

**Swipe, F*ck, Ghost, Repeat:
How Dating Apps Have Changed the Way We Form
Relationships and View Intimacy**

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Abstract:

The widespread use of dating apps today has undoubtedly led to a redefined view on relationships and intimacy within modern society. These changes have been highlighted by academic scholars who argue that the likelihood of ‘liquid love’ has increased. This has emerged as a result of rapid technological advancements, particularly within mobile applications. Dating apps, such as Tinder, have utilised these advancements to create easy, convenient, and gamified platforms for users to engage with. The interface of these applications has encouraged users to participate in self-branding techniques to achieve maximum desirability within the online dating world. This has, in turn, led to the formation of a self-performance and gratification based ‘hook-up’ culture. Furthermore, these factors have resulted in an increased number of superficial and fleeting relationships, straying further from traditional ideas about dating, such as marriage and long-term commitment, every day.

A 'digital revolution' is continuing to unfold in the world of modern dating and intimacy. With the rise of mobile applications such as Tinder, strangers are able to connect instantaneously with just the swipe of a finger. Dating application (henceforth 'dating app') algorithms have become the new matchmaker in modern society, connecting individuals with a seemingly endless supply of potential romantic and sexual partners. This ease and convenience, however, comes with many underlying drawbacks for users and raises the question, are modern daters falling into 'liquid love'? With one's carefully chosen 'selfies' and poses at the forefront of each profile, users are being unconsciously encouraged to form superficial and gratification-based relationships. These factors have undoubtedly contributed to the gamification of online dating as well as an entirely redefined view on intimacy.

With over 323 million dating app users worldwide, online dating is far from being a new concept (Curry, 2022). In fact, these applications are "commonly seen as a socially acceptable and advantageous means of meeting a long-term partner" to many individuals (Smith & Anderson, 2016). But, with the continuing and rapid technological advancements emerging every day, the likelihood of falling in 'liquid love' has increased. This term was first coined by Bauman (2003) and describes the increasing fragility of human bonds within an adiabatic and individualistic society. This ideology is rooted with insecurity and the conflicting desire for one to tighten and loosen bonds simultaneously (Bauman, 2003). Bleeding from what Bauman (2003) dubs 'liquid modernity' within society, this new outlook on relationship formation has led many individuals to create fleeting connections with one another rather than meaningful relationships. The fabrication and use of dating apps has undoubtedly contributed to the increasing superficiality of these connections and turned dating into an almost gamified shopping experience. Similarly, Bauman (2003, p. 65) argues that dating apps have transformed the creation of relationships into a form of entertainment where users can date "secure in the knowledge they can always return to the marketplace for another bout of shopping". The seemingly endless supply of potential partners available to users plays a significant role in the emergence of this entertainment-based mindset within modern daters. Subsequently, life-long monogamous relationships are slowly disappearing as a result of the forementioned superficiality and networking possibilities (Bauman, 2003).

As previously mentioned, dating apps such as Tinder have not only encouraged the superficiality of relationships, but also led to the gamification of online dating. Gamification refers to the use of game design elements in a non-game context (Seidel, 2015). Tinder's interface and navigation controls – swiping right to 'like' someone and left to 'pass' on someone – resemble that of many

traditional games. Despite not being designed with the sole purpose of being a game, Tinder has undeniably gamified their platform to create an entertaining experience for users. According to two of the platform's founders, Sean Rad and Justin Mateen, Tinder was designed to challenge and supersede previously established online dating websites by offering users a smoother experience (Stampler, 2014). Specifically, the platform was designed with the intention of being a less emotionally taxing and time consuming 'game' for users to play, leading to a stress-free dating experience (Stampler, 2014). This design principle is reflected in the interface of the platform, where user profiles are presented similarly to a deck of playing cards; "love, sex, and intimacy [being] the stakes of the game" (Hobbs, Owen & Gerber, 2017, p. 272). This simple and entertainment forward interface allows users to almost detach themselves from the emotional side of a relationship and focus on finding a partner that will satisfy their desires and leave them with a short-term feeling of gratification. With this in mind, the rising superficiality and fleeting nature of relationships in today's society is unquestionable.

Additionally, the gamification of dating and dating apps may also have deeper effects on how a user sees themselves. To elaborate, Lee (2019) suggests that the gamified, visually centered nature of Tinder, allows little room for users to establish their psychological 'self'. To form one's psychological self an individual must be able to distinguish their 'self' from others by "interrogating one's psyche and reformulating relationships" (Lee, 2019, p. 2). Intimate relationships, then, can be understood as people engaging with each other's psychological self, forming an entity. Illouz (2007, p. 78) argues that online dating, and now dating apps, have materialised the building of intimacy through their platforms, breaking down the 'self' into "discrete categories of tastes, opinion, personality, and temperament" based on answers provided to sign-up questions. Therefore, forming a relationship via a dating app introduces a superficial shift in which individuals are paired by basic categorical information. As well as this, this process may also lead to a skewed sense of self developed through self-branding techniques.

Many dating apps available today market their users to one another with carefully chosen images at the forefront of their profiles. Through the judgement of a singular 'selfie', one can swipe to 'like' or 'pass' on a person without looking further into their interests or other images. This has led to many users feeling the need to self-brand themselves to achieve maximum desirability. Hobbs, Owen & Gerber (2017, p. 280) acknowledge that many individuals have felt the need to engage in self-branding practices to "market themselves as desirable commodities in a crowded relationship marketplace" through a "process of self-stylisation for self-transformation". Many

interviewees of *Liquid love? Dating apps, sex, relationships, and the digital transformation of intimacy* (Hobbs, Owen & Gerber, 2017) discussed using self-branding techniques to make themselves seem more desirable to potential romantic and sexual partners. One female discussed how she selects the ‘best’ and most suitable photos for her profile; “you try and pick the best photos of you... we’ve all got this idea of ourselves, and it is marketing”. This outlook was present among many interviewees and highlights the way in which users are virtually marketing themselves to others in an endeavour to achieve maximum desirability and gratification, rather than a meaningful relationship. Similarly, another female claimed that she felt the need to participate in what many scholars now dub ‘edited authenticity’, an ideology referring to the way in which one may deliberately reveal and hide aspects of themselves within their self-branding (Marwick, 2013). These examples stress the almost universal nature of self-branding among dating app users in modern day society. As well as this, the original interface goal of Tinder is also emphasised, as users take part in numerous self-branding techniques to almost create characters in the game of contemporary dating.

Additionally, Goffman’s (1959) ideology of the ‘performed self’ also comes into play within the use of dating apps. Goffman (1959) argued that people within society are constantly displaying a series of masks and roles to others in an aim to present themselves in the best possible way. While Goffman’s work explores self-presentation within face-to-face interactions, the ideas are still very much present in modern day communication and interactions online. This becomes particularly interesting when dating app interactions move from the online space to the physical space and one’s digital self-presentation must reflect their physical self. And, as it is significantly easier to construct a persona online, the fleeting nature of modern dating is emphasised when making this shift.

Users taking part in these self-branding and edited authenticity techniques are faced with the outlook that perfection achieves desirability, and desirability achieves connection. As a result of this, it seems that the aim of modern relationships is no longer marriage, but to obtain gratification from another individual. According to Bauman (2003), this outlook, and subsequently ‘liquid love’, is so widespread in contemporary culture that it has normalised someone who is always loving and losing – ultimately emphasising the forementioned fragility of human bonds and intimacy today.

Not only has the way in which individuals form relationships changed, their view on intimacy has also been completely redefined. Traditional views regarding the sacredness of sex have been largely outweighed by the prevalent hypersexuality and eroticism of contemporary culture. For Bauman (2003), eroticism refers to adding excessive value to the sexual act, so that the act itself becomes something that we desire. The amplification of this desire has ultimately led to an entirely new ‘hook-up’ culture to form, facilitated by the ease and convenience of dating apps. Specifically, Tinder has been accused of kick-starting this ‘apocalypse’ of modern dating due to its ease of use and rapidness in supplying new partners for intimacy (Sales, 2015). The forementioned ‘shopping’ and ‘game-like’ interface of the app has contributed to the commodification of individuals, treating them as a means of achieving gratification and satisfying desire.

Furthermore, this change has undeniably redefined the way society views intimacy, as individuals are almost advertised new ‘products’ every time they log onto a dating app. With only a ‘like’ and a few messages, users can meet and satisfy sexual desires without having to build any deeper emotional connections first. Bauman (2003) argues that this commodified form of eroticism has come about as a result contemporary seduction. Nowadays, individuals are culturally learning to seek sensation rather than produce it (Best, 2019). And, as Bauman (2010, p. 22) states “getting sex is now like ordering a pizza... now you can just go online and order genitalia”. Bauman and Mazzeo (2012, p. 117) highlight this change once again, stating that the commodification leads to a “weakening and impairment of interhuman bonds” as well as “the pulverisation of love relationships”. As a result of this, modern daters are significantly more likely to view sex and intimacy as an easily achievable moment of validation and gratification, as well as a means of satisfying erotic desires.

Upon exploring these factors, it is evident that the use of dating apps has changed the nature of modern relationships. With the ease and convenience of applications, such as Tinder, contemporary culture has become accustomed to having a seemingly endless supply of potential romantic and sexual partners. This, in partnership with the gamification of said dating apps, has contributed to the increasing formation of superficial, gratification-based relationships. These factors have undoubtedly also had detrimental effects on one’s sense of self through the disseminating feeling that one must self-brand themselves to appear more desirable. In the hunt to achieve maximum desirability many individuals have been left with a completely redefined view on intimacy. Straying further away from traditional ideas, modern daters are increasingly viewing

intimacy as a means of satisfying desire. And, with the number of dating apps available, this has become easier and more rapid, ultimately leading to the development of a new and pervasive 'hook-up' culture. Although Bauman's (2003) theory of 'liquid love' can still be debated as the 'digital revolution' continues to unfold, it is undeniable that the increased use of dating apps has led to numerous changes in modern dating and a redefined outlook on intimacy

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