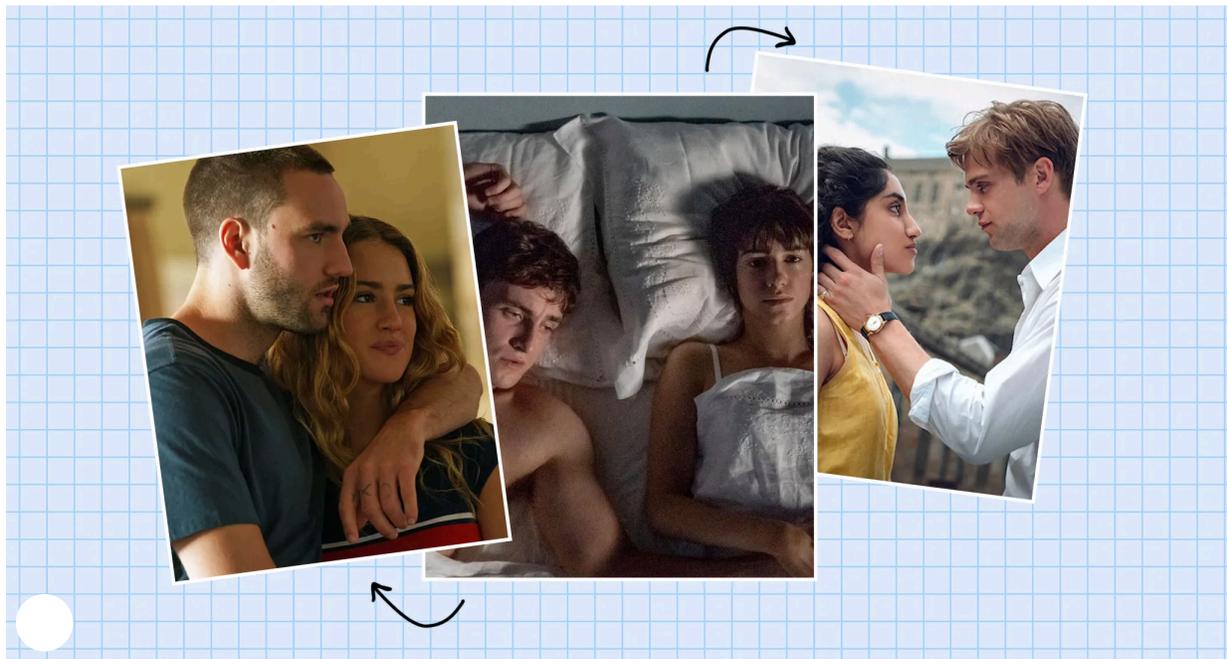


Box Theory Dating: Is It Backed By Psychology or Just Another TikTok Fad? I Spoke With 2 Experts to Find Out

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BY SYDNEY MEISTER • PUBLISHED JAN 5, 2025



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When she walked into [SoHo's newest lounge](#), Max was taken aback by her cargo pants and dark brunette locks. She had lighter hair on her [Hinge profile](#), and he'd envisioned more of a girl who summers in Martha's Vineyard. (He didn't expect such a Kim Possible vibe.) "Heather?" he asks, extending his arm for a side hug. She leans in awkwardly and says, "I can't believe you got a reservation here—I've been on the waiting list for months." She seems jittery. Nervous. He smirks and debates whether he should reply, "I waited longer for your Hinge match than I did this reservation." He misses his chance when the *maitre d'* interrupts, "Follow me right this way."

Max follows both women up a mirrored, Studio 54 staircase feeling confident. He knows Heather approves of his taste, and she's ostensibly more [invested in the date](#) than he is. If he's being honest, his biggest concern is that this very cool, very Old Hollywood jazz lounge might be wasted on a fling. When they settle into two overstuffed leather armchairs, he gets a good look at her. *Yeah*, he thinks, *she's definitely attractive*. Her big blue eyes make her a "solid eight," which he tells his friends at dinner the next night. Two drinks and two hours go by, and he's now sure of one thing: She's fun. He likes being in her company, likes that she's amused by his jokes, and likes that she can carry a conversation.

But then Heather says she recently quit her consulting job to pursue a career in the arts. "I'm not sure yet, either grad school or acting..." she trails off. Max wonders if she's going through a quarter-life crisis or if she's always this indecisive. It brings him to the same nagging thought: *I don't know if I see myself with her long-term*. Yes, he knows, she's cool,

funny, smart—all the things. But for some reason, he can't decide whether all of that's enough. Whether he can envision himself with her long-term. So he takes a hefty sip of his Old Fashioned before asking the make-or-break question: "So, why'd you match with me?" Anxiously, she replies, "I don't know. You checked a lot of boxes." And when he presses, she admits, "I want a stable finance guy, but honestly, most of you are unbearably boring. You seemed different." Now Max understood: He was the type of guy *she* saw herself with.

When Heather inevitably asked the question back, Max stalled: "Well, for one, you're beautiful." It was the truth. But it was also true that he had matched with a different girl in mind. Despite following this date up with another (and many late-night hookups after that), Max could never quite see Heather as the 'girlfriend' he'd imagined. Meanwhile, Heather could never understand what was missing. His reluctance to move things forward was baffling to her—their connection felt more real than anything. Yet, as hard-to-get reservations devolved into 2 a.m. dive bars, she realized—this was all he'd ever offer her.

Both perspectives are what this story is all about: **Box Theory**.

What Is The Box Theory in Dating?

"When men meet you in a romantic setting, they put you in a box. Either they want to date you, they want to sleep with you, or they want nothing to do with you," explains TikTok famous Tinx. She coined the theory in a viral video, adding, "It's very difficult to shift from box to box. Your behavior doesn't really affect what box you're in with a guy." To put this into context, box theory would ascribe Heather to box two (Max wanted to sleep with her). There's nothing she could've said or done to move from box two—known as a situationship—into box one (being in a relationship).

The same applies when you flip the theory and reverse it. Say Max had put Heather into box one—he wanted to date her. If he had decided, *I'm serious about this girl*, she could've slept with him that very night. She could've puked on his shoes or stolen his mom's cat—it wouldn't matter. According to Tinx, box one means he sees you as commitment-worthy, and almost nothing will change that. "It doesn't matter when you decide to sleep with someone," she notes. "The three- or five-date rule doesn't guarantee that he's going to view you as relationship material." (And if you don't hear from him after date one, it's safe to say you're in the third box: he wants nothing to do with you.)

Of course, there's been some Reddit controversy over the theory. One user in an all-male forum echoed a repeating concern, "Plenty of women start in the hookup or friend box, and end in the date box. Or the reverse. There's no science to this." A second person also chimes in, "It usually takes me a good couple of weeks—even a month sometimes—to feel out [which box] to put 'em in." And from this writer's perspective, I think both sides have merit.

Tinx argues that box theory is about our subconscious: both men and women have biases that determine who we choose to settle down with. Yet, at the same time, it feels one-dimensional to reduce our love lives to boxes. Do men really know whether someone's commitment-worthy after date one? And likewise, how long are women supposed to wait for an upgrade from box to box?

I spoke to social psychologist Dr. Sarah Hensley and Dr. Joy Berkheimer, LMFT, to find out.

Meet The Experts

- **Dr. Sarah Hensley, PhD**, is a social psychologist with over 15 years of experience studying the science of relationships. An expert in attachment theory and attraction, she has coached thousands of clients on finding and maintaining healthy relationships. Dr. Hensley also specializes in helping individuals understand conflict, improving communication and building deeper connections. Her practice includes group hybrid coaching, one-on-one sessions and executive coaching, offering a comprehensive approach to relationship repair.
- **Dr. Joy Berkheimer, PhD**, is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, sexologist, and founder of Renew Yourself With Joy LLC. She empowers women to rediscover their inner strength and cultivate meaningful relationships, and as the creator of the Glow Your Goddess®, she blends her expertise in therapy, shadow work, coaching and intuitive healing to help clients thrive. She's also a passionate speaker and author of Why Won't He Call? Where she brings both professional and personal experience to her work.



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How Widespread Is the Box Theory, Really?

In a [survey of more than 2,000 people across the country](#), 83 percent confirmed that they've put someone into one of the three boxes on a first date. It also found that 37 minutes and 14 seconds was the average time it took to put a first date in a box. And while nearly half of people admitted to putting someone in a box based solely on their dating app profile, three out of five women said they'd found themselves in a box mix-up. That means that, at one point or another, a majority of women have thought they were in a relationship box when, in reality, they were in a [situationship box](#).

So, yes, this survey says box theory is widespread. But on a deeper level, I believe, Tinx's video went viral for one reason only: Women have always wanted to know why men put them in box two. Whether it was Rick abandoning Ilsa on the plane in *Casablanca* or Mr. Big choosing Natasha in *Sex and the City*, we've long debated whether commitment and connection are inextricably linked. The theme has been so pervasive, in fact, that I'm not sure we even care whether box theory is "widespread." What we really seem to be asking is: Are men psychologically primed to put us in a box, and are women bound by the boxes we're placed in?



Has Box Theory Been Psychologically Proven?

According to Dr. Hensley, "If we get to the real science, there was a significant study in 2006 published by [Willis and Todorov](#)." In five different experiments, people were asked to evaluate photos of strangers' faces. "The goal was to test whether we, as humans, are wired to make incredibly rapid judgments based on facial appearance alone," she explains. "The study found that participants took just 100 milliseconds to form an impression." To be clear, "that's one-tenth of a second for people to make snap judgments about attractiveness, competence, trustworthiness and likeability in a stranger." Hensley continues, "People who spent more time looking at the photo (like 500 milliseconds or 1,000 milliseconds) didn't change the judgment much; it just made them feel more confident about their decisions." In other words, this study supports the very foundation of box theory, which follows that a) people are quick to form opinions based on appearance alone and b) time only makes us feel more confident and more certain that our initial opinions were correct.

Still, there's the issue of why women feel deceived and bamboozled by box two. "This idea has relevance in the field of psychology, especially in relation to cognitive biases and the process of social categorization," says Dr. Berkheimer. To break this down, I'll

return to the Max and Heather example. Because of Heather's Hinge profile, which fell short of Max's expectations, it's feasible to say Max had a negative bias from the moment he met her. And on the flip side, Heather felt confirmation when she met Max—he showed up as the guy she hoped he'd be. "Romantic idealization might have more to do with the confusion around commitment," Berkheimer explains. "Our 'commitment box' often stems from an idealized perception of someone. It's shaped by cultural norms and personal fantasies about love and relationships (which can backfire if reality fails to match the ideal)." So in short, negative bias could explain why Max put Heather in the situationship box. And to that end, we could say idealization was to blame for Max being in Heather's relationship box.

The TL;DR here is that we're doing a lot of theorizing about a theory. In reality, both experts have different takes on how box theory works in practice.



What Do Experts Think About Box Theory?

"As a social psychologist who is well versed in attraction science, I don't believe in box theory," says Hensley. "There's a foundational principle in social psychology known as The Mere Exposure Effect: It says that familiarity increases liking, which directly contradicts box theory. Repeated exposure is essential to forming lasting judgments about someone." She continues, "Again, these are foundational findings, meaning that they've been built upon and refined over the years. Spending more time with someone has been proven to influence and reshape our initial impressions. It's a core idea that has evidence—backed by empirical data—unlike a theory derived from TikTok."

On the other hand, Berkheimer believes "box theory has its pros and cons, though it serves a purpose." She argues, "It offers several positive features, primarily in its straightforwardness. The theory facilitates self-reflection and the rapid establishment of boundaries." Plus, she notes, "categorizing our experiences can make it easier to understand the intricacies of romantic social dynamics." Yet, while Berkheimer appreciates how box theory can lead to quicker evaluation (aka less time spent on the wrong partner), she also warns: "The unhealthy elements of box theory are oversimplification, rigid thinking and a fear of being vulnerable. When we depend excessively on labeling others, we fall prey to stereotypes. We develop a limited understanding of who people really are. Such inflexible assumptions can lead to judgment and comparison—both major obstacles to building deep, lasting relationships."

Hensley agrees with this notion, summarizing: "Judgements about potential partners shouldn't be made until you've had two to three dates. That's enough time to determine if there's chemistry. Then, the first three months will tell you if there are incompatibilities that could hinder the development of a committed relationship."

The Box Theory in Dating, Summarized

Could box theory be a symptom of my generation's [dating app dependence](#)? Maybe. In New York alone, [Hinge situationships](#) are as ubiquitous as a 99-cent pepperoni slice. But as I look at the bigger picture, I see that the [psychology behind situationships](#)—and the [mystique around commitment](#)—are the nerves Tinx tapped into. She delivered a theory that could help explain why women, time and time again, feel boxed in by partners with little room to move.

Nonetheless, whether this theory is “true” is still up for debate. I could spend twelve more hours dissecting relational psychology, but the experts I interviewed agree: Relationships are never set in stone. There's no empirical evidence that says it's impossible to jump from box to box. What's more, it's been clinically proven that the more time you spend with someone, the more likely you are to re-shape their initial impressions. (So yes, reader, it's *possible* to [turn your situationship into a relationship](#).)

All in all, if you want my two cents, I'd say the truth of this theory lies in perception versus reality. If you believe you should be in box one—and he's placed you in box two—what good is it to obsess over why? That's his reality. You'd be better off searching for someone who would never put your cargo pants in a box.

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