



# Dating Apps: The Uncertainty of Marketised Love

Cultural Sociology

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/17499755211051559

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## Abstract

Dating apps promise a ‘digital fix’ to the ‘messy’ matter of love by means of datafication and algorithmic matching, realising a platformisation of romance commonly understood through notions of a market’s rationality and efficiency. Reflecting on the findings of a small-scale qualitative research on the use of dating apps among young adults in London, we problematise this view and argue that the specific form of marketisation articulated by dating apps is entrepreneurial in kind, whereby individuals act as brands facing the structural uncertainty of interacting with ‘quasi-strangers’. In so doing, we argue, dating app users enact a Luhmanian notion of interpersonal trust, built on the assessment of the risk of interacting with unfamiliar others that is typical of digitally mediated contexts dominated by reputational logics. From a sociocultural perspective, dating apps emerge as sociotechnical apparatuses that remediate the demand to rationally choose a partner while at the same time reproducing the (im)possibility of doing so. In this respect, far from offering a new form of efficiency, they (re)produce the ontological uncertainty (Illouz, 2019) that characterises lovers as entrepreneurs.

## Keywords

brands, dating apps, digital intimacy, entrepreneurship, markets, social capital, trust

## Introduction

With 320 million users worldwide (Statista, 2020), dating apps represent a preferential device to navigate the stormy waters of intimacy, and have become an ever more pervasive part of the mobile digital lives of the global youth (Ansari and Klinenberg, 2015;

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Chambers, 2021; Gibbs et al., 2011; Anderson et al., 2020). They constitute a new development in the history of dating cultures (Hodgson, 2017); following the first wave of online dating, these have brought dating practices firmly in the context of datafied and algorithmically (re)mediated forms of social interaction (Albury et al., 2017; Lutz and Ranzini, 2017). Thus, dating apps may be seen as yet another component in the broader process of platformisation of society and culture (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018) with its corollaries of quantification of the self and socialities (Lupton, 2020).

Sociologically, the rise of dating apps is to be understood as part of a cultural logic whereby love is no longer primarily organised by social and economic institutions, but rather left to the free choice of individuals. Making the 'right choice' thus becomes central to navigating what may be seen as a deregulated market of romance, where stable and widely shared social norms are replaced by one's abilities to interpret private emotions (Beck and Gernsheim, 1990; Giddens, 1992; Thwaites, 2017, 2020). This condition, however 'liberating' to a certain extent, is also a source of suffering for the subject, who is burdened with the responsibility of picking the best possible partner, and has only his or herself to blame if this endeavour fails. This form of 'negative freedom' is modelled on the myth of an individual who can identify and act in their best interest, in whatever circumstances (Illouz, 2019). The dilemma of contemporary love is that we are invested with full agency to choose in our own interest, *and* we have to be truthful to our emotions. It is this contradictory combination of economic and emotional logic that marks the individualisation of romance, leaving the subject to operate in a very uncertain field. We are supposed to make a choice following our emotions, but there is no institution that regulates and organises this process, and emotions are not always as clear and stable as one may wish.

Powered by user-centred affordances that provide access to potentially infinite partners and the possibility to assess them according to a set of indicators, dating apps offer a potential solution to this dilemma. They can be interpreted as 'technologies of choice' (Illouz, 2007, 2012) producing a sense of 'personal autonomy and control' (Chambers, 2013: 122). Dating apps promise to operate a rationalisation of intimacy, subduing the mystery of romantic alchemy to the scientific work of data, by means of their technological infrastructures, that is, algorithms. In this respect, they seemingly come to rescue the postmodern subject from the weight of 'free choice' and can be seen as technosocial devices that support the selection process by providing quick and easy information about potential partners. Dating apps are deemed to implement an algorithmically mediated, data-driven market of romance whereby the self is evaluated, and rationality and efficiency are applied to the complexities of love and sexuality. They can be thought of as apparatuses of a marketised culture of romance in which the encounter is made into a 'commodity purchased and disposed of' (Illouz, 2019: 62). As such, they underpin and amplify an individualised conception of sexual, intimate and romantic relationships, and thus represent a new iteration of the capitalist conception of 'love as a market', offering the tools to manage courtship as a 'commodified game' (Hobbs et al., 2017) and profit from it (Best and Delmege, 2012).

In this article we aim to further problematise the market metaphor as a heuristic category to understand the cultures of intimacy promoted by dating apps. Connecting cultural sociology of love with insights from media studies, we contribute to the

understanding of platformised romantic cultures by analysing the ways in which users relate to dating apps' injunction to present oneself and select, choose and trust others. Reflecting on the findings of small-scale qualitative research on dating app use among young adults in London, we question the extent to which dating app users act as rational actors with a defined purchasing power and exchange value for and in themselves. In other words, we challenge the link between marketisation and rationalisation; while we concur that dating apps enact a marketisation of intimacy, we suggest that the 'market' at stake actually does not constitute a carrier of rationality, transparency and efficiency. In fact, users act in a fundamentally uncertain social environment, navigating an inherent lack of information about others and continually negotiating the risk of engaging in an interaction with them. The process of platformisation of intimacy operated by dating apps, we maintain, does not equate with an augmented sense of control, but rather with a remediation and systematisation of the insecurities and vulnerabilities that characterise postmodern romance (Illouz, 2019). Dating apps emerge as technologies that, while promising to facilitate the act of choosing by organising potential partners according to general thus comparable indicators (profile picture, biography etc.), in fact reproduce the demand and (im)possibility of performing any choice based on those criteria.

Drawing on Arvidsson's conceptualisation of online daters as brands (2006), we argue that the specific form of marketisation and commodification produced by dating apps is entrepreneurial in kind: individuals conceive of themselves as assets in order to attract interest from others in a competitive setting. As entrepreneurs, they are required to face the 'structural uncertainty' (Knight, 2006) of engaging in social exchanges with 'quasi-strangers' in a fluctuating environment, investing in social relations with the expectation of some kind of return (Lin, 1999). Within this context, dating apps provide users with a ring-fenced environment to perform strategies of self-presentation and enable access to what we define as 'ready-made' social capital, intended as a pool of otherwise unavailable contacts that they can tap into and browse. This, we contend, implies that dating apps users enact a Luhmanian notion of interpersonal trust (Luhmann, 1986, 2000) that is built on the assessment of the risk of interacting with unfamiliar others – which is in fact typical of online social environments dominated by self-branding practices and reputational logics (Bandinelli, 2020a; Gandini, 2016).

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we review existing research on dating apps. Subsequently, following a methodological note, we outline the key insights emerging from our empirical work; here, we describe how dating apps users approach interactions in a condition of structural uncertainty and illustrate how the balance between trust and risk represents a key interpretative dimension to understand their experience. In the conclusive section, we reflect on the implications that derive from the rise of dating apps as the leading force of 21st-century love cultures.

## Dating Apps: The 'Platformisation' of Intimacy

If, until a decade ago, relying on the internet as a source for potential romantic partners was linked to social stigma, in recent years the popularisation of dating apps has contributed to the normalisation of digitally mediated practices of intimacy, which are now commonplace, especially amongst urban youth (Evans and Riley, 2017; Gibbs et al.,

2011). Recent statistics show that in 2020, 30% of US adults had used a dating app, up from 11% in 2013 (Anderson et al., 2020), Tinder being the most popular, reaching 50 million users worldwide, with people aged 18–29 and 30–44 being the largest population segments in this market (Statista, 2020).

In the last few years, a remarkable body of research from a cross-disciplinary background has been concerned with dating apps and the understanding of their affordances, the motivations of their users, their business model, and their social and cultural significance. What emerges with clarity is that dating apps constitute a process of remediation of the codes of courtship, which have adapted to the concise and ephemeral grammar of digitally mediated sociality (Ansari and Klinenberg, 2015; Hodgson, 2017; Weigel, 2016). As a result, within dating apps, individuals are called to devise new strategies and tactics to present themselves and assess the presentation of others (Ansari and Klinenberg, 2015; Lutz and Ranzini, 2017; van Hooff, 2020).

Research on the topic specifically in the area of cultural and media sociology has looked at how dating apps mediate practices of dating and mating from the perspective of a ‘digital transformation of intimacy’ (Hobbs et al., 2017) and in the context of late capitalist cold intimacies (Carter and Arocha, 2020). Scholars have focused on the remediation of sociocultural patterns of dating, for example the reproduction of hook-up culture and the difficulty of forming long-lasting bonds (see van Hooff, 2020), as well as on emerging practices, such as the virtual travelling of the geosocial flaneur (Chambers, 2012). Among these, Ansari and Klinenberg (2015) offer a thick empirical account of the aesthetic and emotional labour required on the side of users to initiate a conversation on dating apps and to organise a date. Our contribution aims to follow in these footsteps and expand the understanding of dating apps from a cultural sociological perspective. Importantly, our aim is not to analyse romantic or sexual relationships for how they are mediated by dating apps. Rather, we approach the matter by looking at the relationship that users have with the app itself, and with each other within the app. In so doing, we want to further explore the ways in which these act as ‘technologies of choice’ in a commercialised culture of love (Illouz, 2007, 2012).

In particular, we contend that, with dating apps becoming so popular, we are witnessing the unprecedented diffusion of a specific conception of dating that complexifies the articulation of a marketised love. While the commodification of intimacy certainly precedes the rise of dating apps (Illouz, 1997), these operate a remediation of the market notion of love through the user-friendly affordances of social media. Dating apps rely on the portability, availability, locatability and multimediality of mobile media (Schrock, 2015), thus emphasising a logic of entertainment that gamifies practices of ‘relation-shopping’ (Heino et al., 2010). Through their algorithmically driven matchmaking work, dating apps allegedly systematise the social exchange between unequal but commensurably competing social actors who assess each other according to certain parameters. All users have to do, it has been noted, is to ‘identify their needs, establish what they offer in return, understand the dating market, evaluate options and, lastly, pick the best fit as per their cost-benefit analysis’ (Stoll, 2019: 90).

Users are well aware of the commodifying process at stake in dating apps. They recognise the need to produce a desirable presentation of the self in order to ‘stand out’ from ‘competitors’, thus acknowledging the requirement to master digital self-branding

techniques (Hobbs et al., 2017; van Hooff, 2020). Their conception of dating apps' value relies on the perceived 'efficiency' of these tools in connecting the romantic paths of busy individuals that do not have much time and energy to proactively look for love (Hobbs et al., 2017). As has been noted (van Hooff, 2020), at stake is a form of 'cold intimacy' whereby 'efficiency' and 'rationality' tend to replace passion. This reproduces a narrative for which digital technologies are deemed to offer pseudo-scientific solutions to the romantic struggles of individualised subjects (Morozov, 2013). The specific solution offered by dating apps to the problem of matchmaking is that of providing users with the opportunity to widen their romantic network, thus giving access to a pool of strangers (Hobbs et al., 2017; van Hooff, 2020) while organising and datafying these connections.

In this respect, dating apps can be taken as eponymous of a process of 'platformisation' of intimacy that reflects the present-day political economy of digitally mediated social exchanges, broadly considered. The concept of platformisation builds on the notion of the platform as the 'dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web' (Helmond, 2015: 1) and involves the process of 'penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems' (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 4276) for purposes of re-mediation and datafication. Dating apps apply this logic to intimate and romantic exchanges, as technologies that mediate – and, in so doing, coordinate and regulate – the actualisation of a social relation between two parties who are brought together by a common interest or goal. This coordination and regulation takes place through a data-driven, algorithmically powered infrastructure that makes prospective encounters 'fundamentally "contingent", that is increasingly modular in design and continuously reworked and repackaged, informed by datafied user feedback' (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 4275).

However, while maintaining that dating apps articulate a form of marketisation of romance, we argue that there is a need to further question what sort of marketisation process is peculiar to dating apps and their functioning. Specifically, we challenge the view that online daters should be regarded as buyers and sellers in a market organised around quantifiable exchange values. Conversely, we suggest considering them as brands: managerial devices which serve as interfaces to enable social actions (Lury, 2004). As brands, daters engage in social exchanges with others by providing and interpreting signs, and, based on these interpretations they act in certain ways, producing a peculiar social understanding of digitally mediated intimacy (Arvidsson, 2006). A dater's profile is thus to be conceived of as the result of a process of identity construction that extends beyond the concepts of fakeness, deception and authenticity. As has been noted (Ellison et al., 2011), a dating profile can be read as a promise; one that can be realised with the active contribution of a significant other.

In this respect, a branded self on a dating app is not the artificial counterpart of a supposedly authentic self that remains concealed. Rather, it is a dispositive through which a public version of the self is produced (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013). Yet, the complex temporalities of the branded self, which point to a number of possible future selves, make this evaluation very difficult. The sign value of brands is in fact inherently uncertain and fluctuating, and trust is difficult to build. Therefore, despite their own promotional slogans, dating apps – we maintain – are actually unable to provide users with tools to facilitate choice, since they are left with a series of opaque signs of intangible values in which

they are called to emotionally and socially invest. They inhabit, in other words, a social ecosystem characterised by ‘structural uncertainty’ (Knight, 2006), in which they are required to attune to intersubjectively accepted irrationalities and accept an inherent dimension of risk. Betting, more than choosing, guessing, more than knowing, are the metaphors that best describe the commodification of intimacy that characterises dating-apps culture.

## **Methodological Note**

The article discusses insights originating from small-scale qualitative research jointly conducted in London by the two authors in May–September 2018, as part of an externally funded project on dating practices, cultures of intimacy, trust and technology. This involved three focus groups with regular dating-app users and five one-to-one in-depth interviews with key informants. Importantly, this project constitutes a segment of a wider and ongoing ethnographic investigation conducted by the main author of this article about the digital cultures of love in the UK and Italy. At the time of writing, this comprises 40 interviews, seven focus groups, and an extensive number of informal interactions conducted over the course of four years. While findings presented here are primarily based on the data jointly collected, their interpretation must be placed in the broader context of the ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author. The methodological coherence that characterises this research allows for their combination. In what follows, we use ethnographic insights to offer additional evidence for purposes of corroboration.

The research jointly conducted by the authors involved a total of 16 participants. Overall, these are highly educated, middle-class young adults based in the UK, with diverse ethnic backgrounds (but predominantly white), and diverse sexual orientations, but with a prevalence of heterosexual cis-gender individuals. All regularly used dating apps for at least six months, are between 20 and 30 years of age and have attended university studies; a majority hold a BA degree. Focus groups involved a total of 11 participants (3 males and 7 females) and lasted around two hours each. Nationalities of focus groups participants include Italian (2), Chinese (3), British (3) Pakistani (1), American (1) and Greek (1). Each focus group included a note-taker and was led by one of the authors. A first focus group was composed of two male and two female heterosexual participants, while a second was made up of four, all-female, heterosexual participants, in an attempt to pay closer attention to the experiences, perceptions and understandings of female heterosexual dating app users. A third focus group, with three non-heterosexual (one male, two female) participants, was also conducted; however, evidence from this component of the research is not presented in this article, since its primary focus is on heterosexual dating app use. However, this group contributed to the development of the theoretical proposition here presented as it added contextual knowledge of the field and constituted an important point of cross-cultural reference. Overall, conversations in the context of focus groups primarily revolved around the individual relationship with the app and its use, strategies of self-presentation, encounters with strangers and issues of trust. Particular emphasis was placed on the role of technology in the intermediation (and remediation) of these processes.

A set of five in-depth interviews with subjects considered as ‘key informants’ in the dating app scene in London were conducted. These are individuals who have been considered ‘experts’ of digitally mediated dating practices, having used dating apps intensively for at least one year. Key informants were recruited alongside focus-group participants and thus have an analogous socio-demographic status. These were three females – two Italian and one Greek – and two males – one Italian and one British. Interviewees were isolated from the group discussion to best exploit their status as highly practised online daters and at the same time maintain the homogeneity of expertise in group composition. The conducting of these interviews was instrumental to (a) gain further in-depth understanding of below-the-radar practices of dating-app use and (b) expand our knowledge about specific practices undertaken by expert users. Interviews consisted of approximately one hour of open-ended conversation each. Both focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and subsequently fully transcribed. All participants’ names have been pseudonymised to preserve their identity.

In the interpretation of findings, insights from focus groups and interviews were taken in a complementary, iterative and reflexive perspective; a comprehensively inductive approach guided our analysis. Interestingly, despite the interactive nature of focus groups it was expected that it might limit the sharing of more personal anecdotes, but this did not happen; in terms of the type and quality of personal information shared, insights that originated in the context of focus group conversations are comparably homogeneous with those emerging from interviews. As a result, evidence collected from both components of the research was considered contextually, with no specific epistemological differentiation except for a peculiar attention to the more dialogic, participant-to-participant nature of focus-group conversations.

We acknowledge that due to its hyper-qualitative, small-scale design, findings illustrated in this article do not allow us to produce generalisations concerning the overall population of dating-app users. However, the primary aim of this article is to build on the insights collected in our research to produce a theoretical proposition and thus contribute to a better conceptualisation of how dating practices come to be integrated into digital and data cultures from a cultural sociological perspective. Despite the limited numbers, we contend that such a hyper-qualitative, small-scale approach actually represents a valuable source for the in-depth analysis of the implications of processes of datafication and platformisation at the level of the self. This allows an in-depth investigation into the relationship between these processes and the reflexive microsocial practices that individuals themselves put in place in their everyday experiences of app use. This kind of research, we maintain, can harvest important insights that may otherwise be inaccessible through quantitative, digital and big data-driven approaches, and thus counterbalances these (important, but not exclusive) perspectives.

### **Match-Chat-Date: The Entrepreneurial Market of Love**

In a large, multicultural city such as London, many young adults use dating apps with varying degrees of engagement. The majority of our research participants have a multiplicity of dating apps on their phone and use them in accordance with different states of mind and geographic locations. The most popular apps for our participants were Tinder

and Bumble, which reflects recent statistical trends in the USA (Statista, 2020). As emerged in focus-group discussions, our participants concur that having one or more dating app on one's mobile is akin to having various social media accounts; this confirms the relative absence of stigmatised views against digitally mediated dating practices in the demographics observed. This also points to a diversification of dating-app use, with a growing number of options remediating different romantic cultures and moods that are employed concomitantly by daters. Social media apps are also frequently mentioned as primary means of dating; our focus-group participants report establishing first contact with potential partners through Instagram or Facebook's private messaging features on a regular basis (see also Chambers, 2021; Lykens et al., 2019). These observations indicate that dating via digital means is increasingly normalised and that it is ever more contiguous with other digitally mediated social activities (Chambers, 2013).

Media scholars have paid attention to dating-apps' affordances and their role in mediating the relations of users, for instance by reproducing heteronormative imaginaries (see Ferris and Duguay, 2020; Licoppe, 2020), or encouraging a certain subjective position in relation to others (e.g. David and Cambre, 2016). In this article we depart from a media-oriented perspective and approach the matter from a sociocultural viewpoint that is concerned with the peculiar traits that characterise dating apps comprehensively intended as digital technologies of romance, and their role in everyday cultures of use. To this end, we start from an understanding of dating apps as 'technologies of choice' (Illouz, 2007, 2012) characterised by solutionist discourse (Morozov, 2013) that sees algorithms as devices that are deemed to solve the long-standing issues of lonely hearts. The promotional narratives of dating apps are quite eloquent in this respect. Tinder's tagline, *Match-Chat-Date* (Tinder, 2020), synthesises this quite effectively, for it presents romantic exchanges as the outcome of a three-step journey that encapsulates the promise of romance-efficiency as a technologically driven procedure. In other words, we build on the idea that dating apps' reflexive narratives are founded on the more-or-less implicit claim that these may help reduce uncertainty and time-wasting, thanks to a process of rationalisation and machinisation of romantic matching that replaces the irrationality of romance with the rational principles of algorithmic technology. Yet, as we are about to see, dating has actually never been so difficult. Despite the claims and expectations of transparency, dating apps appear to reproduce the fundamental uncertainty of contemporary romance.

### *The 'Structural Uncertainty' of Dating Apps*

Constant wonders characterise the life of online daters, who must continually assess their authenticity and that of others, trying to at once interpret and devise visual and textual language to communicate a certain sign value. While dating apps may be reproducing the concept of love as a market, different from the commodities on sale at a marketplace of goods, dating app users do not have any prescribed objective value upon which to base their selection, nor are they in the position to simply select and choose what they want (despite what the patriarchal fantasy of heteronormative courtship seems to maintain). The logic at stake cannot therefore simply be reduced to a mechanism of 'supply and demand', which implies a greater degree of transparency of information. Instead, users



must face the uncertainty of engaging with total strangers, and their ‘purchase power’ depends on their projected value. This means, in other words, that the self-branding codes of dating apps constitute a grammar on its own, which partially delinks from chiefly presentational purposes. In fact, daters primarily use ‘signalling’ (Donath, 2007) to navigate the structural uncertainty that characterises dating apps as online social environments. Stefano, an Italian man who works as an urban developer, during an interview shared his constant doubts regarding his mastery of self-branding:

I don’t know what pictures I have to put, I put one of me at the beach with no shirt on, but maybe that has given the idea that I am kind of a chav? I did it because I thought that being a bit chavvy was what actually works on Tinder, but I guess I was wrong! (Stefano, male, 27)

Following these considerations, Stefano asked a female friend for advice:

She told me I have to be more intellectual, so I asked her to take some pictures of me wearing the specs . . . so let’s see if this work better now. (Stefano, male, 27)

Stefano’s words imply an understanding of dating apps as peculiarly connoted by a notion of efficiency, thus perceived as valid only when ‘it works’, that is when ‘swipes’ are successfully reciprocated by others. Yet, to make them ‘work’ is not an obvious task. Ethnographic observations of group chats among friends corroborate this insight. It is common for friends to share advice on how to present oneself, interpret signs, interact with and evaluate others in dating apps. At stake there seem to be not yet codified scripts that partially differ from those regulating ‘IRL(in real life)’ romantic cultures.

This confers a distinctly strategic and managerial dimension to the economy of display, attention and appreciation that is typical of social media in general (Marwick and boyd, 2011). What daters include in their profile is attuned to this (mis)understanding. For instance, together with the profile picture, another key element daters spend considerable time strategising about is the biographical information in the hope of attracting matches, in other words, making the app work. As Brad, a British media student, explains:

In my bio I put something like ‘if you want to have moderately good time, call me’. I thought it was ironic and humble. But then it was not working, my friend then wrote a bio for me, which is about me liking smooth jazz, which I don’t know what it is. (Brad, male, 20)

Brad’s words express the perplexity that originates from operating within a system that is supposed to be as ‘efficient’ and ‘transparent’ as a market is commonly intended to be – at least at a metaphorical level, and if compared to the messiness and opacity of human interactions – while instead finding that what one is doing is not working. The much-promoted efficiency of the app emerges not as something that is given, but rather as the (auspicious) result of the ability of the user to be successful in that system, to make use of the elements that it provides and interpret its signals. Moreover, different apps are perceived to function in different ways. Ethnographic exchanges reveal for instance that Bumble is generally perceived to be more ‘serious’ than Tinder, while Hinge has a reputation for being the preferred options of creatives and intellectuals. It takes time, and a series of trials and errors,

for users to understand each app's culture. This blends with the algorithmic systems that produce the matching, towards which our participants share a degree of scepticism. Sandra, an Italian woman who works in the education sector, phrases this nicely in her interview:

The algorithm is not getting me right! See what matches it gives me?? Do you think I am that kind of person? (Sandra, female, 35)

This is further corroborated by an exchange with Lawrence, an engineer, who reveals in an informal exchange that he is suspicious of the algorithmic matching and how it works:

Tinder's algorithm at the beginning gives you a lot of matches, but most of them are bots I think, and then after a while it stops showing you nice people. So you have to delete it and re-install it to have new good ones, and understand who are the bots. (Lawrence, male, 35)

This structural uncertainty does not end once a match is obtained. Dating app users must decode signals from others not only with the purpose of collecting information about a prospective dater, but to the very strategic end of obtaining an 'experiential' (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) impression, which suggests how successful an actual date with that person might be. Focus-group participants discussed this mechanism at length; there is agreement that the text-messaging feature embedded in dating apps represents a key context of signalling. In this regard, algorithmic-based indications facilitate the production of adequate signals, for they invite the sharing of one's interests and hobbies, which often become a middle ground for conversation. As Anna (23), a British woman studying for a BA in London, summarises in the context of an informal conversation:

. . . it's easier to have a conversation if you're both in love with the same hobby or you have the same sense of humour. (Anna, female, 23)

Stefano, mentioned earlier, supports Anna's impressions. In his interview he reports the fluctuations of the texting economy of Tinder, and the difficulties in grasping its workings. He reveals that:

For a while I used the same message to initiate a conversation, and it was working. But then one replied saying 'oh this is a very old trick you gotta change it', so now I am still thinking of a good way to start a conversation. I was told GIFs is what works but I haven't found a proper one. (Stefano, 27)

In an interview, Mark, a postgraduate student, laconically claimed that:

Pick up lines are a thing of the past. They don't work anymore! (Mark, male, 25)

Mark's observation is revelatory of a fluctuating culture, in which codes and norms are ephemeral and transitory. The lack of objective indicators about the value logic at stake in dating apps puts individuals in a condition for which trial and error is the only possible way to finally (hopefully) devise a way of capitalising on one's displayed self. In this respect, users behave as entrepreneurs of the self who seek to capitalise on their 'assets'

to attract the right opportunities in an uncertain environment. See for instance what Sandra says in her interview about her profile-building strategies:

When building my profile, I always try to put clear hints to what I like, or what I am into at that moment . . . like now I put a picture of me climbing . . . I hope someone gets in touch and invites me to climb, or at least to hike. . . (Sandra, female, 35)

Participants in the focus groups agree with Sandra that, on dating apps, self-presentation is as much a matter of crafting a self that works as it is of attracting a specific type of person. The sheer amount of hermeneutic labour that users must engage in to benefit from the virtually infinite opportunities they are offered, and to learn how to work its 'magic', is indicative of the lack of shared and definite rules. On the internet, a multiplicity of forums can be found whereby the most effective of these techniques are discussed, contrasted and compared, and these can be as detailed as to what colour to wear in your profile picture (Pugachevsky, 2018). Dating apps themselves offer advice on how to take advantage of their services. For instance, OK Cupid's blog has a whole section called 'tips', featuring articles such as 'Bold first date ideas that could make or break a relationship' or 'Tips for finding your spring someone' (OK Cupid, 2017a, 2017b).

This puts into question the assumption that dating apps represent a market of relations whereby rational choice can actually be exerted. When testing with various types of opening messages, or profile pictures, individuals seem to be more occupied with developing strategies to adapt their cognitive, affective and behavioural habits to the dating app cultures and affordances. Users are constantly faced with the technosocial opportunity – and demand – to choose rationally and reflexively, and at the same time with the impossibility to do that based on any stable and shared indicator. This amounts to an economy of display that requires a specific kind of affective, cultural and aesthetic labour (Ardivisnon, 2006; Carah, 2014; Pettinger, 2004).

In the market of dating apps, users need to communicate their value in the form of a brand, thus learning how to manage their brand as well as how to decipher the value of the brand of others. The rational, strategic and managerial approach that characterises the moral economy of dating apps is, in turn, precisely a response to its irrational nature. In their active status of match-seekers, users develop strategies of self-presentation that are not just pointed to the display of their 'best' self in a rational market, but rather to produce 'a self that works' in an entrepreneurialised social environment. This means, from a sociological perspective, that dating-app users in their entrepreneurial behaviour 'invest' in social relations with the expectation of some kind of return (Lin, 1999) – that is, the 'success' of a date, whatever personal benchmark is set for it. To do so, they employ strategies based on betting and guessing practices that enable them to operate within the irrational, information-scarce market these apps construct. This behaviour reflects the necessity to navigate the structural uncertainty that derives from interacting with others who are 'quasi-strangers' they know something – but not all – about. This speaks to the nature of social capital on dating apps and, in turn, raises a question around the processes of building interpersonal trust among users.

## *The Digital Game of Love: 'Ready-Made' Social Capital, Trust and Risk*

A peculiar and somewhat overlooked aspect that characterises dating apps is that, differently from social media such as Facebook or Instagram, users do not accumulate social capital incrementally through them. On a dating app, users can neither compile lists of 'friends' nor scroll content others have 'liked' (boyd and Ellison, 2007). On the contrary, the construction of interpersonal trust on dating apps is left to the limited amount of information provided by an individual user about one's interests and a restricted set of in-app affordances. Users are offered by dating apps a pre-packaged set of contacts – that we might call 'ready-made' social capital – to tap into and which they have to 'invest' in (by 'swiping right', in the Tinder jargon) with the expectation of some kind of return (Lin, 1999).

This 'ready-made' social capital is composed of otherwise unavailable connections that users can browse through and might ultimately match with; this is an algorithmically produced list of suggestions (or, albeit less commonly, a statistically based one, as happens on the platform eHarmony) that comes with the perception and promise of scientific rationality. In the production of this 'ready-made' social capital, data play a crucial role: on Tinder, for instance, daters are required to log in to the app using their Facebook credentials. This injection of personal data allows the app to build up a database to provide *other* users – not the original ones – with a set of profiles to evaluate, and leaves individuals with no affordances to build a social capital of their own. While this process also serves a purpose of identity vetting, it primarily represents a 'black-boxed' algorithmic elaboration the workings of which, obviously, remain hidden from public scrutiny. The 'algorithmic imaginary' (Bucher, 2017) of dating-app users, in other words, entails a technologically driven search for rationality in an otherwise uncertain social environment.

This means that the process of building interpersonal trust in this peculiar context, made between users who are 'quasi-strangers' to one another, is characterised by the effort of capitalising on the scarce information availability by means of strategic behaviour. Existing research on trustworthiness on dating apps has focused primarily on self-presentation and deception, looking in particular at the relationship between attractiveness and trustworthiness and the gender dynamics attached to this issue (see for instance McGloin and Denes, 2018). However, the relevance of attractiveness and other factors in producing a perception of trustworthiness can be understood only in the light of a context whereby users need to reduce the inherent risk of interacting with non-intimate others. This determines a notion of trust that is not based on mutuality or reciprocity (Bourdieu, 2002 [1986]) but which resembles instead German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's (1986, 2000) understanding of trust as the juxtaposition of interaction with 'familiar' – intended as less risky – vis-à-vis 'non-familiar' – i.e. more risky – others.

Interestingly, for Luhmann, love is a medium of communication characterised by the 'codification of intimacy', intended as a social system within which social actors 'enhance communication by largely doing without any communication' (Luhmann, 1986), a position which delinks from the Parsonian notion of love as a 'reciprocity of perspective' (Luhmann, 1986). Dating apps seem to convey a faithful representation of Luhmann's understanding of love as a social system based on the codification of intimacy, as users behave as fluctuating brands and interpret the 'signals' that foreground their interaction with others as 'communication without communication'. From this perspective, even the

archetypal affordance of reciprocation within dating apps – the swipe – does not actualise mutuality, but rather a request to provide more signals to further reduce uncertainty. Following this line of thought, we can interpret a ‘swipe right’ as a mere appreciation of the brand, rather than a reciprocation of interest in the person. Ethnographic observations suggest that until the conversation is taken to another app (e.g. WhatsApp, Snapchat, or Instagram), a move that typically happens when there is the prospect (however vague) of an embodied date, there is no real sense of communicating with ‘a person’. This may contribute to explain the ratio between matches and dates – as a frustrated participant puts it: ‘Every 60 to 100 matches I ended up having one date!’ (Alexa, female, 25) – as well as in the normalisation of practices such as ‘ghosting’. It may be argued, in other words, that dating apps emphasise the communicational side of romantic exchanges, giving priority to the communicational act – the match – rather than the exchange itself – the meeting (Bandinelli and Bandinelli, 2021).

Yet, trust inevitably plays a key role in the unfolding of this codification of intimacy. In practice, this process of building interpersonal trust is characterised by a twofold goal. On the one hand, it entails an obvious dimension of personal safety, that relates to the (potential) face-to-face encounter with a stranger. On the other hand, however, it consists more strategically in the evaluation of whether a face-to-face date would actually be worth its sign value in romantic terms. These evaluations, though, remain built on structural uncertainty and information scarcity. Dating-app users, as noted, have very limited information to perform these kinds of assessments, since one cannot engage in any kind of regular activity of content posting on a dating app.

Beyond the static display of a set of pictures and a short biographical statement, the only point of connection with others is the messaging system. Thus, the effort to accumulate knowledge about others on a dating app may be seen to be comparatively greater than happens in non-digitally mediated encounters (where non-verbal communication often plays a crucial role) but also in traditional social media, whereby the presence of lists of connections and a variety of multimodal content allows one to collect potentially ample information about somebody (as happens, for instance, in contexts of recruiting, see Gershon, 2017). This translates into practices of ‘questioning’, that take place after a successful ‘swipe’ and in coincidence with the first exchange of messages on the app. Here, safety and sign value clearly intertwine: talking about her experience of Tinder, Andrea, an American woman based in London, recounts in a focus group that:

At the beginning, I didn’t think it was a secure way to find someone. But I did use it and asked a lot of questions to make sure that’s what you are looking for. (Andrea, female, 28)

Following up in the same focus-group discussion, Sarah, a London-based designer, said that the decision of whether and when to meet with a dater is a skill that one learns in the process:

I think I am doing quite a good job now after developing some skills. Just trying to be careful about who I’m gonna meet. (Sarah, female, 30)

To reduce uncertainty, our focus-group participants report that, once the counterpart has made a successful first impression, they move to another social media platform – typically

Instagram – in order to acquire more information about the potential partner from the perusing of a traditional (in particular, a visual) social media profile. Yet, the process of building interpersonal trust, our participants reveal, also maintains a dimension of learning at its core; one learns how to interpret signals and reduce uncertainty. The issue of safety and the perception of one's worth remain intertwined.

This labouring of betting and guessing is practised through the app by means of the signals others send. Thus, it often goes down to one's 'gut' and instincts. As Bianca, a London-based Pakistani marketing professional, explains during a focus group:

If I meet you for the first time, [and] you're friend of my close friend, I can trust you more than just strangers. So before, I used to meet people like that. Friends of friends. So I felt we were more closer to each other and safer, in your mindset, because it's friends' friend. If you just met him, it's difficult to just trust. So my trust is just based on my instinct. (Bianca, female, 25)

Rita, an Italian woman based in London who works in a recruiting company, corroborates these insights. During an interview she expanded on what 'techniques' can be used to assess the trustworthiness of a potential date:

Sometimes I show the chat and profile to my friends to see if they think it's fine to meet them in person! . . . Almost everybody is stalkable online, I mean if you have some skills you can find out a lot of things, so in a sense you know more about a stranger that you can google, than some random person met at a bar. (Rita, female, 26)

As noted by Yan and Holtmanns (2007), the building of interpersonal trust by means of digitally mediated social exchanges entails an inherent notion of risk, which underpins the building of intimacy among social actors who are strangers to each other. This seems to be particularly true for dating apps, whereby users navigate their way using signals to 'communicate without communication' and thus codify the process of building an intimate relationship based on incomplete information. In this process, technological affordances – such as the profile picture, the bio, or text messages – play an enormous role insofar as they allow 'signalling' to take place and enable daters to nurture and assess the experiential dimension of the date. This entrepreneurial conduct aligns with the reputational logics that characterise other contexts in which self-branding is a prominent practice, such as for freelance workers in cultural economies (Bandinelli, 2020a; Gandini, 2016). For them, self-branding equates to the hermeneutic of a self that 'works' in a given context, and that empowers the accumulation of social capital to develop reputation. On dating apps, despite the impossibility of accumulating social capital, self-branding equally represents the source for the building of trust among individuals who know something, but not enough, about each other, and that within this context of information scarcity there is a need to build the necessary conditions to engage in a successful transactional exchange.

## Conclusion

The article has discussed insights emerging from small-scale empirical research about the use of dating apps by middle-class young adults in the large, multi-cultural context of London. The results suggest that the sociality which characterises dating cultures replicates

the logic of a brand-intensive market, whereby choices are made on the basis of intersubjective feelings and expectations of future behaviour that are uncertain and volatile. Dating apps emerge from our research as techno-social institutions that systematise a marketised notion of romance. Despite the promise of an efficient, algorithmically driven ‘digital fix’ to the question of love, they are far from offering a solution to the ‘mystery’ of love by means of more ‘transparent’ choice criteria, and rather reproduce the uncertainty of contemporary romance (Illouz, 2019). This configures an essentially irrational dating market whereby, as seen, users act like brands to accumulate sign value and seek to attract others’ investment by means of signals that convey an experiential dimension. In so doing, they enact an entrepreneurial logic, striving to produce a ‘self that works’ and to spot the most profitable and secure investment to be carried out in a fluctuating marketplace.

To see dating apps in such a light, we contend, allows us to pin down the managerialised logics that characterise social exchanges mediated by these services and their interaction with technological infrastructure, which are the epitome of broader dynamics of ‘platformisation’ of culture and society (van Dijck et al., 2018). If on the one hand dating apps can be seen as offering ‘love on demand’ in the same way as other apps offering services or goods (obvious examples here are Deliveroo and Uber), on the other hand what is on demand is only the (im)possibility of evaluating potential opportunities in the form of branded personas. To actually go on a date, let alone a successful one (however ‘success’ may be interpreted here), is a completely different story. Users of dating apps approach interaction within these social environments as investors who seek to obtain some kind of return by capitalising on individual assets. In so doing, they consider others as ‘quasi-strangers’ whose encounter bears a certain degree of risk. This, as shown, represents a context whereby social capital cannot be accumulated and a Luhmanian notion of trust, based on instrumentality rather than reciprocity – which is typical of another context whereby one’s reputation acts as a cultural conception of value (Gandini, 2016) – is affirmed as hegemonic.

Despite their tremendous popularity, the dating-app industry still presents considerable room for growth. It is no surprise that monopoly giants of the social media industry such as Facebook have recently turned their attention to the dating app market in their search for new avenues of profit.<sup>1</sup> As a result, it is reasonable to expect that concerns about trust, datafication and privacy that characterise the use of dating apps are going to be exacerbated, while experimentations to ‘decentralise’ the dating-app market, such as those promoted by means of blockchain technology (Kuchler, 2018), have failed to garner sufficient attention. Yet, the degree of embeddedness that digital technologies have acquired in the mediation of romantic relations points towards a complete and total normalisation of dating-app use, especially for younger generations, as the standard gateway to love cultures and practices. It seems important, therefore, to maintain a critical overview of the ways in which technology is integrated into these processes and represents a driver of cultural and social change.

While mindful of its limitations, concerning in particular the small sample at our disposal and the contextual cultural setting of a global urban context such as London, we believe our research contributes to highlighting the problematic nature of the technologically driven promise of optimisation and efficiency. The reports of individual experiences, perceptions and insecurities about the use of dating apps underline how dating,

albeit ‘platformised’, remains a cultural practice connoted by a dimension of uncertainty which must be intended not only entrepreneurially but also in its emotional nuance, for the entrepreneurialised subject is characterised exactly by the compenetration of the economic and the emotional orders of value (Bandinelli, 2020b; Stark, 2009). This compenetration is reflected in the sheer amount of ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 1983) that dating apps elicit among their users and that is required of them in order to successfully engage with the digitally mediated dating scene. This leads to the frustration of many users – which might in fact be one of the affects that makes the app ‘sticky’ (Bandinelli and Bandinelli, 2021). It also points at the impossibility of a technological ‘proceduralisation’ of love, revealing the ideological character of dating apps’ reflexive narrative. As Deborah Lupton has noted, there are still things that cannot be completely subsumed into our ‘data persona’ (Lupton, 2020).

It is not going to be the next powerful algorithm to rescue us from the messiness of contemporary love and the demand to make the right choice. In fact, the business of dating apps is the co-optation and reproduction of such a mess, and the systematisation of the (im)possibility to choose with whom to fall in love. Users are constantly faced with the expectation to evaluate/choose from potentially infinite options and – at the same time – with the endless repetition of the impossibility to perform such actions relying on shared and stable scripts. The marketisation of romantic cultures in its platformised iteration simultaneously exacerbates and hides the contemporary ‘chaos of love’ behind and within the ideological surface of its proceduralisation. Following from this, and drawing on Eva Illouz’s (2019) analysis of negative relationships, we argue that dating apps function as technologies of non-choice, that is, as sociotechnical apparatuses that reproduce the ontological uncertainty of lovers as entrepreneurs.

## Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research for this article has been partially financed by the project Technologically Fabricated Intimacy – dating apps, gamification and blockchain technologies, funded by the King’s Cultural Institute (London) as part of the King’s College London x Somerset House Studios scheme (2018). More information is available here: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/projects/ais-technologically-fabricated-intimacy>. We acknowledge and thank Marjia Bozinovska Jones as the artistic lead of the project.

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## Note

1. See Facebook Dating, <https://www.facebook.com/dating> (last accessed 4 June 2021).

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