all within a broader context.

Regarding sexuality or intimacy as social processes allows us to demonstrate how these powerful cultural forces are constantly in negotiation with technological and social changes and explore how they have become intrinsically linked with our identity construction (Giddens 1992, 197-203). This process is fundamental for the research at hand as it allows us to explore the individualisation of intimacy. Giddens provides us with an early optimistic outlook. He argued that the individualisation of intimacy would democratise intimacy by emphasising individual choice above social relations (Giddens 1992, 192). However, whilst the individualisation of intimacy may have given people more freedom to make their own choices, it is also important to acknowledge the inequalities and insecurities which it has caused.

The work of Eva Illouz is especially illuminating in this regard. Illouz highlights how social forces, like feminism and psychology, construct intimacy as a constellation of individual needs and desires that individuals are responsible for. By problematising this process Illouz reintroduced a sociological understanding of intimacy. She argues that these social forces rationalise intimacy and desire and constrain our understanding of romance as a form of self-

fulfilment (Illouz 2012, 12-15). Byung-Chul Han criticises Illouz's approach, however, suggesting that she does not go far enough. Desire is not rationalised, Han argues, individualisation has instead put an end to desire as it only focuses on what the individual wants and needs (Han et.al 2017, 37). The individualisation of intimacy creates pressures and expectations to pursue intimacy as a form of self-actualisation. FDS could be seen as a reaction to these pressures. Another example is male seduction communities where the number of women one has sex with becomes a token of prestige within the community. Sex with women is therefore used to compete with other men (O'Neill 2018, 38). These arguments are important as they allow us to explore how FDS prioritises their individual needs and desires within their strategic approaches to dating.

Giddens believed that the individualised and increasingly free forms of intimacy would ultimately lead to a pure relationship, a relationship of emotional and sexual equality, liberated from the disproportionate importance of the male sexual experience (Giddens 1992, 2). This concept bears little empirical value, as highlighted by Jaimeson (1999) and van Hoof (2015) who both reveal several structural inequalities within modern relationships. However, it could still serve as a potential landmark to explore if an equal and democratised relationship is the favoured structure of FDS's ideal relationship. FDS, however, could potentially be a response to the inequalities often observed within contemporary dating norms. Representations of scepticism towards a traditional heterosexual relationship structure within FDS could be further observed as a manifestation of heteropessimism.

Asa Seresin introduced the term heteropessimism in an article in *The New Inquiry* (2019) which highlighted an interesting phenomenon of heterosexual people feeling trapped in their sexuality. The term garnered significant academic interest (see for example Holzberg & Lehtonen 2021; Johanssen 2023) as the phenomena illustrated some form of "heterosexual crisis". Heteropessimism, highlights a sense of shame or embarrassment over one's sexuality and choice of partners, as Seresin highlights, the feeling is more common among women than men (Seresin 2019). Representations of this have been found in popular culture, Holzberg and Lehtonen analyse the occurrence of heteropessimism in the TV series *Fleabag* where the female character's sexuality is portrayed as awkward, the men are disappointing or clueless and sexual experiences cringe-worthy rather than pleasurable. The show stands out, therefore as it offers an alternative narrative to the common neoliberal portrayal of intimate experiences as individual achievements as in shows like *Sex and the City* (Holzberg & Lehtonen 2021, 1905). Something that single women have called for, for a long time (Simpson 2016, 386). Heteropessimism could be utilised to explore how FDS portrays the heterosexual relationship and its disappointments.

Johannsen's research demonstrates how manosphere communities, Involuntary Celibate (incels) and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) utilise heteropessimistic fantasies to explain their romantic misfortunes. His research demonstrates how heteropessimism is deployed to dismantle idealisations of heterosexuality by portraying it as inherently flawed, and for incels and MGTOW unattainable. By doing so, incels and MGTOW protect themselves from having to experience the disappointment and complexities of a heterosexual relationship (Johannsen 2023, 33). Heteropessimism could appear to be a response to an increasingly individualised intimacy which emphasises choice (Illouz 2012, 58). As the focus on the desires and needs of individuals within a relationship grows the failure to fulfil these, either due to disappointing encounters or one's perceived lack of desirability, creates a pessimism towards the heterosexual relationships structure and ability to fulfil individual needs. I argue that we can understand some expressions within FDS by employing heteropessimism as a theoretical concept to explore the utilisation of fantasies regarding men and their perceptions of intimate encounters with men.

Scrutinising heterosexual relationships is not a new phenomenon. Several researchers and academics have questioned the gender dynamics and expectations of women that limit women and invoke a certain loss of self (Jack 1999, 39-40). Simone de Beauvoir describes this as society limiting women to a form of immanence (de Beauvoir 1949, 730). Soraya Chemaly (2018) and Dana Crowley Jack (1999) explore how women challenge these limitations using aggression as an approach to reclaim their autonomy, this is done through what Jack calls positive aggression (1999, 282). As intimacy is individualised an individual's sense of autonomy becomes crucial to their sense of fulfilment within a relationship. However, FDS demonstrates that despite individualisation many women still feel disappointment or loss of autonomy which could imply that other powers may have co-opted intimacy.

1.2.2. The Commodification of Intimacy & Sexual Capital

The individualisation of intimacy and its integration with the self has given us an expanded sense of freedom and autonomy despite this, as FDS could exemplify, there is still a sense of uncertainty. As intimacy becomes individualised and a site for self-actualisation it has opened several avenues for commodification (Illouz 2008, 2012, 2019; Bauman 2003; Hakim 2011; Srinivasan 2021; Han et.al 2017). My ambition is not to argue for a return to the oppressive and traditional institutions of sexual control such as the family or religion (Green 2014, 7). But it is important to recognise that whilst modernity has offered more freedom, it has also offered more

experiences of uncertainty, devaluation and worthlessness as our individual needs and desires are commodified (Illouz 2019, 309-310). As Zygmunt Bauman argues, modern consumer culture favours short, fluid relationships where partners are inclined to consume rather than love. He describes this as a destructive dynamic as intimacy becomes fixated on self-actualisation rather than connection (Bauman 2003, 7-9). As we can see in Bauman's example intimacy becomes governed by a consumption framework. This resonates with the work of Han who argues that the disappearance of control, from the traditional institutions, for instance, does not guarantee freedom. In modern societies, constraint and freedom coincide. As we give ourselves to the goal of maximising achievement (Han 2015a, 11). The commodification of intimacy is therefore a form of control which we willingly give ourselves to.

Illouz exemplifies how individualisation and commodification are key features of modern romance by highlighting the negative choice. Modern emotional relationships are characterised by an individual's ability to always make a negative choice, such as leaving a relationship or ghosting a previous date. The negative choice can be used as a strategy to protect one's sense of self and is essentially encouraged by the capitalist logic of modern intimacy. This often stems from an uncertainty about one's own and another's value. The self becomes reliant on a field where both economy and sex are essentially merged (Illouz 2019, 222). Illouz argues that these logics are more likely to benefit men than women. Whilst male sexuality is often focused on sexual experiences and separation of emotions, women have been socialised to prioritise emotions with the ambition of reaching the end goal of a relationship (Illouz 2019, 86). What we can ascertain is that the commodification of intimacy encourages negative choice, women will be more likely to exert this if they feel as if their emotional needs are not being met whereas men may be more likely to if they sense that their sexual needs or a need for autonomy are not being met. The differences here set the stage for an exploration of how, when, and why FDS exercise the negative choice.

As intimacy has been individualised, sex becomes a commodity. Following the liberation of sexuality, sex has become a form of capital, an unevenly distributed resource. One's sexuality becomes in a sense a personal attribute referred to by Kaplan and Illouz as one's sexual capital (Kaplan & Illouz 2022, 26). This is typically observed in the exploitation of female bodies. Illouz explains that men derive value from women by exploiting the female body putting women at an economic disadvantage as they become frequently objectified (Illouz 2019, 105). Conceptualisations of sexual capital are widespread within academia (Green 2014; Kaplan & Illouz 2022), one of the most well-known and controversial conceptualisations however stems from the work of Hakim (2011). Hakim's thesis is based on an essentialist idea,

the male sexual deficit, put simply: men want sex more than women, which she argues that women should exploit (Hakim 2011, 3). Hakim's work argues that women should utilise their sexual capital to "bargain for a better deal" (Hakim 2011, 6). Sexual capital, therefore, ties into the exploitation of women's bodies and sexuality as an attribute, but it is also utilised with the purpose of empowerment. Hakim's work echoes many of the ideas from FDS, however, FDS must also be seen as a response against a society which assigns value to people based on sexual attributes such as attractiveness or performance.

Hakim's conceptualisation is problematic for two reasons. First, it understands sexual capital as a form of capital or power which women hold over men due to the premise that there is a biological male lust for women. Hakim regards this as a "new social fact" (Hakim 2011, 32). However, this could instead be viewed as a cultural norm and a part of the western construction of masculinity (Green 2013, 144). The second problematic aspect of Hakim's argument is the fact that she fails to understand that sexuality as a form of capital, maintains the domination of men over women, as women remain subject to exploitation. As Kaplan & Illouz argue, using women's sexual capital is what maintains some of the patriarchy's most oppressive characteristics, not what subverts it (Kaplan & Illouz 2022, 8). Thus, Hakim's idea formation misconstrues many different aspects of female sexual capital as empowering when it is more exploitative.

An example of this could be what several authors call the pornification of intimacy. As Illouz argues, the pornification of sexual culture represents a mechanism to further control women (Illouz 2019, 119). This pornification of sex, according to Han, "dissolves sex into feminine simulations of pleasure and masculine performances of performance" (Han 2015b 12). Han illustrates how the pornification of sex, reduces women to objects, expected to perform simulations of pleasure to fulfil the man's fantasies. An act which, in the end, undermines their autonomy. Porn is, in short, a blatant exploitation and commodification of women's bodies (Illouz 2019, 106). Porn could, therefore, be seen as an extreme consequence of the commodification of sexuality.

Instead of viewing sexual capital as a force for empowerment for women, I will employ a critical view of the commodification of individual sexuality and intimacy. Sexuality and sexual capital become an inherent part of neoliberal economics (Kaplan & Illouz 2022, 106-107). FDS is interesting to analyse to both explore how they utilise their sexual capital and ideas of "male sexual deficit", but also, how they could be seen as a response to the intense commodification of an individual's sexual attributes and the exploitation of women's bodies.

1.2.3. Romantic Anguish – A Growing Field

The commodification of intimacy and the rising significance of sexual capital as a personal attribute tends to benefit men, rather than women (Illouz 2019, 71; Kaplan & Illouz 2022, 8). However, as research into communities within the manosphere exemplifies (Cannito & Ferrero Camoletto 2022; Srinivasan 2021), there is a modern backlash against feminism and the concept of sexual freedom. The rise of incels is an especially explicit example of this. Incels experience that they are left out of the sexual market due to their undesirability, or low sexual capital. Sexual freedom, for them, has meant an involuntary experience of feeling excluded or humiliated. These feelings are especially potent because they have internalised success in the sexual market as a form of status advancement within male hierarchies (Srinivasan 2021, 101). Illouz relates incels to white-power ideology and argues that the female equivalent of the incel is the white-power housewife due to their rejection of sexual freedom to reclaim traditional gender roles (Illouz 2019, 225). The incel and white-power housewife may share many of the same ideological notions. But one of the most important aspects within the incel community is their obsession with sex, sexual hierarchies, and societal norms of desirability. This is not a common obsession within groups of white-power housewives. However, it can be found in the many different female analogies of manosphere communities.

There have been many calls for further research into the female analogies of manosphere communities (Kay 2021; Hart & Huber 2023; Andreasson 2021; Brix-Rasmussen 2023; Rae Evans & Lankford 2023; Ling 2022). Despite this, there have been few previous studies which recognise these communities. Balci et.al. (2023) explores these online ideological spaces for women and gives us more insight into groups such as Female incels (femcels), Females going their own way (FGTOW), Red Pill Females and FDS (Balci et.al. 2023, 4). Ling argues that FDS is related to the femcel movement (Ling 2022, 42). Whilst there could be similarities between these groups Balci et.al. defines them as separated and argues that FDS is instead more like the manosphere community of pick-up artists (Balci et.al. 2023, 2). I would like to acknowledge the prevalence of a form of femosphere. This expands upon the argument by Illouz by offering more perspectives that exemplify a female resistance against modern intimacy which is not necessarily based on traditional values, as in the example of the housewives.

The femosphere, like the manosphere, is a collection of different female-only communities that all present different contradicting and conflicting value systems. The FDS for instance, presents its “methodology” as a simple way of achieving maximum female benefit.

To achieve this, they offer strategies which essentially economise dating using a risk versus reward strategy (About, Female Dating Strategy 2023). This is different to femcels, for instance, who are centred on a sense of hopelessness due to their incapacity to find romantic love. Brix-Rasmussen (2022) builds upon the research of Andreasson (2021) and argues that a lack of social responsivity creates a sense of hopelessness among femcels. This hopelessness is sustained by the collective the members build around these feelings (Brix Rasmussen 2023, 81-82). Differences such as these demonstrate the value of researching the different responses and community-building aspects of these femosphere communities.

FDS is both the largest group within the femosphere and focuses its energies on topics which are primarily oriented around dating, relationships, and intimate experiences (Balci et.al. 2023, 7). Having recognised the diverse landscape of the femosphere communities, I position FDS as the focus of this thesis. FDS shares many similarities with other groups within the femosphere, like the femcel, but stands out due to its emphasis on actively challenging contemporary dating norms and hierarchies through its different dating strategies. FDS is a heterogeneous community consisting of people with different opinions and experiences. Despite this, it is crucial to recognise that FDS, in its strategies and ideologies, harbours many problematic notions which have the potential to inflict harm not only on its members but also on others. This is exemplified in several investigative reports where journalists have highlighted hateful or intolerant views on men and trans-women (Sisley 2021; Taylor 2020).

I argue that this is done through a form of embedded feminism. Embedded feminism is the process of essentially appropriating feminism to serve a political goal which ultimately may undermine feminist aims (Hunt 2006, 53). Tina Askanius explores how women within the Nordic Resistance Movement utilise embedded feminism. These women employ feminist rhetoric to advocate that women must be defended against an external enemy whilst simultaneously contributing to a movement that oppresses women (Askanius 2022, 1775). Whilst FDS regards itself as a feminist movement they have often been criticised for advocating a form of social conservatism (Sisley 2021; Taylor 2020). Embedded feminism as a term could help us explore the ideological positioning of FDS and if their expressions align with a political project. This allows for further expansion of Illouz's comparison of incels and housewives.

Embedded feminism could also be related to Han's concept of the achievement society and its achievement subjects. Foucault's work on sexuality bases itself on the idea that society is disciplinary, therefore, power is exercised through culture and norms (Foucault 1978, 43). Han argues that Foucault's analysis of power does not account for the psychic changes which have occurred as society has transformed from discipline-based to achievement-based.

Contemporary society is an achievement society, where achievement subjects act as entrepreneurs of themselves constantly striving to maximise their lives. This subject stands free from external domination. However, the disappearance of the disciplinary aspect does not entail freedom. Within an achievement society, freedom and constraint coincide. Therefore, the achievement subject will willingly give itself over to the constraint that is maximising achievement (Han 2015a, 8-11). This conceptualisation of society could produce arguments as to why members of the FDS are willing to give themselves over to different forms of constraint. Embedded feminism could, therefore, be a consequence of an achievement in society.

The prevalence of FDS, the femosphere and concepts such as embedded feminism demonstrate that contemporary intimacy offers more complexities than simply men being “left behind” or masculinity being in crisis. Yet, both popular and academic discourse surrounding modern romance has often focused on the anguish of men (Kay 2021, 39). The examples within academic research are plenty. Ging maps out the manosphere and effectively illustrates how emotions, in this case anger, can be a key driver in digitally networked publics such as this (Ging 2019, 647). Cannito and Ferrero Camoletto (2022), like the research conducted by Bachaud and Johns (2023), critically analyse the pseudoscientific theories that are prevalent within these groups, that reinforce sexist worldviews within the manosphere. Bujalka et.al. (2022) explores how the manosphere monetises its member's needs. Papadamou et.al (2021) delve into the incel community on YouTube showcasing the prevalence of radicalisation on the manosphere and how the platforms play an active role in steering users towards extreme content. Radicalisation has also been researched by Prazmo (2020), Hoffman et.al. (2020), and Habib et.al. (2022). Prazmo builds on the research of Ging (2019), highlighting how the emotionality within the communities makes them arenas for radicalisation (Prazmo 2020). Research into the manosphere is important if we wish to deter, what Illouz calls, a form of sexual terrorism (Illouz 2019, 223). However, the plethora of research focusing on male anguish risks reinforcing the manosphere notion that women are the winners of contemporary intimacy.

Johanssen reflects on the disproportionate focus but argues that the abundance of research into male communities may be because they have more members compared to female groups (Johanssen 2023, 32). This is a valid point. FDS, for instance, had 250,000 subscribers on Reddit at its height (r/FemaleDatingStrategy, 2024). The Red Pill, a male community that promotes misogyny and offers toxic views on women and relationships (Marche 2016), has over three million subscribers (r/TheRedPill, 2024). However, I argue that qualitative research should not merely focus on researching groups due to their popularity or uniqueness. As Illouz states, sexual hierarchies are not new. Incels, for instance, could be seen as a broader historical

phenomenon of people who throughout history have not been viewed as sexually or romantically desirable and therefore, don't engage in sexual acts (Illouz 2019, 223). The real value in studying these communities qualitatively, and therefore FDS, lies in their ability to expose the underlying dynamics of contemporary intimacy. Therefore, it is crucial to research both male and female communities centred around the concept of intimacy. Focusing solely on the anguish of men fails to encapsulate the full spectrum of challenges and uncertainties within modern romance. This study hopes to take steps away from the focus that research has on male anguish and put the spotlight on female suffering connected to the pursuit of love.

1.2.4. An Existentialist Perspective on Intimacy and Media

Many of the different aspects and issues of modern romance, I argue, reframe intimacy as an existential burden. Susi Ferrarello, for instance, reintroduces the term existential sexuality coined by Peter Koestenbaum (1974) (Ferrarello 2019, 148). The term describes a sexuality where individuals are given the active choice of choosing their sex life (Ferrarello 2019, 151). An illustrating example of this could be the modern dating apps which offer an almost endless choice of potential partners (De Ridder 2022, 595). As we are allowed to choose more the choices make us more exposed. Our being and hope to gain social recognition is at stake, according to Emma Engdahl (2016, 164). Rejection from a potential partner causes a sense of social invisibility that threatens our self. The fear of rejection becomes a social fear as our self-worth is inherently dependent on the recognition we receive from others. Validation from a romantic partner is therefore a feeling of a "full social existence" (Illouz 2012, 124).

An existential perspective of intimacy may be limiting as it mainly focuses on the concerns of the individual. Many of the broader societal and cultural changes which contribute to modern intimacy's complexities are overlooked. However, FDS offers a prime opportunity to employ an existential perspective on intimacy within a technological context which itself exposes individuals to more existential burdens. Dating apps, for instance, pose existential questions as they become a source for social recognition, but also, because they become a habitual part of people's everyday lives which creates an existential burden by the "shared experience of living in a deeply digital, calculated and high paced modern environment" (De Ridder 2022, 606). Digital media becomes an existential arena where our intimate lives are played out. An existential perspective could therefore highlight how technology intensifies existential issues in modern intimacy.

1.2.5. Existential Media

Media has evolved into an essential part of our existence. As John Durham Peters argues, “Media are our infrastructures of being, the habitats and material through which we act and are” (Peters 2015, 15). The dynamic relationship between our being and the media is a relationship characterised by ambivalence, constant change, and tension (Lagerkvist 2017, 97-98). Questions concerning the nature of our digital media become questions which concern our human existence and vice versa. The perspective rejects the idea of media as merely a tool for expression. Paul Frosh argues that media are “systems for the production and disclosure of worlds” (Frosh 2019, xiii). Media has become an integral part of our lives. They shape and reflect our experiences, offer new existential predicaments, but also offer us new spaces to explore existential themes and the profundities of life. Whilst media studies often research how the affordances of a platform could shape a user’s expression, we rarely see studies which focus on the deeper existential implication this may have.

Gregory J. Shepherd responded to a claim that communication lacks disciplinary status due to its lack of core knowledge by arguing that disciplines should not merely be seen as epistemology or specialised knowledge within a field. Shepherd proposes instead that disciplines are defined by their “views of Being” (Shepherd 1994, 83). This would suggest that disciplines are determined by their perceptions of existence or reality. These perceptions provide the basis on how knowledge is created, and which questions are meaningful to pursue. This lack of ontology within media has begun to be remedied by a surge of existential analyses of media's capabilities and limitations (Lagerkvist 2022, 81).

Peters suggests that the ambition of media studies is “to be a successor discipline to metaphysics as the field which accounts for the constitution of all that is” (Peters 2015, 320). Peters essentially naturalises media, it is something which becomes so other to us humans that resembles our relationship with nature. It can be meaningful and profound yet at the same time meaningless, however we find existence in our everyday practices (Peters 2015, 46). Therefore, we cannot isolate media and technology as something which we control. Questions that relate to technology are questions that relate to human existence (Peters 2015, 89). Peter’s focus on the intersection between media and the human condition gives us insight into the profound implications of media and remedies much of what Shepherd felt was being overlooked. When media becomes almost naturalised, we may at times fail to recognise the inherent biases or inequalities inherent in many forms of technology. Sander De Ridder’s research highlights how mobile dating apps have become naturalised in people’s lives. However, a social outcome of

this datafication of intimacy was that the female participants felt objectified as they were categorised by male users according to their fantasies (De Ridder 2022, 604). The datafication of intimacy, in this case, ended up reaffirming traditional gender dynamics which could potentially raise existential issues. In this scenario, we should aim to scrutinise media, especially the idealisations and anxieties it produces.

Paul Frosh has also made significant contributions towards the existential view of media. He expands upon the ideas of Peters but portrays media as poetic forces that construct and reveal different worlds. Media gains an existential significance through their capacity to layer our lives using both reality and fiction. The lifeworld, the world we inhabit, is in constant dialogue with the symbolic worlds that are conceived and sustained by what Frosh calls the media manifold (Frosh 2019, 3-5). The ambition of this research will be to participate in the media manifold of FDS as I immerse myself in the myriad of content within FDS. Frosh's depiction of media as a form of seamless cohabitation resonates with Mark Deuze's argument that we live within media rather than with media (Deuze 2011, 143). Whilst Frosh may highlight the frailty which follows our dependency on technology and media (Frosh 2019, 1), he does not consider the digital limitations of media.

Lagerkvist's perspective on existential media expands upon the aforementioned authors. Media, she agrees, grounds us in being. We are stuck with media, as they are what sustains us. Aligning with Peters and Frosh, Lagerkvist demonstrates how the media presents us with an unlimited number of worlds. However, she argues that we are at a point in time where the crises within our lives seem to be unlimited. Life, she suggests, is a "precarious media life". Rapid technological shifts, evolving social norms and elusive algorithms all throw us into a digital limit situation (Lagerkvist 2022, 89). Thus, she borrows the concept of the limit situation from Karl Jaspers which focuses on the moments in time when we become painfully aware of our existence (Arendt 1994, 34). The digital limit situation exemplifies how we in a time of radical uncertainty, openness and idleness must understand that media matters (Lagerkvist 2022, 25). Existential media in this sense becomes a call for accountability, as media becomes the site where we explore the existential issues and vulnerabilities that limit situations create (Lagerkvist 2022, 20). FDS is made to guide its members through the limit situations within intimacy, whilst also navigating in a context where intimacy is restructured through Lagerkvist's digital limit situation.

1.2.6. The Digital Limit

Within our lives, we experience specific limit situations. One of the most definitive limit situations, for instance, is death which reminds us that no individual is eternal (Bornemark 2006, 72). Research has often focused on studying bereavement groups through the lens of existential media (Lagerkvist 2022; Stenström & Cerratto Pargman 2021; Döveling et.al. 2018). Another limit situation is suffering. When we suffer or experience vulnerability we are often reminded of the finitude of our lives. An instinct may be to avoid suffering by not letting other people come close, as this means more risk of harm. But this limits an individual further as they fail to see an existential meaning to their suffering (Bornemark 2006, 73). In modernity, many limit situations, like illness and death, have become deprivatised. This vulnerability is appropriated in a hypercommercialised and hyperindividualised media landscape. Lagerkvist sees this in the “emergence of intimate publics in which vulnerability is a trademark” (Lagerkvist 2022, 95). Intimacy is a fruitful source of suffering (Illouz 2012, 2019; Bauman 2003; Engdahl 2016). I argue that FDS could be seen as one of these intimate communities that thrives on its members' disillusionment and anguish regarding modern romance.

Most limit situations are played out on digital media, however, the digital technologies themselves could often also constitute a limit situation. Dating apps could become everyday sources of objectification and an existential burden which may encourage a person to question the role technology has in their social lives (De Ridder 2022, 606). The digital is entangled in limit situations. Disruptive or improbable events are often mediated, digital media becomes therefore the space where we process and experience many of the limit situations in life. Podcasts will cover traumatic events, blogs will address aspects of the human condition and livestreams could capture frightening incidents (Lagerkvist 2023, 6). The digital experience is consequently intertwined with limit situations. FDS is a part of this context. FDS has the potential to help many of its members overcome and process many of life's natural limit situations. However, it could also become restrictive by subjecting its members to new limit situations, and in its relation to Lagerkvist's grander digital limit situation.

1.2.7. Being Digitally Thrown

Lagerkvist draws on the philosophical concept of thrownness from Martin Heidegger to explore in what sense we are thrown into our digital existence. Inspired by Heidegger's philosophy, Lagerkvist introduces the term, digital thrownness to further recognise the modern human's digital condition. Thrownness acknowledges the fact that we are situated in a particular place,

at a particular point in time and among a particular crowd and as we exist under these premises, we are urged to find our own purpose and meaning within them. Lagerkvist's term recognises these processes and feelings in the digital environment where we become digitally situated (Lagerkvist 2017, 97). Experiences of digital thrownness have been demonstrated by Tudor's insight into queer digital media use in Russia and, again, De Ridder's research on mobile dating apps as existential media (Tudor 2022, 9-10; De Ridder 2022, 594). Many instances of contemporary intimacy could be affected by our feelings of thrownness and digital thrownness. The commodification of dating often positions us with dichotomous choices, for instance, swiping right or left in a dating app. These choices are often made based on rationality rather than emotionality. This is particularly apparent in online dating (Illouz 2012, 180).

Understanding and addressing digital thrownness is essential as we navigate the complexities of modern intimacy and relationships through the lens and expressions of FDS. Their experiences could highlight the precariousness of human existence within digital realms. Acknowledging thrownness, however, is also an obligation to consider the research subjects' subjectivity. Lagerkvist's exploration of thrownness is not simply an inquiry into the proficiency of people who operate in certain digital realms (Lagerkvist 2017, 102). Lagerkvist's theories situate human experience at the centre which demands a certain ethical framework which will be further explored in the methodology chapter (Lagerkvist 2022, 115).

1.2.8. Maximum Research Benefit

To summarise, contemporary intimacy has become individualised our capabilities, needs, and desires within romance become constitutive aspects of our sense of self. This connects intimacy to many existential issues and reflections whilst also opening our romantic needs and desires to capitalist logic and ideals. Sexual capital becomes an important aspect of our self. Objectification is on the one hand a form of social recognition, however, on the other it can also harm us. The digital and the real inform each other, we see this in dating apps as well as through the spread of pornography (Han 2017 et.al, 29). I argue that the existential vulnerabilities and social hierarchies which these logics create trigger the disillusionment and frustration which we see trademarked in manosphere and femosphere communities. Previous research has focused mainly on the manosphere and male expressions, this study shifts the focus to women.

Building on Shepherd's argument (1994, 83), I deploy existential media as a “view of Being” to sufficiently explore the existential implications of modern intimacy recognising that these are shaped by the “infrastructures of our being”, the media (Peters 2015, 15).

2. A Female Research Strategy

To effectively study FDS and its community I deploy a qualitative approach and focus on creating a deeper understanding of FDS as a case within a broader context (Bazeley 2013, 4). I ground this thesis in the theoretical and ethical framework proposed by Lagerkvist who combines philosophically informed readings of empirical data with ethnographic methods. Lagerkvist argues that researchers are obliged to slow down. The existential implications of being constantly connected often encourage ideals such as speed and quantity. Therefore, Lagerkvist believes that, as researchers, we should problematise the ideals. Existential media is therefore a slow field (Lagerkvist 2022, 50). The limitations of this thesis unfortunately do not allow for a full application of Lagerkvist's ideal as this would entail an intense long-term immersion in the field of the study. This would go beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, I aim to adhere to these principles of slowness as an aspect of my reflexivity as a researcher, The research will have the characteristics of an ethno-case study, proposed by Marie Parker-Jenkins (2018), where the researcher borrows techniques from long-term ethnographic research yet acknowledges the empirical material collected as part of a richer and wider context.

2.1. The Case for Female Dating Strategy

FDS has been chosen as a potentially illustrative case of how individuals operate and cope with modern norms and vulnerabilities in contemporary intimacy. FDS has the characteristics of an extreme case which, according to Bent Flyvbjerg, has the potential to reveal deeper causes and consequences of wide societal issues (Flyvbjerg 2001, 78). FDS could be seen as an extreme response to, or resistance against, the prevalent norms within modern romance culture. The ambition here is to highlight the social conditions and interactions within FDS and create a thick description of the patterns and structure within the group. I also aim to problematise the context that has created FDS.

The methodological approach of Lagerkvist resembles the phronetic approach which Flyvbjerg advocates for. It effectively holds a mirror up to society and provides an understanding of an aspect of the human condition, whilst being driven towards advocating for some form of societal change (Flyvbjerg 2001, 60). Lagerkvist's argument for a new form of subjectivity within research exemplifies this. Rather than positioning people as idealised categories, like media citizens, savvy users, or the audience, Lagerkvist positions the co-exister as the core subject of existential media. The co-exister is a lost subject in search of a greater

meaning by navigating their digital existence in the backdrop of the digital limit situation. The co-exister is not a moral or especially rational subject (Lagerkvist 2022, 108). Posting the co-exister as the main subject of the research emphasises this research's context dependency. This is only natural within the social sciences. Flyvbjerg argues that we cannot hope to find universal knowledge when our research concerns people and society (Flyvbjerg 2001, 70-73).

Whilst co-existers may be deeply entangled within a context they are still able to act or respond to their situation (Lagerkvist 2022, 113). Responsiveness lies at the core of existential media. In line with Jasper's philosophy, Lagerkvist argues that expressing vulnerability creates a sense of obligation between two people. Mutual understanding and a sense of respect can be a source of social recognition (Lagerkvist 2022, 107). Concepts of responsiveness have previously been applied to research on incels and femcels where a lack of responsivity induced a sense of hopelessness which was maintained within the forums (Andreasson 2021 33; Brix-Rasmussen 2023, 81). These studies imply that the researched forums offer their members a form of lifeline. This relates to Lagerkvist's discussion on lifeline communication, which she argues is more than just coping or writing about life: "it is about living life... even as the end nears" (Lagerkvist 2022, 162). As Peters argued: "At some level expression and existence merge" (Peters 2015, 15). Whilst I acknowledge the importance which sharing vulnerabilities and issues can have to create community, I also wish to scrutinise "media in the shape of lifelines" and question FDS's capacity to offer meaningful connections (Lagerkvist 2022, 162). Therefore, I will draw on Lagerkvist's warning, which highlights the hazard of getting stuck in one's vulnerabilities through these lifelines (Lagerkvist 2022, 163). Which one could argue is demonstrated by incels and femcels sustained hopelessness.

2.2. Towards an Empirical Richness

The thesis takes the form of a case study which incorporates ethnographic techniques for material collection, as suggested by Parker-Jenkins (2018). Ethnography has typically entailed an approach where a researcher will immerse themselves in a community over an extended period. The ambition of this method is to provide thick descriptions of the social infrastructures within this community (Geertz 1973, 9). The ethno-case study provides me with an opportunity to acknowledge the limitations created by the time constraints of the project, whilst still utilising the flexible and reflexive tools within the ethnographic toolbox for online fieldwork (Parker-Jenkins 2018, 25). Given the significant impact of the deep mediatisation and digitalisation of our social lives, the broad palette of tools within the ethnographical approach allows for a

nuanced exploration of a digital context, like FDS, and its social intricacies. This could effectively highlight the different ways in which technology is shaped by and shapes the social dynamics of a group. Multiplicity is a core principle of the ethnographic approach (Pink et.al. 2016, 8). Robert Kozinets defines three different forms of data which an ethnographer should capture when conducting fieldwork in the virtual world: elicited data, archival data and fieldnote data (Kozinets 2010, 98).

2.2.1. Elicited Data

Elicited data is data consisting of social interactions between the researcher and the research subjects, or participants. This form of data includes interviews, emails, and conversations on forums or in a private chat group, for instance (Kozinets 2010, 98). Interviews are an example of an easy way to underline the lived experiences of members within a community such as FDS (Byrne 2012, 469). Elicited data could provide valuable first-hand insights into FDS, however, this research has chosen to forego the collection of elicited data. This means that I will not be interacting with members of FDS in any way. The ambition is to still emphasise the empirical accounts and aspire to create helpful knowledge for women by acknowledging their challenges in contemporary intimacy (Harding 2008, 105;115). I have made this decision based on the methodological complexities one must consider when interacting with a “hidden group”, which I argue that FDS is. This chapter will delve deeper into these methodological complexities.

There is a shortage of interview research into the manosphere community (Hart & Huber 2023, 7; Ging & Murphy 2021). This has often been attributed to the hidden nature of these groups and their notorious scepticism towards interacting or sharing information with both journalists and researchers (Daly & Reed 2021, 29). The same scepticism is prevalent within FDS and was exemplified by the pessimistic responses The Verge received when reaching out for an interview (Taylor 2020). Within academia, the cynicism of these groups is often reflected in the sample sizes of interview research (Daly & Reed 2021; Suguira 2021). In the femosphere there exists only one study which includes elicited data (Brix-Rasmussen 2023).

Recruiting hidden populations is a challenging task for researchers who are perceived as outsiders by the research population. To succeed researchers often need to establish a certain level of trust with the members of the community they are observing or potentially gain access to the community members by building a relationship with one of the community’s gatekeepers (Matthews & Cramer 2008, 302; Hart & Huber 2023, 7). Lagerkvist exemplifies this in her description of the slow and patient approach which she had to employ to establish a

relationship of trust with her research subjects, this is an essential part of the slow field which Lagerkvist advocates (Lagerkvist 2022, 50). However, even if one has insight and access there are still more methodological issues to consider. Lauder recounts how his research on white nationalists was hindered because whenever he engaged with group members, they would still treat him as an outsider, an enemy. This made it difficult for him to access inside information or to be a neutral participant-observer (Lauder 2003, 190-191). In the same vein, Reynolds suggests that covert research may be the only way to effectively study deviant groups. This gives the researcher a chance to, potentially, avoid distortions, biased recollections, or outright denial from the research participants.

The slow approach consisting of building a relationship of trust was not feasible due to the time constraint of the project, and engaging with the community without this relationship, I argue, would risk distorting the results. As the authors argue, if we wish to fully understand a community we cannot solely rely on their accounts, especially if they are sceptical towards the research. Hart & Huber make a similar argument. They see a potential measure to gain access to participants could be to perform a form of covert ethnography by posing as a member and asking questions from within (Hart & Huber 2023, 7). I argue that this approach is far too treacherous and would rely on a certain degree of deception which I do not feel ethically comfortable with. As Lagerkvist an existential media perspective recognises that it is crucial to analyse and reflect upon our systems of ethics and care (Lagerkvist 2022, 113). Research within digital environments offers us a certain degree of openness and flexibility, researchers can adopt an experimental attitude and get responses at a lightning-fast pace. It is in this context we must consider the value of slowing down and truly reflecting on our methodological choices and their implications.

2.2.2. Archival Data

Given the challenges associated with accessing FDS members directly my methodological approach will predominantly consist of observational fieldwork along with the collection of archival data. Archival data, as defined by Kozinets (2010, 98), refers to pre-existing data which has been generated without the researcher's involvement. Rooting the methodological framework in digital ethnography supplied me with a toolbox fit for a multifaceted data collection. The data collection has consisted of examining the Female Dating Strategy Handbook (2020), reading articles on the community's website, listening to the Female Dating Strategy Podcast, and remaining consistently immersed in the FDS forum, hosted on the

community's official website. Therefore, the methodological approach undertaken in this study seeks to create a nuanced understanding of the FDS community, its dynamics, and the discourse.

The methodological approach facilitates an exploration of several diverse perspectives of the same phenomena, a triangulation of data (Bruhn Jensen 2021, 348). As stated by Tom Boellstorff et.al. (2012, 119), research focused on the study of virtual communities necessitates a broad understanding of the social and cultural contexts within which these interactions take place. In this case, we cannot rely only on material from the forum as the forum may perhaps not fully encapsulate the many perspectives or values of the broader FDS community. By triangulating multiple data sources, I mitigate the risks of misrepresenting or oversimplifying which are inherent in studying one set of media texts in isolation.

Data has only been collected from open online spaces. I have deliberately avoided closed communication channels and the sections of the forum that are restricted to members only. This intentional exclusion of certain data stems from ethical considerations and practical difficulties, similar to the collection of elicited data, associated with gaining access to the closed spaces. I have not taken this decision lightly as I acknowledge the rich potential which data collection within these spaces could contribute to. Askanius recognises the limitations of only collecting publicly available data, especially when the subjects are aware of a potential "outside" audience, like journalists or researchers. These limitations raise questions regarding the validity and quality of our research (Askanius 2019, 4-5). This is observable within FDS's community where there are often references to lurkers on the forum and the podcast hosts traditionally end every episode of the podcast by telling scrotes, men who they argue are low value, to "die mad". Despite these limitations, I argue that the ethical imperative of this research outweighs the temptation to access these restricted areas through some form of deceit.

The ambition of this research is, as Askanius writes, to try and get: "inside the online universe of the organization in an attempt to understand the cultural, political and social expressions and practices inhabiting this field while staying at a distance" (Askanius 2019, 2). The research is predominantly externalist. As our digital landscapes become increasingly complex the distinction between private and public domains are gradually blurred (Kleinman 2004, 47). I argue that the online environments studied are deemed as open, public spaces. The Female Dating Strategy Handbook is a public handbook which members are encouraged to read before engaging with the material on the forum. The intention of the handbook, I argue, allows its content to be researched, as it is explicitly made to teach FDS's ethos to new members.

On FDS's website, there is a page titled "Strategy" which contains several articles which resemble opinion pieces, these are authored by different moderators. The articles will

sometimes offer the author's opinion on chapters in the Handbook, dating advice and recent developments within FDS.

The Female Dating Strategy Podcast is also material which could generally be considered public and open. Markus Lundström and Tomas Lundström (2021) argue that this is one of the strengths of podcast ethnography, which they advocate for in their article, as it essentially sidesteps many of the difficulties regarding the obtaining of data in ethnographic research (Lundström & Lundström 2021, 296). As Rachel Winter and Anna Lavis (2019) argue, listening could be an active form of participation as this facilitates a form of data collection which mirrors how the research subjects themselves engage in this material. Listening becomes even more ethically important if the researcher has an externalist approach as it could allow the researcher to engage in the rest of the material with a broader sense of the emotionality within the media manifold (Winter & Lavis 2019, 4).

The forum page on FDS's website is an open space where members of FDS can discuss strategies, podcast episodes as well as the perceptions and experiences of individual members. One of the core principles within ethnographic research, especially when the content can be personal, is for the researcher to seek informed consent from the research subjects. However, as Boellstorff et.al. states, not all research settings provide the structure to do so. In many contexts, it could be impractical or disruptive for the researcher to announce one's presence, and project, and ask for consent (Boellstorff et.al. 2012, 134). Karen O'Reilly draws on Maurice Punch who writes that there may be certain social settings where negotiating access from everyone would be ineffective and undermine the behaviours the researcher wishes to observe. Another problematic aspect is if researchers cannot fully explain the research to participants. Balancing one's wish to be open and honest without being obtrusive and a constant reminder of the presence of an "other" is, therefore, quite difficult (O'Reilly 2005, 61-62). I decided against announcing my presence as a researcher as I believe that this could have potentially had a negative impact on the community (Bryman 2012, 680). The reasons for this are both the FDS's scepticism against outsiders but also because of my gender as a man.

The ambition of my research is to still operate within these environments with a sense of care when it comes to collecting and handling data. Researchers may at times operate under the assumption that online participants are autonomous individuals who base their communication on rational responses (Ling et.al. 2004, 173). I recognise my research subjects as co-existers. There may still be times when these operate under the assumption of privacy, for example, if someone shares personal details about themselves in these cases it is up to the researcher judgement to not only deem what should be regarded as public or private from an

ethics point of view but also to be empathetic towards what a user might perceive as very private information (Boellstorff et.al. 2012, 135). Despite the information being publicly available the, at times, private nature of the communication necessitates the need to anonymise all subjects by leaving out usernames from the posts. This is done to ultimately adhere to the ambition of ethnography to ensure that the research is causing as little pain as possible and be aware that the data, despite being publicly available can still create effects for the research subjects (O'Reilly 2005, 63).

2.2.3. Fieldnote Data

The fieldnote data could be seen as a mediation between my thoughts as a researcher and my observations or data collection. The field notes have more of a reflexive character as the focus of the analysis is to prioritise the empirical accounts of FDS members. Thus, the fieldnotes are both involved in the sense-making process of the researcher (Bazeley 2013, 68) and as a way of recording my journey, including my justifications for certain choices, uncertainties, and personal reflections and emotions (Kozinets 2010, 114). Fieldnotes have been taken during the entire process detailing my interactions with different parts of FDS and reflections on my role within the research. Examples of the field notes will not be included within my analysis as the goal of the research is to understand the dynamics and experiences within the FDS rather than my observations of them. However, they will be used to reflect upon the results and future research.

2.3. Approaching Female Dating Strategy

FDS has been on my radar since March 2023 and since then I have regularly checked the website and read posts on their forum page. The community was founded in 2019 as a subreddit (Taylor 2020) but has since 2022 moved from Reddit to an independent website. This website contains a forum, links to their podcasts and several articles akin to opinion pieces. Before entering the forum, members are encouraged to read the FDS handbook, as this holds many answers to FDS's overall ethos and details many of its strategies. I began familiarising myself with the content on FDS's forum and the content in the handbook in late January 2024. At the time it was a weekly engagement which was mainly intended to update me on the social climate and give me an understanding of the content, as this would assist me in my purposive sampling later (Seale 2018, 339). I increased my engagement with the content on the website in March 2024 which included downloading and listening to the FDS podcast. This routine immersion

consisted of me downloading and archiving data from the FDS Handbook as well as articles and forum posts on the FDS website.

Working with the FDS podcast offered other possibilities. Listening to the FDS podcast offered a helpful break from the typically isolating practice of sifting through immense amounts of text-based data. The podcast episodes allowed me to immerse myself in the field whilst I was doing everyday tasks such as commuting to work, walking, and cooking. This was useful as it allowed me to drop my guard and engage with the material as a part of my everyday life (Askanius 2019, 8). It also made me somewhat emotionally attached to the speakers, similar to the experiences of Lundström and Lundström (2021, 293) and as the FDS podcast announced that one of the hosts would be leaving, I found that I also experienced a form of disruption as I felt that I had developed a certain connection to the host. In total I listened to 36 podcast episodes, however, these have not all been transcribed and analysed.

The process of sampling for the analysis followed a purposive approach (Seale 2018, 339). So, whilst I listened to 36 podcast episodes, I ended up transcribing and analysing 14 episodes as they were deemed as the most effective to answer the research questions. There were 15 articles on the “Strategy” page which have all been analysed together with the comments in the article's comment section. 35 forum threads were archived and coded. I mainly collected data that focused on different aspects of intimacy and relationships. I did not analyse forum posts from certain categories, such as “Skincare”, “Travel” or “Fitness and Nutrition”. On top of this, I have also analysed the FDS handbook. The collection of data from each source was guided by the concept of informational redundancy (Seale 2018, 375). Data collection concluded once the empirical material it generated was superfluous.

2.3.1. Coding

The next step of the process was analysing and coding the data. The different classes of material were each coded separately, to ensure that the characteristics of each form of media were captured. The process began by creating descriptive codes¹. This was done by identifying and labelling certain passages within the different media texts. This was built upon with a second stage of coding where the descriptive codes were clustered together into categories, which spurred the creation of sub-categories and ultimately themes² (Bazeley 2013, 126). As Daly & Reed discuss it is often misleading to argue that the “themes emerged” (Daly & Reed 2022, 19).

¹ An example of the descriptive coding process can be found in appendix 2.

² A compiled example of the codebook containing descriptive codes can be found in appendix 3.1.

Categorising the descriptive codes and dividing them into themes is essentially an act of the researcher's interpretation and a process of constant negotiation. It was a circular process, as Bazeley (2013, 126) points out, which consisted of me constantly revisiting and revising the categories and themes³. Within this process, it becomes increasingly important to acknowledge the positionality of the researcher.

2.3.2. Embodying a High Value Researcher

As a researcher, I have had many conflicting feelings regarding the ideals and beliefs of FDS. My ambition has been to account for this subjectivity by utilising the field notes and reflecting upon my personal reactions to several statements made on the forum or in the podcast. Utilising field notes in this sense has allowed me to reflect on the process of data collection and coding and allow me to consider my role in this research and provide findings which reflect FDS, rather than my opinion of them. Objectivity may not be an attainable value within social sciences, especially not in mediated expressions which are constantly filtered by a manifold of events (Peters 2015, 358). However, listening and understanding are especially valuable traits within research. Whilst my beliefs and experiences may not reflect those within FDS, the presented insights offer important findings into FDS and add nuance to our understanding of the dynamics and inherent struggles within contemporary intimacy.

³ A compiled example of the codebook containing analytical codes, or quotes, can be found in appendix 3.1

3. Existing on Female Dating Strategy

This chapter presents the findings of the research and utilises quotes from the different classes of material to explore FDS as a response to the uncertainties within contemporary intimacy. The first chapter explores FDS's self-help approach and the community's ambition to embody what they call a High-Value Woman. The analysis then focuses on FDS's broader conceptualisation of men which informs many of their suggested strategies. Following this, the third chapter studies the concept of evaluating and categorising men and focuses mainly on how men are differentiated between high value and low value. Finally, the analysis shifts its focus to the actual strategies of FDS and their implications.

3.1. Becoming a High Value Woman

Whilst FDS, at first, may resemble any other digital self-help platform tailored towards women the community has a much more profound mission than simply empowering women in their romantic pursuits:

FDS' goal is to deconstruct toxic and self-sabotaging cultural narratives that inhibit women from living their best lives and entering relationships that truly benefit them.

(About, Female Dating Strategy, 2023)

As illustrated in the quote, FDS recognises that society limits women to a form of immanence, a loss of subjectivity, which is internalised due to prevailing patriarchal narratives (de Beauvoir 1949/2010, 730; 749). Feminist scholars argue that this is realised through women's patterns of silencing themselves and prioritising the needs of others (Jack 1999, 10). Within this cultural context, FDS offers a framework and a community which aims to help women assert their agency and subjectivity by setting standards and only engaging in beneficial relationships. FDS is in this sense a community which has been cultivated for the co-exister – a responsive individual that embodies vulnerability and navigates digital spaces in a search of meaning and relationality (Lagerkvist 2022, 108). FDS creates a safe space for these co-existers to realise their agency by reclaiming certain behaviours and labels that have previously been mocked or labelled as destructive due to the challenge they present to the underpinning patriarchal society (Jack 1999, 37; Chemaly 2018, xviii). An example is their adaptation of the term high maintenance as a positive attribute, which empowers women to set high standards and enforce strict boundaries. In an episode of the podcast, the hosts reflect on the term:

04:15: I also want to retitle this episode and say that none of the things that we're saying are actually high maintenance. They're just things that you need that I think are basic things, but we're calling them high maintenance only because that's how it's referred to. But honestly, this culture needs to change the standards to meet us here. None of what we're going to say is going to be outrageous in the way that men are going to pretend it is.

04:35: Yeah, women need to be comfortable with being called high maintenance. There's nothing wrong with it. There is an element of stigma and shame attached to it but that is there by design. If a man says you're high maintenance in a derogatory way, just know that he's a scrote⁴ and just move on. I think it's a great vetting strategy because, like I said, men are high maintenance as well and they don't apologise for it so neither should you.

(Why You Should Be High Maintenance, 2023)

The discussion highlights the shame and stigma connected to being high maintenance, however, it also reframes this societal stigma and argues that it is a strength rather than a vulnerability. FDS could therefore be seen as a steadying force, a community that recognises and shares the vulnerabilities and empowers its members to enforce their subjectivity. FDS's presence and support could position it as communication in the shape of a lifeline for many women who feel confined due to societal expectations and narratives (Lagerkvist 2022, 164-165). The recognition of men being high maintenance and not having to apologise is also valuable in this sense, as it problematises the differences between male and female socialisation, where women are expected to be a civilising force who can neutralise male aggression (Jack 1999, 33; Engdahl 2009, 37; Young 1980, 153). To retaliate against this FDS argues that women should engage in the act of decentring men from their narratives and instead focus on self-development. This commitment is epitomised in the conceptualisation of the High Value Woman (HVW). This idealised woman is portrayed within the community as a self-centred and liberated figure, free from patriarchal constraints and essentially unbothered by the actions of men, as we see in this quote:

A high value woman is a woman who doesn't revolve her life around men. She has her own career, hobbies, and a great social life that fulfils her emotional needs, so if she does welcome a man in her life, he better be amazing.

(Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 2)

⁴ See appendix 1 for definition.

The HVW demonstrates how FDS idealises autonomy and self-worth over romantic engagements with men. Therefore, FDS argues against the perceived notion that singledom is some form of defective state. A notion many women will internalise due to a lack of diverse narratives about single women (Pickens & Braun 2018, 431; Simpson 2016, 386). Rather than focusing on finding a man, members are encouraged to build their careers, pursue new hobbies, and build a rich social life which could be perceived as a resistance to traditional heterosexual gender roles (Pickens & Braun 2018, 444). To efficiently decentre men FDS argues that members need to deprogram themselves, which many members find challenging:

I still analyse men out of habit at times and I still catch myself centring them in my narrative but it's getting better. ... Deprogramming ourselves is hard work, but necessary and rewarding. There is a whole world out there and inside of us that is ours, that does not focus on men.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

To deprogram themselves and bring forth the world-producing capacities of the media members from the same thread looked for alternative perspectives, such as only listening to female-ran podcasts or female artists. This creates a female-centred media manifold which could reshape their lifeworld, aligning with Frosh (2019, 3-5). Another aspect of this media manifold is the extensive reading list within the FDS Handbook which contains books focused on dating advice, as well as an entire section of personal development books and a subchapter named Self Improvement (Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 5-7). This is also common in the manosphere and many of the books in the FDS reading list were also featured on the Red Pill reading list (r/TheRedPill 2024). Self-development is an important aspect of FDS often referred to as levelling up. FDS is, therefore, an interesting site where therapeutic discourse and feminist ideas and goals are combined. Illouz argues that these cultural formations have often resonated well with each other as she recounts a quote from feminist scholar Angela McRobbie “feminism is about being who you want to be - and finding out who you are in the first place” (Illouz 2008, 131). This is further realised as an essential part of levelling up is attending therapy:

Get in therapy and work on your co-dependency, when you no longer feel you 'need' someone to feel fulfilled, your head will be more clear, your boundaries will be firmer, and thus your standards for what you tolerate will be stronger.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

08:50: I've spent my entire life you know, getting treatment, going to therapy for depression and anxiety. I've worked my ass off to get to a point where I am mentally healthy and like a functional person with good communication skills and stuff. I am not going to saddle myself with someone who has not done that kind of work. So, there's nothing wrong with not wanting to date someone who's mentally ill.

(Introduction to Female Dating Strategy, 2021)

These quotes highlight the transformative power which therapy has on members of FDS by helping them recognise and establish their needs and desires. The establishment of individual needs aligns with Illouz's observation that feminism and therapy redefined healthy intimacy and relationships by individualising each partner within a relationship (Illouz 2008, 129). Intimacy has therefore been intertwined with our self-identity (Giddens 1992, 203). This personalisation of needs and the close connection between the self and intimacy could explain why the podcast host is so reluctant to date anyone who has not done the necessary self-betterment. The FDS are however not after a pure relationship, as Giddens would have hoped (1992, 2). Instead, FDS practically embodies the social consequences of the therapeutic discourse of individual needs and desires highlighted by Illouz (2008, 142). They employ a utilitarian approach to intimate relationships framing relationships in terms of personal gain, rather than human connection, as exemplified in the following quote from the podcast:

12:46: FDS is not an equality strategy. It's an equity strategy. One thing that that makes FDS unique is that we understand that the dynamics between men and women are inherently, they're not equal... Therefore, we need to switch to equitable strategies. In order to have somewhat of a chance against the unequal dynamics that society has essentially generated between men and women.

(FAQs about Feminism, Double Standards, Men Who Are Still Friends with an Ex, 2021)

This quote expresses the FDS perception that the imbalance between genders necessitates an equity strategy rather than an equality strategy. As our individual needs and desires can be endless, they tend to become vague and ambivalent, which creates emotionally confusing relationships (Illouz 2019, 29). The commodification of intimacy and technological development further complicates this matter. Contemporary relationships are connoted by their, at times, disorienting nature which could create the experience of thrownness (Markham 2020, 30). These moments within our relationships where we are made aware of our thrownness and feel that our existential security is threatened could constitute a limit situation (Lagerkvist 2017, 98). When confronted with this severe form of disorientation or existential uncertainty members

are encouraged to adopt the equitable mindset of FDS, which allows them to question if this relationship is beneficial for them. The equitable strategy of the FDS may grant its members a sense of security, however, it also illustrates how the assessment of risk or value, often found in the financial world, becomes increasingly prevalent in our intimate lives. Illouz understands this as a natural consequence of the tyranny of individuality and self-enhancement in modernity. As prospects become increasingly uncertain, psychological resources are frequently employed to assess our relationships and social lives on a risk-versus-reward basis (Illouz 2019, 163-164). This is an essential part of FDS's methodology:

Each of our recommended strategies is weighed by overall risk vs reward based on real world lived experience and available data to recommend the best course of action.

(About, Female Dating Strategy, 2023)

The mention of risk-versus-reward-based strategies above establishes that FDS members see evaluation as an essential aspect of the dating, or relationship experience. Whilst evaluation is an essential part of modern dating it can often lead to complicated experiences as most people are influenced by at times conflicting goals. An example would be the goal of preserving one's autonomy on one hand versus striving for attachment with another person on the other (Illouz 2019, 164-165). How does FDS evaluate the risk of losing some form of autonomy for the reward of connection and attachment, and vice versa? This conflict is illustrated in a forum thread where a member describes how she recently contracted COVID-19 after kissing a man whom she had met on several previous occasions. The poster was frustrated over the situation and asked the other members of the forum what she should do. Most of the advice she received encouraged her to end the relationship, emphasising the man's selfishness and that her health was potentially at stake:

I hope you feel better! Rest up and take it easy. ❤️ As for the dumbass.... This shows that he is selfish and in the worst way possible because (God forbid) what if you get really sick?

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

I am so sorry to hear this! I would end it if it were me. I have a pre-existing condition and I could have serious complications if I catch Covid-19 even with the vaccine and booster...

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

One commenter argued that it was most likely an accident and that nobody is perfect:

Wow really, someone didn't know they had covid, a mild case, you also didn't know and he is so horrible for being human that you cut him off. No one is perfect, not knowing doesn't mean he didn't respect you, waiting for the fourth date to kiss you, he is polite and patient. How can anyone expect perfection?

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

The original poster ultimately commented that she appreciated the support and had decided to end the relationship, highlighting that she had even blocked the man on all accounts:

Thank you! I honestly had my mind made up, I just needed a push! He didn't respect himself to make sure he didn't have COVID and put me at risk. I blocked him on all accounts. He didn't even apologize for getting me sick. 😊

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

The original poster was faced with the dilemma of prioritising her health and by extension, autonomy or maintaining a relationship with the man that she had been dating. When actors are faced with goal conflicts even minor details, like contracting a mild case of COVID-19 after a kiss, is enough to generate an exit strategy which allows the actor to withdraw from the relationship and preserve their autonomy. This is representative of Illouz's negative choice (Illouz 2019, 165). Whilst this case might not have been harrowing enough to constitute a limit situation, it did provide us with another example of FDS's ability to essentially be a lifeline of communication for the original poster. The example demonstrates how having someone be there and listen to the original poster's story could create security or stability for them to ultimately take action to preserve their autonomy. However, as Lagerkvist argues, lifelines also create a risk of becoming stuck (Lagerkvist 2022, 164). In this case, one could argue that whilst the lifeline can be a stabilising force which allows women to assert boundaries and standards without shame, it could also cultivate a limiting mindset where potential relationships are approached with a defensive mindset due to naturally conflicting goals and emotional uncertainties.

Whilst FDS may offer beneficial advice, for its members, on how to engage in self-development and ultimately claim a sense of agency. The intersection with therapeutic culture rationalises intimacy and relations to the point where emotional and economic

discourses end up redefining one another. FDS becomes an illustrative example of emotional capitalism where relationships are measured on the achievement of having one's individual needs fulfilled and preserving autonomy (Illouz 2008, 150). Relationships become more like economic transactions, rather than opportunities for growth and understanding. Consequently, FDS takes on a more risk-averse and suspicious character when scrutinising men. This increased scrutiny shall be explored in the next chapter.

3.2. Most Men are Not of Value to You

FDS encourages women to set unapologetically high standards for men and even enforces rules such as “no standard-shaming⁵ for men” (Female Dating Strategy, Forum). However, whilst the stated intention of the community is to help women become a HVW and find a High-Value Man (HVM) the content across all platforms will often consist of discussions where members critique men who have in some way disappointed them, harmed them, or failed to meet their standards. These men are categorised as either Low Value Men (LVM), No Value Men (NVM), Zero Value Men (ZVM) or scrotes. This thesis will refer to them all as LVM as this is the most common category. This is also a common feature of manosphere communities, which similarly to FDS categorises women into different classes based on a perceived value (O'Neill 2018, 155). This categorisation and objectification within intimacy is a characteristic of the datafication of intimacy with modern technology, like dating apps, reinforcing cultural expectations, and highlighting the existential burden which our digital lifeworld may create (De Ridder 2022, 606). The categorisation is an important aspect of FDS as all its members need to recognise and reject what they deem are unworthy men, as the handbook states:

We do ourselves and humanity no favors allowing men to exhibit subpar behavior and be rewarded with our attention.

(Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 2)

This quote demonstrates how scrutinising men should not only be seen as a personal endeavour aimed at protecting their self but also a collective effort they engage in to better the conditions for all women or even humanity. The argument reflects a view of women as a form of social class almost and resembles the ambition of Hakim, to embolden women to “bargain for a better deal” (Hakim 2011, 6). This is further illustrated by one of the podcast hosts:

⁵ See appendix 1 for definition.

25:30: Women as a sort of union, so to speak. I'm very like Pro union and women as a Union need to collaborate and demand better working conditions.

(FAQs about Feminism, Double Standards, Men Who Are Still Friends with an Ex, 2021)

The focus on critiquing men and uniting, as a labour union, promotes a sense of solidarity against subpar male behaviour and a collective demand for better treatment. This activity becomes particularly clear in the podcast segment 'Roast-A-Scrote' where listeners of the podcast submit stories regarding terrible dates or exes that the host will read and react to. The tone in these segments is often playful. Listeners will often portray their encounters with a cringe-inducing or humorous aesthetic, reflecting a heteropessimistic attitude (Holzberg & Lehtonen 2021, 1904). In this sense, FDS is part of a new trend by offering narratives on single women beyond the traditional narratives of equating finding a man to some form of neo-liberal success (Simpson 2016, 386; Holzberg & Lehtonen 2021;1905). This attitude towards men is common, especially in the podcast, as exemplified here:

57:04: For women who are bisexual, I think they're just better off only dating women like why involve men at all. Like if you have the option of not dating men. Why would you date a man?

57:22: It's just performative straightness, right?

(BDSM. Kink. Sex Work. Polyamory. ENDGAME – CANNIBALISM, 2021)

The discussion highlights a performative disaffiliation with heterosexuality as the hosts are in disbelief over the fact that bisexual women would date men, implying a form of "performative straightness". Thus, the hosts overlook the fact that, for many, human connection may be more important than gender and sex. These ideas highlight heteropessimism as they underscore being attracted to men as almost embarrassing in a sense (Seresin 2019). Humour and irony will often play a role in expressions of heteropessimism within FDS. However much of the language will at times appear hateful to an outsider. When criticised for this, members will often argue that they were obviously joking or trolling (Vice Media Comes for The Queens 2021, 01:50). However, it remains unclear how much the FDS embrace hateful language or seriously adopt certain negative ideas about men, a common problem within manosphere research (Hart &

Huber 2023, 8). Whilst members claim that this is a form of online banter, it is crucial to recognise that humour is at times used to mask deeper resentments and spread essentialist ideas, the following quotes exemplify this:

29:18: Yeah, like I think we had a post a while back that was like talk about the 80/20 rule and how like, 80% of women only go for the top 20% of guys and we were basically like, no, the reality is that 80% of women are quite literally equal in value to 20% of men... Women are superior, say it loud and say it proud lady.

(FAQs about Feminism, Double Standards, Men Who Are Still Friends with an Ex, 2021)

They aren't supposed to be pampered and treated like they can bond with us. They're designed for war. Men are not like women, and it's actually raising the bar for women for us to stop funneling actual love into husks. Treating men like big versions of women who can reciprocate naturally is fucking stupid as hell. They're designed to fuck and then get gone. I don't know a single dude who is a fraction as good of a partner as the lesbian women I know. It's biological.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

These quotes illustrate the tendency to view men as inherently problematic and, in many ways, inferior whereas women are described as superior and virtuous beings. The categorisations of men as “husks” and “designed for war” go beyond playful banter and portray men as driven by a biological mandate which could negate their ability to consider the moral consequences of their actions. This becomes a problem as the same language is often used by manosphere communities to warrant their actions (O’Neill 2018, 128). This could be understood as heteropessimistic fantasies, where similarly to the incels and Men Going Their Own Way, FDS creates this portrayal of men which dismiss the complexities of real life to protect themselves from pursuing men as romantic subjects and risk the experience of the many disappointments and complexities of a heterosexual relationship (Johanssen 2023, 33). This attitude creates an antagonism between men and women where they are no longer seen as relatable as they are essentially a different species (O’Neill 2018, 156). This could have social consequences for many FDS members who demonstrate a scepticism and real fear of meeting and potentially dating men at times:

I feel nauseous, exhausted and terrified for my life in some cases at the thought of having to get to know a new male in my life again. To be true to myself though, I would like to find a long term loyal life partner but I'm happy to stay single and stress free if need be.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

I'm grateful that I've never let a man (outside of my family) mess me up or hurt me but I've overcorrected, and now I'm too closed off. I have no idea how to have intimacy with a man. I'm wondering if it's even possible at this point.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

We can ascertain that both members have suffered either from a previous relationship or men within their family, this experience could constitute limit situations (Bornemark 2006, 73). In this sense, the media and content of FDS may have been used existentially to make sense of these situations and offer a sense of relationality and security. However, the media and content of FDS may also be limiting for its members as it may also create new vulnerabilities (Lagerkvist 2022, 114-115). As we have previously seen FDS, as a lifeline, also has the potential of getting its members stuck. The world it produces is one consisting of scepticism and resentment towards men as they are seen as the source of many of its member's suffering. To avoid potential suffering FDS discourages emotional connections with men. This limits a person further by isolating them from communication and connection with others (Lagerkvist 2022, 90-92). This is further highlighted in FDS's paradoxical evaluation of men.

3.3. Ruthlessly Evaluate Men

FDS becomes paradoxical as it encourages women to disdain men, however, it also offers strategies on how to attract men as most members despite recognising the faults of hetero-sexual relationships still hope to find a HVM someday (Johanssen 2023, 30). The search for the almost elusive HVM is a focal point within the community. There is a clear lack of defining attributes that constitute a HVM, as FDS argues that high value means different things for different people, as exemplified and explored in the handbook:

High Value means high value to you, personally. A man who adds value to your life rather than subtracts from it.

(Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 80)

The admission that a HVM is not a definable archetype but rather a person whose qualities and values align with individual FDS members showcases the individualisation of love and intimacy and boils the HVM down to a set of behavioural expectations (Illouz 2012, 164). This individualisation leads to the ambiguity surrounding the HVM. The HVM is portrayed as anything from a chivalrous husband who demonstrates respect and reliability (Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 80), to an almost mythical creature who is constantly battling the internalised patriarchy within his mind:

If you met an actual HVM, he'd probably be very interesting to talk to, but other than that, there's not much else you'd be able to do with him because he is always fighting an internal war and you can't be a part of that. You will never be as interesting to him as his fight is to himself because he wants to be HV... HV women are attempting to de-bug themselves while HV men are attempting to re-bug themselves (with a different bug than their base male nature).

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

The quote illustrates an extreme depiction of the HVM, where a potential relationship is deemed futile. The wide disarray of different definitions consequently leaves many members questioning the very existence of a HVM and resulting in several members adopting a heterofatalistic attitude. This exemplifies how these idealised figures can be used to relinquish themselves from any potential romantic pursuits as there is no one worthy of pursuing. Following the same logic as manosphere groups this allows members of FDS to remain lethargic and reject any potential romantic connections before they even happen (Johanssen 2023, 28). While FDS condemns standard-shaming women for having high standards when it comes to men, they do not apply the same rules towards women who they perceive have low standards. FDS are, therefore, often harsh on women who are dating or in a relationship with men whom they perceive as low value, as exemplified here:

I don't get how these women don't realise how much precious years of their lives they have utterly wasted as a mommymcbangmaid⁶. Isn't there a post that says men can't keep their mask too long, I bet there were red flags before she decided to waste her life for dick.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

⁶ See appendix 1 for definition.

26:23: And that's actually such a good point, because, you know, people will look at FDS and think that we're misogynist because we get mad at other women sometimes for accepting stupid shit from men. No, that's union politics. OK, historically speaking, if someone crosses a picket line, they get fucking beat up. OK. You know, union members do not take kindly to people who break the strike and go to work anyways. As women, we get to feel angry at other women, for, you know, kind of essentially being traitors to, you know, women as a political entity.

(FAQs about Feminism, Double Standards, Men Who Are Still Friends with an Ex, 2021)

Together these quotes highlight a critical perspective on women who accept LVM's, the use of terms like "mommymcbangmaid" in a derogatory way highlights a critique towards women who enter the traditional role of a nurturer and caretaker when they are in a relationship with a man and argues that they have consequently wasted years of their lives (Jack 1999, 32). The podcast quote, however, utilises the metaphor of union politics to justify FDS's anger towards women who do not align with FDS's principles. Lagerkvist argues that "our actions and communicative practices recondition the world and reshape the environments in which we act", this ultimately creates limits, possibilities but also ethical responsibilities (Lagerkvist 2022, 112). In other words, the media we produce matters as it can fundamentally shape the human experience. Whilst aggression can be a useful tool for standing up for oneself and exercising a positive change in the world, a relationship requires "a being with" as much as a "being opposed" (Jack 1999, 282). The harsh language and judgement often exercised towards other women on FDS limits the possibilities for constructive dialogue with other women and communities. This reinforces divisive attitudes rather than promoting an inclusive approach that sees other humans as co-existers and enforces an ethical responsibility.

Adhering to the FDS standards can at times be complicated as there is an abundance of characteristics and attributes that are considered red flags. A chapter in the handbook compiles a few, such as, being an extremely fast texter, love-bombing, having overinflated confidence, being secretive, having pictures of kids on their phone, being controlling and being unreliable (Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 95-97). Whilst many of these traits may potentially be indicators of manipulative behaviour, some could just be ignorant behaviours and not necessarily linked to any malicious intent or abuse, as the term red flag often implies (Shuster et.al. 2024, 157). Additionally, this framework will often lead to members generalising men based on characteristics, or traits such as nationality, financial class, and political affiliations:

Scandinavian men are entitled. They are generally very low effort. You will be asked to come over to Netflix and chill, drink dates and coffee dates.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

That Italian men are overdramatic and put on a romantic show for you but drop you as soon as you're inconvenient in some way... I'm from Germany and I can say most stereotypes regarding German men do apply – many are introverted / socially awkward or friendly but emotionally unavailable, obsessed with work and rather stingy.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

While we believe in having your own career and making your own money, a man still has to add financial value to your life... This means not splitting the bill and not dating financially challenged men.

(Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 3).

24:44: I just think that a lot of Communist men have this whole fantasy of like, “oh once we overthrow capitalism it's going to be a free fuck fest” ...Men's politics are a function of like their sexual interests right.

(Exploiting The Cracks In Male Solidarity, 2021)

The quotes demonstrate how stereotypes and generalisations condition men to a form of socio-sexual hierarchy (Green 2014, 44). FDS employ this to evaluate the men's value and akin to Hakim, question if they can offer any social mobility, exemplified in the argument for financial value or the stereotype that a German man brings a lower social value (Hakim 2011, 121).

3.3.1. Kinky Men & Porn-sick Scrotes – Did the sexual revolution go too far?

Within the sociosexual hierarchy, a man's attitude towards porn and BDSM is a key indicator of his value. FDS views porn and BDSM as grotesque manifestations of the patriarchy and as harmful aspects of contemporary sexual culture. Perspectives which do contain some merit. As several academics claim that porn does have a substantial effect on the sex lives of many adults (Bernstein et.al 2023, 159; French & Hamilton 2018, 82). Srinivasan argues that, especially for men, porn has become the normative standard and authority when it comes to sex (Srinivasan 2021, 44-45). FDS problematises pornography and anguish over the amount of “porn-sick” men who practice selfish and aggressive sex. This is often an argument against casual sex in FDS:

01:02:48: Most guys are porn sick⁷, especially if they're under the age of 30, these days because the normal heterosexual sex script is degrading, violent, humiliating to women. I think there's too much of a risk that the guys going to spring that on you during the casual sex, whether you've discussed it beforehand or not. So, I strongly advise women to avoid it just because of the culture around sex right now. It's just too toxic.

(Casual Sex, Part 1 - Don't Do It (But if You Do, Sit On His Face) + Real Estate Stalker, 2021)

This attitude resonates with their arguments against BDSM culture, in an article titled *His kinks are a reflection of his values* (2022), the author writes that men use BDSM or kinks to get away with problematic sexual behaviours, therefore, FDS should kink-shame⁸ these men. The arguments against porn and BDSM reflect how the emancipation of sexual desire has resulted in a commodified or pornified sexual culture. Sex is freed of any moral regulation other than affirming mutual autonomy and freedom (Illouz 2012, 60). As Han et.al argues, intimacy is not inherently commodified, but capitalism turns sexuality into porn. It exploits our sexuality as it sees no other use for it (Han et.al 2017, 32). Sex, therefore, could become a site of profound uncertainty for many where our thrownness is felt as the digital, such as porn, enters a site where we are most vulnerable. The act of someone degrading you in this state could constitute a limit situation. Many members talk about their experiences of this which highlights how FDS can help create a form of existential security as meaning is created communally (Lagerkvist 2017, 101-102). In their ambition to problematise aspects of contemporary sex culture the FDS risks oversimplifying sexual expression and desire by creating a binary view of what sex should and should not be:

Pure vanilla sex⁹ with a man who wants nothing but to give you intense, loving pleasure is uplifting and divine ❤️

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

Whilst the quote demonstrates a resistance against the pornification of sexual culture, which Illouz argues is a mechanism to further control women (Illouz 2019, 119), it also gives us a portrayal of sex where the man is objectified as a function of achieving pleasure. This is interesting as it portrays sexuality as an arena for women to both act in the position of the

⁷ See appendix 1 for definition.

⁸ See appendix 1 for definition.

⁹ See appendix 1 for definition.

subject, experiencing autonomy and power as they objectify the man, as well as an arena of potential devaluation and objectification of their self (Illouz 2019, 140). However, autonomy is only achieved if sex is done “right”. Within these discussions FDS’s critical stance against what they call “choice-feminism” becomes apparent. They highlight how certain branches of feminism emphasise the individual ability to choose, which glosses over many inherent gender inequalities and imbalances prevalent in the heterosexual framework.

This position will, at times, put FDS in an uneasy alliance with conservatives. An example is the conservative journalist, Louise Perry, who was invited to an episode of the FDS podcast where she admitted to being a fan of FDS. The hosts and Perry discussed the dangers of casual sex, the pornification of sexual culture, and criticised many of the more liberal strands of feminism. (How Sexual Reaganites Deregulated The Sexual Marketplace To Women’s Detriment w Louise Perry, 2022). Whilst FDS may align with conservatives on certain values and topics their differences become apparent in their ultimate goals. For instance, whilst Perry makes arguments against certain aspects of contemporary sexual culture that are in line with FDS’s ethos, she concludes her book *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* (2022) by declaring monogamous marriage as the answer and argues that feminists should listen to their mothers (Perry 2022, 185-189). Whilst many FDS members appreciate Perry’s work, not many agree with her closing arguments, as we can see in this forum post:

Yeah, I read "The Case Against the Sexual Revolution" and I agreed with most of it. Louise Perry made some excellent arguments against porn, prostitution and casual sex. The one part I disagreed with was that part where she pushed marriage and children as the only path for women.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

FDS has in several articles been criticized for being “socially conservative” (Taylor 2020; Scott 2020; Cunningham 2021), and whilst many of its approaches to sex and dating take a conservative approach, FDS itself mirrors more of a hybrid position between traditionalism and modernity. Conservatives, for instance, tend to idealise marriage as the goal by arguing that it provides security both ontologically and physically, FDS, however, uses traditional approaches to dating to ensure maximum female benefit. FDS is therefore an extreme example of emotional capitalism within intimacy where relationships are rationalised as a project of the self (Illouz 2012, 247). I would argue that FDS even resembles the achievement subjects in Han’s

achievement society who will willingly give themselves over to constraining structures to maximise individual benefit (Han 2015a, 11).

Similar to their utilisation of conservative values they utilise often utilise feminist values for the same purposes. They embody a form of embedded feminism. However, it is distinct from the embedded feminism highlighted by Hunt (2006) and Askanius (2022) where feminism is used for political gain (Hunt 2006, 53; Askanius 2022, 1775). The feminist values within FDS are utilised for individual gain. The uncertainty of an unregulated sexual and relationship market is not concerning because it is morally wrong in an essentialist manner, as perhaps in conservative spheres of influence. It is ethically questionable because it could potentially harm their sense of self. This mixture of values demonstrates FDS's flexibility but also its lack of character, as its core focus becomes individual benefit rather than standing for something (Han 2015a, 40). I have decided to title the embedded feminism, which FDS embodies, as a form of *negative-choice-feminism*. This strand of feminism is built upon the negative choice, highlighted by Illouz (2019, 19-20), and acts in modern intimacy as they would in an economic market, constantly assessing value and withdrawing whenever value drops. FDS acts according to capitalism and neo-liberalism rather than conservatism or feminism.

3.3.2. “I’m not their mom” – Low Value Men in Remission

As FDS becomes guided by this form of embedded negative-choice-feminism they create a climate prone to risk aversion. The most common encouragement within the community whenever a member starts suspecting that the man, they have been seeing has a low-value characteristic or trait is to “block and delete”. Giddens argued that the contractual form of relationship would allow parties to negotiate whenever they find inequalities or issues (Giddens 1992, 192). However, as Illouz argues this rolling contract implicates a rolling ethics of consent and gives justification for any actor to withdraw as soon as their emotions change. Modern intimacy is therefore characterised by the freedom to exit a relationship at any point without a moral cost. This can be exemplified by the practice of ghosting, where actors exit relationships without any obligation to explain their decisions (Illouz 2019, 167-170). FDS is an illuminating example of this as it encourages these forms of negative actions:

We are staunchly Pro - Ghosting¹⁰ on this sub. Any comments guilt tripping women for dropping communication with men without explanation will be removed. You don't owe men an explanation for shit.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

The generalisations regarding men and emphasis on negative choice create clear dichotomies which become incapable of catching the nuances of relationships or potential partners. The approach reflected in the quote above discourages communication and growth within relationships. Sennett argues that capitalism decreases institutional loyalty and trust, people are turned into independent entrepreneurs who can only rely on themselves and their abilities (Sennet 2006, 63-65). This explains the approach of FDS. They can only trust their instincts and evaluations of a relationship, and as this is the case there is no reason to discuss their decision with the other party. There is no basis of loyalty or trust in the relationship and therefore there is no room for growth or change. This is exemplified in a discussion on the podcast regarding whether a LVM can change or not:

31:31: I'm gonna go on a limb here and say it's possible for people to change, but in the case of low value man, I think it's extremely unlikely. A lot of their habits, beliefs and behavioural patterns have been embedded in them for a very long time... we often like to say well men should just go to therapy, but therapy doesn't necessarily fix a man. It can make him worse. Because it gives him the ammunition to justify his abusive nature, essentially.

(FAQs about Feminism, Double Standards, Men Who Are Still Friends with an Ex, 2021)

The quote demonstrates one of the hosts acknowledging the possibility of a LVM changing but considers it unlikely. The quote contrasts the expectation that women can “level up” through introspection and therapy by essentially arguing against men seeking therapy by underscoring that they would use it for personal gain, a critique which could also be applied to members of FDS. The quote does acknowledge that many of the habits, beliefs and behaviours of men may not be inherent but rather socially constructed. However, by arguing that men cannot change the host rejects any reason to combat modern masculinity or try to improve it by offering a masculinity which is more understanding and congruent towards the emotional experiences of women (Illouz 2012, 247). These ideas and the form of negative-choice-feminism that FDS embodies becomes the basis of many of FDS's dating strategies.

¹⁰ See appendix 1 for definition.

3.4. Strategizing in a Modern Dating Market

FDS is often criticised for mimicking the rhetoric within the manosphere and essentially gamifying intimacy and relationships through its different dating strategies. When criticised for this the podcast hosts explained that their strategies were simply counteracting an entire generation of men who already see intimacy as a game:

01:01:09: We weren't the ones that turned it into a game like we were presented with a whole generation of men who already see it as a game, and now we have to come up with counter strategies to respond to that.

(Boomers, Coomers, & Consumers - What Went Wrong with Male Socialization? 2021)

The FDS gained a lot of attention by framing itself as a response to the different communities dedicated to male seduction techniques on the internet. As relationships became more democratic Giddens believed that there would be fewer incentives for seductive techniques (Giddens 1992, 83-85). However, as the quote suggests this does not seem to be the case. O'Neill's deep dive into male seduction communities illustrates how intimate relationships have become a competitive environment guided by a self-centred individualism where men can use their sexual accumulation to compete with other men (O'Neill 2018, 38). Sexual accumulation has become a status marker in modern masculinity (Illouz 2019, 103). The contractual structure of the relationship, outlined by Giddens, has therefore created an environment more akin to an economic transaction rather than a democratic process, as actors within FDS and the manosphere seek to get the best deal for themselves against their respective partners (O'Neill 2018, 38). The techniques taught by these communities both package intimacy as a script to be rehearsed rather than seeing intimacy as something which could be cultivated through human connection and interactions. However, whilst techniques within the manosphere are aimed at sexual accumulation the strategies of FDS focus on preserving autonomy and maximising female benefit through several defensive strategies.

The discussion surrounding the manosphere is an indication of just how uncertain many of the FDS's members find navigating relationships or dating. Strategies such as *vetting*, *letting men chase you*, and *keeping a scrotation* have been created to ensure that the members of the FDS can maximise their benefit in these situations.

3.4.1. Vetting

Vetting is the continuous process of evaluating a potential partners suitability for a romantic relationship. These strategies often come with recommended practices, one of these is the pre-interview which is elaborated upon in the handbook:

I suddenly asked myself, is there a way to verify the basics about a guy before I waste my time on a potentially boring shitty date with someone who might turn out to be a weirdo? Enter, The Pre-Interview. I've used pre-interviews to screen candidates at work, and also to get jobs myself. They are excellent tools for quickly screening unworthy candidates.

(Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 32)

The pre-interview is an interesting concept that showcases a utilitarian understanding of dating. The components are described as: booking a video call, limiting the conversation to 20 minutes, and establishing the parameters of the date (Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 33-34). The practice is compared to a professional screening technique and establishes a clear and rational approach to a date as an exchange of information rather than a site for emotional connection and intimacy (Illouz 2012, 94). The pre-interview could be regarded as the action of verification as mobile dating apps become increasingly common within modern dating and intimacy, influencing FDS members digital worlds and lifeworld (Frosh 2019, 3). These forms of media can elicit a sense of thrownness as we are confronted with this digital condition (Lagerkvist 2017, 97). The pre-interview could, therefore, create a sense of certainty or predictability before a date. However, the pre-interview could also create a sense of thrownness, in the sense that whilst it offers some certainties there are still many uncertain or limiting aspects as it positions an intimate encounter in a deeply digitalised and fast-paced environment which may leave the actors questioning the authenticity of the encounter (De Ridder 2022, 595-596).

As our basis for relationships has developed in the modern era, we have moved from a communal framework based upon pre-modern courtship to a subjective and almost elusive practice where we base relationships on individual needs and desires which are constantly influenced by consumer markets and technology (Illouz 2012, 41). This shift has created new opportunities to experience uncertainty as there are no rituals or rules that organise emotions and interactions into predictable sequences or provide guidance on what behaviour is acceptable and not (Illouz 2019, 35). Engdahl argues that this uncertainty leaves people's sense of self exposed in modern romance, as the subjectivity of choosing a partner or being chosen puts our entire being at stake in intimate encounters (Engdahl 2016, 164). Consequently, FDS

creates a rational approach based on creating rituals and practices which structure intimacy into a predictable sequence, like pre-modern courtship. An example of this is the “establishment of commitment before sex” policy, which the group encourages:

Don't have sex before commitment has been established (if you're looking for a relationship) or before he has demonstrated value and investment (if you're looking for FWBs¹¹). If a man is really into you and sees you as girlfriend material, he will commit to you in two months (or three months max).

(Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 3)

This policy is another example of how the FDS will adopt certain strategies which mirror conservative values with the intent of self-preservation. However, positioning the woman in the traditional role of the gatekeeper of intimacy gives the woman a certain sense of emotional distance to fully evaluate the man she is dating (Illouz 2012, 155). This still reflects the broader commodification of intimacy as the relationships still take on the semblance of a transaction where the man needs to prove commitment before having sex with the woman. It could potentially build a false sense of security as well and the strategies suggested do not guarantee a solution to the profound uncertainties of intimacy and romance, therefore the members of FDS still risk the experience of a limit situation (Lagerkvist 2023, 2). There is value in being cautious of one's safety in relationships, however, the FDS's performance of desire and intimacy becomes more akin to the male seduction communities (O'Neill 2018, 94-95). These scripts regurgitate a portrayal of intimacy as a transaction, a series of calculated moves in a performance where FDS members may feel autonomous but ultimately will not guarantee them the security or authenticity of a genuine intimate connection.

This became evident in a post on the forum where a member announced that they were leaving the community. The community member argued that they had levelled up in many different aspects of life throughout the years and had now found a HVM who adhered to all the FDS standards and had made it through the evaluation process. The responses in the comments to this post were mixed. Whilst several members were happy with the original poster, there were a few members who questioned her decision to leave:

¹¹ Friends with Benefits.

Vetting never ends. FDS isn't for finding a man, you're not supposed to leave. But it's your choice and we respect it obviously.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

The emphasis which this commenter puts on constantly vetting one's partner reveals a natural characteristic of the negative-choice-feminism. FDS prioritises control and security rather than trust and connection. As contemporary intimacy has been redefined as a form of enjoyment or self-development, constant evaluation becomes necessary to hinder any potential negativity. Han argues that within the achievement society, intimacy becomes more like a performance and utilises an example from the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* where the main character's partner defines their relationship as a job offer (Han 2017 et.al, 13-14). This resonates well with the language within FDS which often equates the evaluation of a potential partner to evaluation practices within a professional setting or how FDS resembles certain manosphere communities in their ambition to get the best deal against their potential partner rather than cultivate an equal relationship. Therefore, by seeking refuge from the uncertainty and perceived normlessness of contemporary intimacy, FDS engages in a state of constant openness and inconclusiveness. Setting standards and boundaries is incredibly important when one engages in an intimate relationship with another person, however, if strategies such as vetting is never-ending the subjects will never achieve closure (Han 2015a, 40).

3.4.2. Let Men Chase You

This strategy bases itself on the idea that men are the natural pursuers and need sex more than women. As in the "commitment before sex" policy women are seen as the gatekeepers of intimacy:

A man's role is to be the pursuer, the one to convince you that he's the right man for you. As a woman, you don't have to prove yourself to him.

(Female Dating Strategy Handbook 2020, 3)

Men strive to have sex, to be desirable. This is for most women, a given. We are mostly desired, pursued and offered sex.

(Patriarchal Projection: Why it's Them and Definitely Not Us, 2022)

These ideas are often based on the previously exemplified essentialist portrayals of men. As men are the pursuers in these portrayals it is women who are in charge whilst men have no

choice but to succumb to their biological needs. This is a common association of ideas within the manosphere that negates the responsibility of men and reinforces a stereotypical view of masculinity, without problematising its social construction (O'Neill 2018, 126-128; Cannito & Ferrero Camoletto 2022, 599). Yet these arguments have been common in both popular and academic literature for a while, exemplified by Gray (1992) and more recently Hakim (2011) and Perry (2022). McKinnon argues that these reductionist ideas tie to a form of genetic individualism which naturalises neoliberal economic theory as a perpetuation of an evolutionary imperative that redefines our social relations as market relations (McKinnon 2005, 43-44). Therefore, we can understand how an evolutionary understanding of gender and sexuality could logically work with the capitalist makeup of FDS. As the man pursues, he must constantly demonstrate his value in some form, which becomes especially evident in FDS's position on who pays the bill after a date:

A man that does not pay for at least the first few dates and insists you go Dutch¹², is likely poor quality that does not value you or think it's worth it to try and impress you.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

Like the other commenters said, he gets the pleasure of your company. That should be enough for him to arrange a nice meal; you shouldn't have to 'lift a finger'. Men are literally desperate enough to pay women to talk to them (even if these women are men pretending to be women). Know your worth!

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

The perspectives in these quotes illustrate how women are positioned as both subjects and objects in an intimate encounter. As subjects, they engage in an evaluator practice assessing the man's value and commitment. However, the "he gets the pleasure of your company" line also implies a certain objectification. As intimacy has become increasingly individualised, one's capacity to conjure desire in another person has become a personal attribute, referred to as one's sexual capital (Kaplan & Illouz 2022, 26; 44). As Hakim suggests (2011, 203-205), FDS argues that women should use their sexual capital and men's need for sex to their advantage to ensure that women are writing the scripts for their relationships. Manosphere communities have argued that women tend to hypergamy, as in marrying upwards or horizontally in the social hierarchy (Srinivasan 2021, 116). Asking men to pay for a date may not imply hypergamy, many in FDS

¹² Splitting the bill 50/50.

believe that this is just a necessary standard to allow men to prove their value both financially and as a form of commitment. However, the concept of hypergamy is not foreign to FDS and is sometimes encouraged as it aligns with FDS's focus on equity over equality (Some Misconceptions About Hypergamy + State of the Pod 2023, 12:00).

The idea of men as pursuers, however, portrays women as the more chaste sex. Kaplan & Illouz elaborate on this, explaining chastity's historical role as a class marker that could heighten a woman's reputation (Kaplan & Illouz 2022, 59-63). The community will often criticise women who are intimate with men or crave the attention of men as pick-me's¹³, which once again uses conservative ideas and traditional roles to advocate for a form of stoic, chaste female subject. However, the approach risks reinforcing certain gender stereotypes and creating more social stigma around women's sexuality, as highlighted by Cannito and Ferrero Camoletto (2022, 599). Encouraging women to maintain their confidence and standards by enforcing clear boundaries and recognising imbalances in heterosexual relationships could allow women to become more assertive and challenge male authority within intimacy (Jack 1999, 29). FDS strategies that centre around men as pursuers and women as virtuous gatekeepers of intimacy puts the burden of consent solely on women (Srinivasan 2021, 28). Not only does this perpetuate a patriarchal narrative where men feel entitled to sex and will go to great lengths to have it, but it also creates a very traditional and conservative social stigma around women who do not fully align with all of FDS's ideals.

3.4.3. Keeping a scrotation

“Keeping a scrotation”¹⁴ is the act of dating multiple men at the same time. The tactic intends to ensure maximal benefit by creating more choices and maintaining a sense of emotional detachment. A podcast host describes the practice as following:

02:22: I think for me, one of the biggest benefits is because I tend to get invested very quickly into relationships and I think since I've started this rotational dating, I've been able to maintain a really good amount of distance from especially men... I mean it's almost like a job interview, right. So, when I've been involved in recruitment before, it's so much easier to see who the top candidate is compared against other candidates.

(Scrotation Management - The Benefits of Multi-Dating, 2022)

¹³ See appendix 1 for definition.

¹⁴ See appendix 1 for definition.

Dating is, yet again, compared to the evaluation practices within a professional workplace, which implies that potential partners should essentially be evaluated objectively or neutrally in some capacity. This resonates with the argument of Han et.al who claim that modern intimacy has essentially been degraded to work, lacking spirit and desire (Han et.al 2017, 47-48). This separation of intimacy from emotions is something which has historically been distinctively masculine. Illouz describes this as essentially a form of emotional domination, as it has given men more control over intimate encounters due to their emotional detachment (Illouz 2012, 102-104). In the quote above we see aspects of this being practised, the emotional detachment allows the host to evaluate their potential partners from a position of emotional dominance. Other benefits of dating rotations are clarified as:

04:35: Yeah. And the other thing about a dating rotation, it makes it much easier to see red flags when they do occur. When you're only seeing one person at a time and you're feeling more invested in that person.

(Scrotation Management - The Benefits of Multi-Dating, 2022)

The argument in the quote seems to imply that women are more observant of red flags when maintaining a form of emotional distance, which is valuable advice. It could also be seen as a form of *benchmarking*, a process where one constantly analyses one's intimate partners to see if they meet one's standards or, in this case, how they compare to other prospects (Illouz 2019, 136-140) The process of benchmarking is institutionalised in contemporary dating through the plethora of online dating apps which always displays new potential partners. These mediated truths, therefore, become influential in people's ability to detach emotionally.

The encouragement to not idealise potential partners demonstrates how romantic decision-making can become a process of maximising. Maximising is the process where individuals are always seeking the best option for them. Always looking for the best option, however, could become increasingly difficult as any decision one takes may cost in opportunity (Illouz 2012, 94-95). Strategies for maximising could, therefore, become a never-ending process. As Han argues, this absence of closure is a common aspect of the achievement subject's life, as "openness and inconclusiveness favour growth" (Han 2015a 40). Yet, within the negative-choice-feminism of FDS having a moral indifference to ending a relationship is seen as more beneficial than getting stuck in a bad or disappointing relationship. Whilst, this statement is in many cases true, FDS draws it to its extreme, further inhibiting a form of the

capitalist logic of using relationships and dating as a form of self-actualisation (Illouz 2019, 173). This is further supported by the notion within FDS that most men are disloyal:

I always cringe when I hear or see a woman drop her friends, drop her scrotation, etc. for an idiot who laughs at her with his buddies behind her back. We've got to stop doing this.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

And all the while, in the guy's head, he's thinking about what his bros are up to for tonight. And the cute exchange student that he's met in one of his classes that he is going to see this weekend behind your back.

(Female Dating Strategy, Forum)

As we can see in these quotes, FDS believes that men laugh behind their partner's backs, constantly think about other women and dream of being anywhere but with their partner. The dating rotation is FDS's way, in some sense, to level the playing field and enact their form of emotional dominance right back at the men. Therefore, the dating rotation may not be as concerned with the abundance of choice and opportunities for upgrading one's partners, but rather by asserting control in a relationship, a similar logic can be found within the seduction community (O'Neill 2018, 44). This demonstrates an intimacy which is a performance, devoid of all ethics and focusing on purely self-benefit. This emphasises quantity over quality. Relationships become a form of economic value which raises a person's sense of self-worth. This thesis aligns with Illouz in arguing that there needs to be some form of return to ethics when it comes to modern romance. Not to constrain a person's sense of self but rather precisely because of its importance.

4. Conclusion

De Gregorio's essay regarding "maybe-men" demonstrated a response from someone who felt that she had been emotionally dominated in her relationships. Her relationships felt shallow and fragile because she knew that the men she dated would make a negative choice once she threatened their autonomy (De Gregorio 2020). As we have seen FDS draws on frustrations like these, where women feel secluded to a form of immanence, a loss of subjectivity. By encouraging women to "level-up" FDS takes the form of a self-help group which offers romantic advice and dating strategies that demand commitment from men. Whilst the ideas and strategies which position women as the sole gatekeepers of intimacy may sound empowering. They culminate by re-drawing traditional gender roles and invoking the same gendered regulation system in intimate encounters that Srinivasan argues is the cause of male sexual entitlement (Srinivasan 2021, 28). Whilst FDS may offer strategies to resist the emotional domination highlighted by De Gregorio, they end up inadvertently reinforcing the harmful traditional gender roles which they claim to oppose.

However, unlike groups within the manosphere, FDS are more likely to regret the notion that they are a conservative group. Instead, they embody a form of embedded feminism, which I have decided to call *negative-choice-feminism*. The negative-choice-feminism emphasises a consistent need for evaluation and vetting. Relationships become more in line with values such as control, rather than trust or connection. The strategies supposedly offer women security, predictability, and structure in their romantic lives. They idealise traditional concepts such as courtship and, in some cases, marriage not because they believe in a conservative project, but because they see it as a possible avenue for maximising female benefit. They willingly give themselves over to constraints and resonate with Han's achievement subject, navigating the dating market as self-entrepreneurs set on maximising achievement (Han 2015a, 8-11). Many analyses of FDS so far have misunderstood this difference. FDS are not inherently conservative or feminist. They are, in a sense, apolitical utilising and repurposing conservative, liberal, feminist and even in some cases manosphere values with a focus on the individual benefit these can provide.

FDS, it could be argued, lacks character. It is a shapeless and flexible community which borrows from many different political influences, all in the name of efficiency and security (Han 2015a, 40). In their strive for autonomy, they often turn to objectifying or devaluing men through a form of gender essentialism. This is especially evident in strategies, like "Let Men Chase You". Consequently, we find a variant of genetic individualism

championed within FDS, which happens to coincide with traditional or neo-liberal sexual models (McKinnon 2005, 149-150). This strategy could, on one hand, strengthen the member's sense of agency by once again positioning women as the gatekeepers of intimacy which could encourage women to enforce a certain set of standards or boundaries when it comes to men. On the other hand, it turns consent into the woman's responsibility and naturalises many abhorrent behaviours of men who manipulate or seduce women for sexual purposes, as exemplified by O'Neill (2018).

The essentialist understanding of men has a social effect as it does not only inform many of the strategies but also creates a climate overtly focused on risk aversion and heteropessimistic fantasies which resemble the fantasies within incel and MGTOW communities. The heteropessimistic fantasies may serve as a method of protecting FDS members from the disappointments and complexities of heterosexual relationships (Johanssen 2023, 33). Risk aversion is demonstrated in strategies such as dating rotation and vetting. This allows members to maintain emotional distance from any potential romantic partners, which puts them in a constant state of openness and inconclusiveness, like the "maybe-men" and Johansson (2020). Evaluation becomes a constant practice which preserves the emotional distance and encourages the negative choice. Setting standards and boundaries in an existential environment such as intimacy is incredibly important. However, the focus of strategies such as vetting, which some members argue is never-ending, implies that the members of FDS will never achieve closure (Han 2015a, 40). This was especially evident in the quote that highlighted that members should not leave.

Another interesting aspect of the implication that members should not leave is FDS's existential capabilities. FDS seems to be an important lifeline for many of its members. Offering its members advice and a sense of security through its different strategies and the community's support for its members. Lagerkvist argues that there is a profound openness to mediated vulnerability. As vulnerability has been hyper-commercialised and individualised, which encourages many to share their stories and insecurities. Whilst media such as FDS may shield its members from many vulnerabilities it also cocreates a few by creating a potentially vulnerable dependency (Lagerkvist 2022, 95-98). This is highlighted in the analysis of members potentially getting stuck when using FDS as a lifeline. FDS tools such as being able to "block and delete", having access to the FDS forum to ask questions, listening to the podcast, and reading the public material create a dependency on technology within their intimate lives. Media becomes existential as it becomes the lens through which they experience modern romance. Additionally, these sources offer so much advice on how to avoid pain but

not nearly enough on how to confront or handle different forms of suffering. Relationships and intimacy are riddled with potentially limited situations, but as Bornemark argues, experiencing these is important if we wish to find existential meaning and purpose (Bornemark 2006, 73).

By utilising FDS, this thesis gives a more nuanced perspective which does not blindly accept the predominant narratives of men being “left behind” (Kay 2021, 39). Instead, it explores the uncertainties and insecurities of women, by exploring FDS as a response to these. The expressions of members of FDS underscore the media’s existential capacities, not only as a lifeline but as the infrastructures of contemporary intimacy. The digital and real inform each other (Han 2017, 29). This is not only demonstrated through FDS’s role within its member’s lives, but also in the concerns and anxieties created by “porn-sick” men and modern dating apps. The thesis highlights how the role of media and technology within an intimate field, like romance, is a cause for feelings of thrownness and a reminder of our different existential limits.

Existential media offers a “view of Being” which demands that we take careful consideration of ethics and care, the existentialism we base this perspective on demands that we are both responsive and responsible for what we set in motion (Lagerkvist 2022, 112). Within the field of intimacy, this means demanding accountability for the objectification and datafication which follows dating apps (De Ridder 2022, 606), the selfish and aggressive sexual lives that porn encourages (Srinivasan 2021, 44), and the transactional gamified views on dating which FDS and many manosphere groups display.

Illouz illustrates that research into intimacy has been dominated by a psychological ethos which has personalised romance. She deploys a sociological view on romantic suffering which highlights that intimacy is a cultural force, which constrains and shapes our experiences. The psychic resources, she argues, are just a way of coping with these restraints (Illouz 2012, 15). I agree with Illouz that a more structural view of intimacy and relationships is needed. However, as media becomes the lens through which we understand and live through these experiences I argue that we should turn to media to understand how our romantic suffering is shaped by the technologized forces through which we live our lives. Han may argue that these are constraints we willingly give ourselves to (Han 2015b, 49). However, I question if the restraints and existential capabilities of media are something we can choose in the context of the wider digital limit situation.

4.1. There is a narrow way through – Discussion on Methods and Limits

It is difficult to accurately depict the full existential impact which media may have in the lives of the FDS members. This thesis is merely a snapshot of their digital and symbolic world. Lagerkvist proposes a slow field within research that prioritises aspects like waiting, attendance, ethics, care and ultimately, slowness (Lagerkvist 2022, 226). This thesis could unfortunately not fully deploy the slow approach of existential media. However, its argument is still in line with that of the slow field, posing as a call against the swiftly adopted narrative of men being left behind, which has been popularised in recent years. Still, in the context of this thesis, the constraints have hindered me from fully exploring the human condition through FDS, which needs to be the goal of an analysis adopting an existential media perspective (Lagerkvist 2022, 146). This calls for more research as there are still many aspects which need to be fleshed out and explored within groups in the femosphere, for instance. A longer research process would allow for a slow approach where the researcher can build a relationship of trust with the FDS to yield results which will not be distorted due to the researcher being seen as an outsider.

When observing the material on FDS there was a sense that the community was not thriving in the same way that it once had. Members would at times write that they missed the “old-school” posts which focused more on actual strategy rather than individual problems or debates on politics and popular media. The community moved from being a subreddit to instead existing on its own website in 2022. Several community members missed the old format and argued that many members had not followed FDS to the website and had instead left the community. Others argued that it was more likely that certain members had just levelled up past the need for FDS. A slow approach could have allowed for more insight into these different aspects of FDS right now. Developing not only a further exploration of the community over time but also by acknowledging these disruptions and developments and how these raise new existential questions for members of the community.

Daly & Reed’s research highlights the benefits of having several researchers and coders to ensure a certain sense of validity (Daly & Reed 2022, 19). This could have also been managed by a slow approach with a more developed ethics of care. Having more time for coding would mean more time for reflection upon the themes and categories, but also, the potential capabilities of involving FDS members in the process. Both by utilising their empirical accounts, or elicited data, and living up to the ideals of Sandra Harding (2008, 114-115) and by ensuring that they are incorporated by providing drafts of my analysis and verifying that their quotes are represented in a way which represents their beliefs and not mine. This is an important

aspect in existential media studies as: “At some level expressions and existence merge” (Peters 2015, 15). As media is intertwined with our existence it is crucial to understand that the subjects, we study have lived a lifetime of experiences, emotions and interactions that have led them to Female Dating Strategy. The ambition of this thesis is to nuance the perspective on contemporary intimacy; however, it is also a call to approach research in media studies with patience, and a commitment to our subjects as co-existers. This is one of the core values of media studies as a discipline.

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Appendix

1. Female Dating Strategies – Glossary of terms

Bangmaid - A woman that is treated like a second mommy you can also sleep with by an incompetent immature man who has little respect for her. This is the ideal role most LVM are looking for women to fulfil (Glossary of Terms & Acronyms, *Female Dating Strategy 2023*)

Ghosting - the practice of ending a personal relationship with someone by suddenly and without explanation withdrawing from all communication (Glossary of Terms & Acronyms, *Female Dating Strategy 2023*)

High-Value Male (HVM) - A man that is respectful, loyal and faithful. He loves to show his woman that he can provide - he pays for dates and a relatively higher proportion of expenses in the relationship. A man that is confident, consistent and reliable. These type of men take care of their body, face and physical appearance. HVMs care about their partner's happiness and sexual pleasure. The HVM exhibits the mate guarding instinct; however, he does not force monogamy on a woman - he will wait until she is sure that his offer of commitment is a good idea. These men LOVE competition and understand that a woman can entertain multiple suitors until commitment is established. Instead of being offended that she doesn't zero in on him in the early dating stages, he takes this as an opportunity to show her why he is the best. (Glossary of Terms & Acronyms, *Female Dating Strategy 2023*)

HVW - High-Value Woman - A high value woman is a woman who doesn't revolve her life around men. She has her own career, hobbies, and a great social life that fulfills her emotional needs, so if she does welcome a man in her life, he better be amazing. A high value woman also doesn't romanticize men's true nature, therefore she's cautious around them and wants them to prove themselves to her before she gets emotionally attached (About, *Female Dating Strategy 2023*)

LVM - Low-Value Male – Men who do not live up to the standards of the HVM are Low Value Men. They are often described as entitled and manipulative, they invite women on low effort

dates and do not take care of their appearances. They could be financially challenges. All men on the manosphere are low value (No official definition on FDS, Authors own definition).

Kink-shaming - entails mocking, stigmatising, or criticising someone for engaging in unconventional sex (No official definition on FDS, Authors own definition).

NVM - Negative-Value Male - A male that subtracts value from your life. He leaves your life worse off than before - these are men that women should avoid. Even Pickmeisha's deserve a better fate (Glossary of Terms & Acronyms, Female Dating Strategy 2023).

Pick Me/Pickmeisha - A woman who degrades herself and her value for the fleeting attention of men. Pickmeishas want the attention of the opposite sex so badly, she'll throw her fellow woman under the bus. They are frequently found engaged in upholding misogynist cultural norms (Glossary of Terms & Acronyms, Female Dating Strategy 2023).

Porn sick - will typically describe a man who has a distorted view of sex, because of his porn consumption (No official definition on FDS, Authors own definition).

Scrote – The FDS defines scrote as: “Generic name for men, but generally in perjorative reference to low value men”. (Glossary of Terms & Acronyms, Female Dating Strategy 2023)

Scrotation – A scrotation is defined by the FDS as “a rotation of suitors you are currently dating but are not in an exclusive relationship with. Scrotating is the act of having multiple suitors simultaneously. Ideally a woman is not having sexual relations with suitors during this phase and is instead assessing their value as a romantic partner” (Glossary of Terms & Acronyms, Female Dating Strategy 2023).

Standard Shaming - Don't Shame Other Members for having higher standards than you. If someone says they only date men with six figure income, we don't want to hear all about how your first date with your boyfriend was in his mom's basement sharing a microwaved Hot Pocket. You're not going to get a cookie or high fives from us because you choose to settle for scraps, sis. Women with desperate pick me behavior will be banned on sight (FORUM RULES AS OF FEBRUARY 12TH, 2023, Female Dating Strategy 2023).

Vanilla sex - is often represented as conventional sex free from kinks and aggression (No official definition on FDS, Authors own definition).

ZVM - Zero-Value Male - A man that adds absolutely no value to your life (Glossary of Terms & Acronyms, Female Dating Strategy 2023).

2. Example of Descriptive Coding

Backfooting: The Disturbing New Dating Trend Men Don't Want You To Know About

Updated: Dec 19, 2022



We've all heard of dating terms like "negging" or "breadcrumbing"— but have you heard of backfooting?

"Backfooting" is a manipulation tactic where a man accuses a woman of something bad to put her on the back foot, causing her to behave defensively and in a way that is beneficial to him to prove she is not like that.

We coined this phrase in [Part 2](#) of our interview with Lundy Bancroft ([Part 1 here](#)).

While the term might be recent, the strategy itself is nothing new. In his book "Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men," Bancroft describes a type of abuser whose possessiveness takes the form of sexual jealousy, and he constantly accuses his partner of cheating on him even though he has no evidence. His accusations cause her to police her own behavior and avoid situations where he might accuse her of cheating, such as being alone without him.

The source of his sexual jealousy is not because he actually believes his own accusations (abusers usually don't), but because he is possessive of her and wishes to isolate her. Possessiveness is not a sign of a man's love, it is a sign of his ownership. Isolation is a tactic often used by abusers to cut off the victim from her social connections, which give her strength.

"Backfooting" is a strategy that is used not only by abusers, but also by ordinary low-quality men as well.

For example, a broke man might accuse women of being "materialistic gold diggers," and in an effort to prove she is not materialistic, she offers to pay for him, lowers her expectations, and stops asking as much from him.

Oskar Andreasson
negging

Svara

Oskar Andreasson
readroombing

Svara

Oskar Andreasson
backfooting

Svara

Oskar Andreasson
Manipulation tactic

Svara

Oskar Andreasson
Behave defensively

Svara

Oskar Andreasson
Sexual jealousy

Svara

Oskar Andreasson
Police behaviour

Svara

Oskar Andreasson
possessive

Svara

Oskar Andreasson
isolation / ownership

Svara

Oskar Andreasson
Ordinary low quality men

Svara

3. Example of Codebook

3.1. With Descriptive codes

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories	Desc. Codes
Be A High Value Woman	Dating strategies		Risk vs reward, value, be ruthless, subpar behaviour, financially challenged, Ruthless mate choice, Men respond to force and consequenc, Lowly scrote, Red flags, shortcomings, spot an abuser, first straw, vetting, friend zone, mediocre, local scrote, penis with a brain, NVM (Now value man), Ordinary low quality men red flag, fragile male feelings, we are not rehab centers for men, self protection, apply a black and white happiness test, trust gut, why waste precious time, move on, waste of time and mental energy, dump him, just leave, don't settle, OBSERVE VET AND EVALUATE, most men provide nothing, swipe left, "subpar behaviour, financial value, standards, zero leg room, fuckboy, red flag, sniff him out, nexted, Low-effort tomfoolery, dealbreaker, cheap, buyers remorse, standards, non-negotiable qualities, selective, pre-interview, screening candidates, objective evaluation, recognising red flags filter out, Waste of my time, no second chances, equal, , cut him out, dig deep into your inner bitch, leave him on read, ruthless mate choice, one mistake is one mistake too much, view all men as guilty until proven innocent, AMALT - All Men Are Like That"
		<i>Vetting</i>	
		<i>Setting boundaries</i>	black and white thinking, pesticide to LV men, not their new mommy, Walls, no means no, basing decisions on my own character, Strong boundaries
		<i>Let men chase</i>	Pursuer, strive to have sex, don't seek affection, pursuer, convince, upper hand, tail, set the tone, relax, never crush, Dont make him the object of your desire, don't double-text
		<i>Commitment/investment before sex</i>	don't rush. Men are sex-driven, Commitment, timespan, investment, Financial value, six-month relationship, Continually investing, commitment, demonstrated value, investment, 2-3 months, prove worth, safe zone, healthy pace, 90 day timeline, good mate, prove himself, vet for how considerate he is, try oral.
		<i>Keeping your options open</i>	scrotation, date multiple men, until you are married.. You are single, copy men, too loyal, keep a scrotation, stop dating/start courting, oneitis, single by law, talk to men on a friendly note, stay cool and pragmatic, don't have reckless sex, haram of platonic men, advice for extroverts, benefit, women close of their options long before they are proposed to, Boyfriend? That word doesn't exist, monogamy is for marriage, scrotation, numbers game, make men compete for your attention, interesting passtime nothing more, dont put all your eggs in one basket, Dating several men at the same time, stressful, exhausting,
		<i>Date ideas</i>	sporting events, dinner dates, don't do drink dates, expensive, don't do coffee dates, high value hobbies, golf, hobbies, comic con, beach
		<i>Dating apps</i>	casual, hit up for sex, block, OLD, avoid OLD, scared of OLD, left OLD, not worth matching with, swipe left, helpful feature, only swipe right on guys with jobs listed on their profiles, lottery, inherently low value, virtual snake pit, dating pool, dating app business model, for each successful match they lose customers, men looking for hookups, easy sex, 70% men 30% women, don't work, nonverbal communication, bois down chemistry to a photo, trick, attention economy,
		<i>Standards</i>	date-appropriate, reproduction, standard setting, meet your own standards, Never abandon standards, high standards, undivided attention, target, stockholm syndrome, lower expectations, difficult, lifestyle, settle for a scrote,
		<i>Who is the High Value Woman?</i>	immovable, character, benevolence, dream girl, gravitasm compassionate, self-care, reputation, behave like a lady
		replaceable, Cut the chord, Eleanor of Aquitaine example, life strategy, just men, tolerate loneliness, singledom is not a personal failure, Boys at the bottom of your priority list, de-centering men, the only barometer i need is my own happiness, ignoring men more, tune out mens stories, emotionally	

3.2. With Quotes

	A	B	C	D
	Themes	Categories	Sub-categories	Quotes
1	Be A High Value Woman	Dating strategies	Vetting	As women, we have the responsibility to be ruthless in our evaluation of men.
2			Setting boundaries	I disagree. Let your no mean no, not "try again". This is one of the reasons why guys coerce women sexually because they think it's just a game of persistence. A HVM should be able to take a no and back off, and not use it as permission to wear you down
3			Let men chase	A man's role is to be the pursuer, the one to convince you that he's the right man for you. As a woman, you don't have to prove yourself to him.
4			Commitment/investment before sex	Sexual Access is reserved for the male or males who have demonstrated good character and significant investment. There is no need to abide by an artificial 90 day timeline. You withhold sexual access until you can safely assure encounter will be to your tangible benefit.
5			Keeping your options open	Keep a scrotation. Date different men, as many that can at least intrigue you slightly and can pay the tabs for you. Have fun while dating these different men and don't feel guilty. You aren't sleeping with them. Sex is for commitment, after all.
6			Date ideas	Go on dates where you're likely to encounter a lot of male mate competition. Sporting events are at the top of the list, but this can be any event or activity where men are likely to be "peacocking" for females and posturing for men.
7			Dating apps	You'd block all the men that hit you up for sex on dating apps and you'd never expect anything less but the best treatment from a man when you go on a date.
8		Standards	if I see a woman with higher standards than me, and it looks, especially if I think she's actually get them, like, damn, how can I be like her? Like, I'm gonna throw on her jersey and get a pen and a pad and try to learn to be like her right now. That's. That's the response you should have	
9		Self advocacy	Who is the High Value Woman?	She has character and benevolence even while "staying still" in who she is. She respects service professionals; she is kind to animals; she doesn't make fun of the unfortunate. You know that if she were in a tough situation she would value the opinions and feelings of women more and those of men less.
10			Decentering men	I feel one thing that helps most with this is just listening to women more. Be it on this forum, podcasts, videos (and in real life of course, but you don't always have FDS-aligned women around you). By sheer exposure I've learned
11			Emotional fulfillment from personal pursuits	Learn and adopt confident body language. Weight-lifting, dance (especially ballet), yoga, pilates, and martial arts are all effective at teaching body confidence.
12			Caution in relationships	Don't forget: no trauma dumping. We save our deep troubles for close female friends or a therapist, NOT male partners or dates!
13			Leveling up	it's also pushed me to to level up, you know, just like that. So in terms of my career in terms of my, in terms of my mental health.
14		Navigating lack of experience	I always wonder how women end up with men like this. I've never dated, but that is my biggest fear.	
15		Ruthlessly Evaluate Men	Low Value Men	What is a LVVM?
16	Manosphere			To them, women's sexual agency is a direct attack on their manhood. They must find ways to get around it: lie, devalue, neg, triangulate, gaslight, deceive.
17	High Value Men		What is a HVM?	A genuine HV man that is sincere in pursuing you will not care about your socioeconomic status -- barista you, toilet cleaner you, janitor you, single mother you, whatever -- if he is interested, he will pursue you.
18			Red flags	Men can and do have eating disorders but they usually don't seek treatment and project their neurosis onto you. Over exercise is definitely a red flag
19			Effort	You wanna know if a man truly cares about you? He tries to make you happy. He remembers the things that you like and makes an effort to make them happen. Men tend to do this in the beginning anyway, so what you have to
20			Looks	A man that does not take care of his general appearance and the importance of him being attractive to you, does not care about your preferences.
21			Entitlement	Have you ever wondered where men get their confidence from? Even the broke, ugly, & dusty ones have the audacity to behave like they're a prize to be won.
22	Differentiating Between High Value and Low Value Men		Treatment	They will treat you like trash because they despise themselves and you make them feel insecure with your looks/money/success/confidence.
23			Masculinity	Like I can't think of anything more unmasculine or unsexy than a guy that takes a dive after getting flipped in the ear or something?
24			Kinkshaming	I agree with literally everything here; particularly with porn and kink shaming. SO happy to have found a space that calls porn out for what it is! It's not normal and neither is BDSM or other extreme kinks!
25	Gender Dynamics	Kinks, BDSM & Porn	The impact of porn	I agree ED would've been a big red flag. I noticed this during my casual sex days - dudes who did a lot of porn couldn't get it up. It was pathetic. No ED in either of these relationships.
26			Lies about men	Men proclaiming "I'll straighten up for the right woman" is 98% conjecture. They are not practiced at being good men, how would they be able to figure it out all of the sudden?
27		Critique of traditional gender roles	Social consequences are higher for women due to sexism. It's not fair - but it's true. If things go south - You'll be looked at badly and take most of the blame.	
28		Cultural misogyny	TradCons have been saying men are better than us. Which causes women to vastly underestimate their power and ability.	
29		Science	Watch elephant documentaries. Even in nature, women bond with their sisters and other women to form loving, nurturing communities. Bulls get kicked out at 14 years old and live alone or in with other rude bulls. The bulls ad	
30		Sex	Women do not orgasm at the rate and frequency of men. The rewards of sex for women are usually a lot lower than for men, who orgasm most times they have sex.	
31		Double standards	We should create double standards. We have the wombs and can raise kids without killing them. Women are the culture.	
32		Cheating	I think pressuring women not to cheat is a tool of the patriarchy to keep women in relationships that don't meet their needs.	
33	Ruthlessly evaluating women	I honestly think so many women who are into promoting BDSM just haven't found FDS and true self respect yet.		
34	Disclosure	They can cheat and leave you when married with kids. Men don't have family anymore.		

27	Most Men Are Not Of Value To You	Gender Dynamics	<i>Lies about men</i>	<i>Men proclaiming "I'll straighten up for the right woman" is 98% conjecture. They are not practiced at being good men, how would they be able to figure it out all of the sudden?</i>
28			<i>Critique of traditional gender roles</i>	<i>Social consequences are higher for women due to sexism. It's not fair - but it's true. If things go south - You'll be looked At badly and take most of the blame.</i>
29			<i>Cultural misogyny</i>	<i>TradCons have been saying men are better than us. Which causes women to vastly underestimate their power and ability.</i>
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31			<i>Sex</i>	<i>Women do not orgasm at the rate and frequency of men. The rewards of sex for women are usually a lot lower than for men, who orgasm most times they have sex.</i>
32			<i>Double standards</i>	<i>We should create double standards. We have the wombs and can raise kids without killing them. Women are the culture.</i>
33		Mens true nature	<i>Cheating</i>	<i>I think pressuring women not to cheat is a tool of the patriarchy to keep women in relationships that don't meet their needs.</i>
34			<i>Ruthlessly evaluating women</i>	<i>I honestly think so many women who are into promoting BDSM just haven't found FDS and true self respect yet.</i>
35			<i>Disloyal</i>	<i>They can cheat and leave even when married with kids. Men don't have loyalty anymore.</i>
36			<i>Unsafe</i>	<i>I like you, can't even test a man for HPV. Yeah. You can't get tested so, you know they're more likely to transmit STI's and STD's and the other way around as well.</i>
37			<i>Male desire</i>	<i>Is he getting sex else where or watching porn? Just curious as a man not wanting sex for three months seems very odd to me. Something is wrong and it's not you at all. It's with him.</i>
38			<i>Abuse</i>	<i>Guess what-- your LVM/NVM knew he was hurting you. He knew exactly what he was doing and did not care. Your pain was obvious and they literally could not be arsed to put in basic effort to treat you with respect.</i>
39	Societal Dynamics	<i>Pride</i>	<i>Their entire self identity is crafted from nothing but belief in their own desire and sense of will.</i>	
40		<i>Behaviour</i>	<i>Men are not stupid, ignorant, or helpless. But they can be exploitative and great at acting. He understands you're hurt and will not change. Even if he were that clueless, do you really want a man-child, sis?</i>	
41		<i>Societal norms and expectations</i>	<i>And there's a culture of always trying to push women to do more and more and more emotional labour for the men in their lives and accept less and less and less to keep marriages together because the goal is always to keep r</i>	
42		<i>Myths within dating culture</i>	<i>A lot of personal talk comes out with long dates and alcohol, and he went in detail about his late wife and the abusive girlfriend he had before her. There was a lot of information meant to trigger my "fix-it" instinct, to comfort t</i>	
43		<i>Marriage & Long term relationships</i>	<i>They marry the man who asks. Women often marry men they don't love nor respect. Only to settle for what society expects from them or they may want kids. They marry the idea rather than the actual man.</i>	
44		<i>Financial</i>	<i>😞😞😞 It's like they took taking you out for a date and not going 50/50 as HVM. Nothing else matters</i>	
45	Existing on FDS	<i>Cultural stereotypes</i>	<i>Yeah,.. I think standards around monogamy vary greatly in different cultures. I think the french are similar. they *seem* to be more tolerant of it (ie infidelity). ldk...</i>	
46		<i>Religion</i>	<i>Also, when a mob of scrotes wanted to literally Stone a woman to death after catching her in the act of adultery, Jesus knelt down to her level and simply told her to go and sin no more. Then he turned to the mob and said that</i>	
47		Community dynamics	<i>Classic FDS</i>	<i>Whole lot of good points here. It's nice to see the classic strategy style posts coming back.</i>
48			<i>Support</i>	<i>That's so true. There is no solution presented or any kind of help. We are honestly lucky to have a community here that cares to hold people accountable and guide.</i>
49			<i>Thoughts on the podcast</i>	<i>Yeah this episode didn't vibe with me. Would have been better to have a guest that identified as a femcel. I know they are just joking around but this one actually felt a little condescending. Just listened again to the one with Dr</i>
50			<i>Activity</i>	<i>I think the end result of internalizing FDS is that you strengthen your boundaries and become much happier as a result. You no longer need to vent or come up with strategies and therefore have no more need for this forum. The</i>
51	Navigating vulnerability	<i>Hostility</i>	<i>Correct but I want it to grow, to reach more women who need it, And some women on here treat you with hostility and you can't even block them to restore the peace in your notifications.</i>	
52		<i>Men on the forum</i>	<i>A few days ago, I woke up to this post about sex about orgasms and I was like, this has to be written by a guy 🤔. No waaaayyy!</i>	
53		<i>Do the research</i>	<i>Right! She's just wasting her life chasing useless, unworthy men. I'm so tired of libfems coming on here and pretending like casual dating and hookups are really where the "good" men are. These women need to read the handb</i>	
54		<i>Resonance</i>	<i>Well said! I needed to hear this today. I especially love everything in your last paragraph. I'm going to copy it down and make it a point to reflect on it all day today. Thank you</i>	
55		<i>Protection</i>	<i>Queens, protect your private part and your body. It's a treasure and a secret garden. Only give the key to the person who is truly worth it ❤️</i>	
56		<i>Difficult experiences</i>	<i>I want to be that girl again, is it too soon to start doing those things again just six months into the relationship? If that's not his primary love language, then does it make sense to start doing it?</i>	