



Article

Liquid love? Dating apps, sex, relationships and the digital transformation of intimacy

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Abstract

In *Liquid Love* Zygmunt Bauman argued that the solidity and security once provided by life-long partnerships has been 'liquefied' by rampant individualisation and technological change. He believes internet dating is symptomatic of social and technological change that transforms modern courtship into a type of commodified game. This article explores the experiences of users of digital dating and hook-up applications (or 'apps') in order to assess the extent to which a digital transformation of intimacy might be under way. It examines the different affordances provided by dating apps, and whether users feel the technology has influenced their sexual practices and views on long-term relationships, monogamy and other romantic ideals. This study shows that dating apps are intermediaries through which individuals engage in strategic performances in pursuit of love, sex and intimacy. Ultimately, this article contends that some accounts of dating apps and modern romantic practices are too pessimistic, and downplay the positives of 'networked intimacy'.

Keywords

Courtship, dating apps, hook-up apps, relationships, sexual behaviour, social media.

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A 'digital revolution' is under way with regard to dating, courtship and modern romance. Unlike previous generations, single adults today, particularly those living in large metropolitan centres, have a seemingly endless variety of potential romantic and sexual partners available through the social networks and algorithms of their smartphones. Indeed, the internet has become a powerful 'social intermediary'. It has partially displaced the role of traditional 'matchmakers', such as family, friends and community leaders, as well as the matchmaking function once commonly performed by classified 'lonely-hearts' columns and dating agencies (Ansari, 2015; Quiroz, 2013; Slater, 2013). Traditional sites and locales for meeting singles, including schools, universities, pubs, clubs and workplaces, have also been partially displaced, with the internet increasingly allowing people to meet and form relationships with people with whom they have no previous social ties (Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012). Data from the Pew Research Centre in the United States shows that 15% of American adults have used online dating sites or mobile dating applications (henceforth 'dating apps') with this usage steadily increasing each year (see Smith, 2016). The trend is even higher among same-sex couples, with approximately 70% having met their partner online rather than through a face-to-face introduction (Ansari, 2015; Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012: 530). Dating websites and apps are now commonly seen as a socially acceptable and advantageous means of meeting a long-term partner (see Smith and Anderson, 2016).

Mobile dating apps are particularly important to modern courtship and sexual activity, as they offer experiences that are distinct from those provided by dating websites. Indeed, the increased usage of dating and hook-up apps, as opposed to dating websites, lies in the their tactile functionality and mobility. Popular dating apps like Tinder, and its many clones, use a photo-driven design tailored for smartphones. Users are shown photos of nearby individuals and can swipe right to 'like' and left to 'dislike', with mutual right swipes resulting in a 'match' and the ability to begin a conversation. According to two of the founders of Tinder, Sean Rad and Justin Mateen, the app was designed to challenge and supplant online dating websites by offering a more fluid experience (Stampler, 2014). Tinder was designed to 'take the stress out of dating', being a type of 'game' that requires less time and emotional investment to play (Stampler, 2014). This design philosophy is reflected in the features of the software, where people's profiles are similar to a deck of playing cards, and love, sex and intimacy are the stakes of the game. Of course the burgeoning popularity of dating apps raises questions regarding their influence on courtship practices and coupling, and whether they might also affect expectations and desires.

In *Liquid Love*, Zygmunt Bauman (2003, see also 2012) argued that the twin forces of individualisation and social change have 'liquefied' the solidity and security once provided by romantic partnerships and family structures. Bauman (2003) specifically identifies 'computer-dating' as symptomatic of what he calls 'liquid love', arguing that it has transformed romance and courtship into a type of entertainment where users can date 'secure in the knowledge they can always return to the marketplace for another bout of shopping' (2003: 65). Implicit in Bauman's ideas is the suggestion that life-long monogamous partnerships are being eroded by the proliferation of extensive 'networks' of romantic possibility (Bauman, 2003: xii).

This article seeks to explore whether dating apps are facilitating 'liquid love' by examining the influences and augmentation provided by digital dating apps. In particular, this investigation explores the extent to which the networks of romantic possibility offered by

dating apps may be eroding traditional ideals of monogamy, commitment and the notion of romantic love. As there is to date limited research specifically on dating apps, this study aims to be an exploratory investigation that identifies the various affordances and transformations provided by the technologies, with the intent of also highlighting areas in need of further research. What follows is a brief review of the existing literature and the study's methodology, and then a more in-depth exploration of emerging patterns of usage and their potential social consequences.

Literature review

Several bodies of literature inform this investigation. The first is the sociological research on love, relationships and sexuality. As has been documented by Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992), throughout the 20th century, social change and an increased emphasis on equality and self-discovery drove a 'sexual revolution'. Technological developments in contraception freed sex from its intrinsic relationship to reproduction. Likewise, feminism drove a radical transformation of the personal sphere. Giddens (1992) argues that relationships in late modernity are increasingly reflective of the 'pure relationship', an ideal type where a relationship is based on sexual and emotional equality and continues only for as long as both parties derive mutual satisfaction. According to Giddens (1992), the development of a pure relationship is related to further changes in the personal sphere, especially the emergence of 'plastic sexuality' and 'confluent love'. Plastic sexuality refers to the greater sexual freedoms provided by modern societies. Giddens (1992: 2) states:

Plastic sexuality can be moulded as a trait of personality and thus is intrinsically bound up with the self. At the same time – in principle – it frees sexuality from the rule of the phallus from the overweening importance of male sexual experience.

Confluent love, on the other hand, refers to love that is active and contingent, and is distinct from the ideal of 'romantic love' in that it is not seen as something that is 'forever after' but lasts for as long as both remain invested in the relationship. Pure relationships do, then, offer the potential for partnerships which prize intimacy and happiness above other social or cultural concerns; albeit these relationships are potentially less durable due to their 'contingent' nature.

The idea that relationships in the modern world are less durable than those of previous generations has also been explored in the work of Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002). In *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that marriage and family life have become more 'flimsy' due to rapidly changing social values. Unlike previous generations, people today are confronted with an endless series of choices as part of constructing, adjusting, and developing the unions they form with others. They suggest that there is a slight unravelling in the bonds of romantic couple relationships because people are seemingly aware that their partnerships often do not last and are therefore wary of investing too much into them. This 'risk aversion' leads people to invest more in themselves, and in a range of other relationships, especially friendships. Despite an increasing tendency towards individualisation, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim believe that people still idealise love. Throughout one's life-course,

relationships begin, dissolve and begin again in an endless pursuit of true love and fulfilment (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002).

As noted earlier, Bauman (2003) believes computer dating is symptomatic of 'liquid love'. His thesis concerns the frailty of human bonds in an age of rampant individualisation, consumerism, and rapid social and technological change. Bauman (2003) argues that virtual relationships are increasingly supplanting more fixed and inert 'real' relationships, and that the widespread usage of mediated communication is leading individuals to think more of transient connections than life-long partnerships. Dating is being transformed into a recreational activity, where people are seen as largely disposable as one can always 'press delete' (Bauman, 2003: 65). These themes are present in the more recent work of Sherry Turkle (2011), who, in *Alone Together*, argues that 'these days insecure in our relationship and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and to protect us from them at the same time' (2011: xii).

Academic studies specifically on online and mobile dating approach the topic from a number of angles. Ellison et al. (2006: 430) found that online dating profiles are created to represent an ideal-self, yet in the face of imminent offline interaction 'individuals had to balance their desire for self-promotion with their need for accurate self-presentation'. Couch and Liamputtong (2008) report that their participants strategically 'filtered' out whom to meet face-to-face by scrutinising interactions and images to assess the authenticity of their potential partners before engaging in sexual activities. As a result, some studies have found that sexual networks are expanded through the use of digital technology, leading to an increase in the number of sexual partners and casual encounters, while others have noted that many individuals use this technology with the intention of finding a long-term partner or 'soul mate' (see Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008; Couch and Liamputtong, 2008; Goluboff, 2015; Meenagh, 2015). The research literature shows that these dating intermediaries have been especially important in increasing the number of romantic possibilities for 'thin markets', such as gays, lesbians and middle-aged heterosexuals (see Blackwell et al., 2015; Race, 2015; Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012).

Despite the recent academic attention paid to online dating, there are several areas in need of further development. There is to date very little literature on dating apps as a distinct social phenomenon, with much of the literature focusing instead on dating websites and the use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to pursue romantic and sexual opportunities. Moreover, much of the literature has focused on risk and sexual health matters (Landovitz et al., 2012; Prestage et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2012), and comes more from a psychological or health studies perspective than a sociological paradigm. As such, the following discussion seeks to address some of the gaps in the academic literature by exploring the experiences and perspectives of users through sociological theories on networks, technology and the micro-politics of everyday interaction. Specifically, this study seeks to highlight how users feel these technologies might have impacted social constructions and ideals, such as commitments to monogamy and long-term relationships.

Methodology and sample

This is a mixed-methods investigation consisting of an online survey and in-depth interviews. The online survey was initially broadcast via the Facebook and Twitter accounts

of the authors to their network connections (an initial audience of over 4000 people). The invitation was then subsequently ‘shared’ and ‘re-tweeted’ by willing network connections, and so on, in a ‘snowballing’ fashion. While the ‘snowball method’ can have epistemological limitations with regard to generating statistically significant representative samples, the research method is nevertheless capable of collecting data indicative of broader social patterns and trends, especially when the survey reaches a broad cohort of participants (see Atkinson and Flint, 2003; Denscombe, 2010: 37; Neuman, 2011: 268–9).

The Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the University of Sydney gave approval to the project (Project No: 2015/716) in October 2015. This study’s information statement, along with a control question, made it clear that only ‘present and past users of dating and/or hook-up applications’ were able to complete the survey, and that their privacy would be protected. The survey consisted of a combination of open-ended, multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions and took approximately 20–25 minutes to complete. Conducted between October 2015 and January 2016, the survey had a total of 365 respondents, of whom most, but not all, answered all questions.

Detailed demographic information was collected from the research participants. Approximately 80% of the respondents were Australian, but 14 other nationalities were also represented in the survey data. With regard to gender identification, 58% identified as female, 40% as male, 0.5% as transgender, 0.5% as ‘other’ and 0.5% ‘prefer not to say’. The sexuality of the participants varied, with approximately 73% identifying as ‘heterosexual’, 13.5% as ‘gay or lesbian’, 8% as ‘bisexual’, 1% as ‘asexual’ and 3% ‘as not belonging to any of these categories’. The relationship status of participants was also diverse, with 55% being ‘single/never married’, 21% in a ‘relationship but not living together’, 13% ‘married or in a domestic partnership’, 7.5% as ‘divorced or separated’, 3.5% as ‘polyamorous’. In regards to the age of the participants, 11% were 18–22 years of age, 35% were 23–7 (the largest cluster), 25% were 28–32 (the second largest cluster), 18% were 33–7, 2.5% were 38–42, 8% were 42–9, and 1% were 50+. The socioeconomic status (SES) of participants was also sought through a series of questions on income, education and occupation, with most respondents providing responses that classified them as belonging to the broad ‘middle/upper middle SES’ grouping, with the ‘average’ participant being a university-educated, white-collar professional in the early stages of their career.

Survey participants could self-select to participate in a follow-up in-depth, semi-structured interview by sending an email to an account exclusively established for the investigation. The first six individuals to express interest in participating in an in-depth interview were selected to take part in the study. The interviewees included three women and three men aged between 24 and 34. The majority of participants identified as heterosexual, with one interviewee identifying as lesbian. At the time of the interview, four persons were single, and two were in a relationship. All participants resided in Sydney, New South Wales, and their educational levels varied from undergraduate to postgraduate qualifications.

The majority of the in-depth interviews were conducted in participants’ homes in November 2015. To maintain participants’ anonymity, they were assigned pseudonyms in all transcriptions. The interviews sought to further explore issues and themes that emerged from the survey, including the different tactics used by participants in finding a

date; their opinions regarding the potential social consequences of the technology; their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with different variants of the software; and whether users felt the technology had influenced their sexual practices and/or led to stable and fulfilling relationships. It is to the views and experiences of both the interviewees and the survey participants that we now proceed.

Analysis and discussion

Is Tinder 'tearing society apart'?

One of the initial provocations for this study arose from the claims of Bauman and others regarding the flimsy nature of modern relationships, along with claims of the emergence of a technology-driven 'hook-up culture' as found in myriad opinion pieces published in mainstream newspapers or news sites, such as a widely read *New York Post* piece titled 'Tinder Is Tearing Society Apart' (Riley, 2015). However, what the data collected for this study suggest is that traditional views on dating, relationships and monogamy are still largely prevalent. At best, dating and hook-up apps could be said to augment courtship and sexual practices, while also fitting into an ensemble of social media technologies that operate as 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988) – an idea returned to below.

While survey participants used a number of different dating apps, Tinder was by far the most popular platform with 84% of survey participants having used it. OKCupid was the second most widely used dating app (used by 30%), followed by Happn (20%) and Grindr (16%) (the latter of which is targeted towards gay and bisexual men). For most users, these apps are attractive due to their ease of use and suitability for modern lifestyles. Indeed, 66% of survey respondents agreed with the proposition that these apps afford them 'a feeling of control' over their romantic and sexual encounters, while 87% believed that apps allowed them 'more opportunities to find prospective partners'.

With regard to questions exploring 'expectations of use' and 'sexual activity', 55% of the survey participants reported that they primarily use dating apps to find dates and 8% reported that they use the apps merely to seek non-sexual friendships. In contrast, only 25% of survey respondents reported that they use the apps 'primarily to find sexual encounters'. Of those survey respondents who indicated that they were in a relationship, 10% said that they had used the technology to engage in a sexual affair, with a subsequent question revealing that most felt that they would not have 'cheated' on their partners had the apps not made it so easy to do so.

However, despite the small number of respondents using the technology for a sexual affair, only 14% of respondents reported that they were '*less* inclined' to seek a monogamous relationship since using dating/hook-up apps, while 72% said that they were just as inclined to seek a monogamous relationship since using these apps. Moreover, a further 14% said that they were '*more* inclined' to seek a monogamous relationship since using these apps. These are significant findings that undermine the 'Tinder is tearing society apart' thesis and arguments concerning the 'liquidity' of traditional norms and ideals, as many individuals are using the technology with the intention of finding a long-term partner.

Further survey questions sought to canvass users' feelings regarding app-enabled dating/hook-ups versus those found in a physical face-to-face environment. Asked whether they would prefer to find love via an app or in a physical environment, 61% of

participants said that they would prefer to find love via a traditional face-to-face encounter, while 38% said that they did not have a preference. Asked a similar question in relation to finding a sexual partner, 48% would prefer to find a sexual partner in a face-to-face encounter, while 42% had no preference and 11% responded that they would prefer to find a sexual partner through the use of apps. The disparity between these results is reflected in the opinions found during the interviews. Some interviewees felt uneasy about telling others in their family and friendship networks that they used dating apps, while others believed the technology is increasingly seen as a 'legitimate' means of meeting a partner (a finding supported by Pew Research data – see Smith, 2016).

Hook-ups, desire and desirability

While data collected for this study suggest that dating apps are not giving rise to a rampant hook-up culture that is supplanting monogamy or long-term relationships, both the survey responses and interviews revealed that some individuals are using the technology to engage in casual sexual encounters. Indeed, many of the interviewees believed that the apps gave them an unprecedented ability to find sexual partners without requiring them to engage in further social interaction. For example, Alice, a 34-year-old single mother, found that Tinder allowed her to control her sexual encounters in such a way that they could occur in the small timeframes in which she was free for such encounters:

I'd just write 'sex?' so that was very direct, and it seemed to work for me, and then everyone knew where they stood ... as a single parent you're so socially isolated [and] you're financially just screwed [and] it's really tough, so you're trying to see as many people in the shortest amount of space and then you're trying to use up the time that you have to yourself, which is not that often.

She found that the app allowed her to establish clear expectations and boundaries, informing sexual partners that they could not stay overnight, as she did not desire further commitment.

Alice also discussed the ways in which Tinder allowed her to get over a painful break-up not long after her child was born, and to work through feelings of rejection and feeling undesirable. She believes 'matches' on dating apps are a form of social validation regarding desirability, which could have a positive impact on one's self-esteem. She believes that this affect allowed her to engage in a satisfying sex life:

[Using Tinder to find sex] was part of my journey.... I liked the way that I could make men behave in a way that traditionally women have behaved.... I felt like I was in complete control of everything and I just wish more women could experience that and not feel bad about themselves and their bodies. So that's what the dating apps did for me.... I got my power back.

In many ways Tinder acted as a 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 1988) through which Alice could facilitate the construction and mastery of a self she longed for – desirable and sexually active – and also played a therapeutic role in helping her heal the pains that she felt due to her ex-partner leaving her. Foucault's (1988) identification of the role of 'technologies' as related to self-care through self-knowledge leading to improving or mastering the self has led to recent works that conceptualise social media technologies

similarly to technologies of the self (see Bakardjieva and Gaden, 2012; Bosch, 2011; Marichal, 2012; Owen, 2014; Sauter, 2014).

Other interview participants, while not necessarily enjoying the same level of sexual engagement as Alice, discussed the ways in which Tinder and similar apps allowed them to quantify their desirability through the number of matches they received. For instance, Alexander, a 27-year-old man who identifies as heterosexual, observed that there is a degree of vanity and superficiality at play in using these apps: 'it's based purely on your looks [so] it's quite flattering I guess if [you] get a match ... it's very vain'. Alexander's views were also reflected in the opened-ended survey questions, with many individuals mentioning both their awareness of the superficial nature of matches based on profile photos, as well as the emotional pleasure of being categorised as a desirable match by other users.

However, in the open-end survey questions, a small number of mostly male, heterosexual respondents expressed frustration regarding a lack of potential 'matches'. As one respondent commented: 'The 10% of highly attractive people fucking all the time make the rest of us feel bad', while another remarked: 'Everyone is copping a root but me' (colloquial Australian-English referring to a lack of sexual activity). In short, much like meeting in face-to-face settings, those individuals who conform to society's dominant ideals regarding attractiveness, are better positioned to exploit the affordances provided by expanding digital dating networks.

Broadening the romantic net(work)

Tinder, as a form of social media, allows for a significantly expanded social network to form. While networks facilitated by social media can be global, they tend to coalesce around geographical proximity (Westcott and Owen, 2013). This is especially the case with dating apps, where the goal of most users is to move from mediated communication to 'real-world' dating and intimacy. Amy, a 25-year-old woman who identifies as heterosexual, and who is in a relationship with a man she met on Tinder, initially used the app to find opportunities for sexual and romantic encounters from a broader social network than that of her existing friendship group. Her motivations for using Tinder were:

Probably more for hook-ups in the beginning.... It was just about meeting new people as well I guess. Not with the intention of making friends, but it was kind of just getting out and meeting different sorts of guys to the ones that I've hung out with in my social circle in the past.

While Amy admits that Tinder did eventually lead to a monogamous and fulfilling relationship, overall her experience of dating through the app was not entirely satisfying: 'if I had to say like how many good dates did I have versus how many of the bad ones I'd definitely had more average to bad ones', but that this corresponded with the nature of the platform in that Tinder was 'literally just opening like the possibilities wider'.

Alice similarly suggested that the majority of the dates she had via Tinder were less satisfying than those she had previously had as a result of dating sites like E-Harmony and RSVP, although she did have *more* dates as a result of using Tinder. Alice suggested that this disparity arose because of the purely physical attraction between Tinder users leading to a 'match', while dating sites suggested compatibility based on 'parameters not

based on simply aesthetics', which was a 'drawback' as 'being matched with someone on an aesthetic basis meant that I found people to be quite boring, or didn't connect with them maybe mentally or intellectually'. This discussion highlights that more research is needed into the role played by algorithms as romantic intermediaries.

Many of this study's participants also mentioned that dating apps allowed them to pursue multiple 'matches' simultaneously. Amy admitted to texting 'not heaps of people but probably like two or three' while actively arranging a date with another person. Likewise, Tim, a 24-year-old man who identifies as heterosexual, uses a strategy of moving conversations with matches to text messaging by telling his matches that he is planning on deleting his Tinder account:

What I've increasingly been doing is like use Tinder for a while, maybe like a period of weeks, and then like say to everyone that I've matched with 'I'm gonna delete it can I have your number?' and then I'll delete it or I'll just delete them. They'll think that you deleted it because you unmatched them but you didn't, you're still on it, but that's the way that they no longer know how often you're on it.

This strategic management of visibility hides Tim's use of the platform from his various matches, so as to conceal the fact that he is still seeking other women on the app. It is also an example of strategic 'gaming' that can take place as a result of the affordances provided by the technology. Indeed, Tim's tactical usage highlights that dating apps are both intermediaries and sites of strategic interaction. This too is an area in need of further research.

Efficiency

The broadened social network also taps into the efficiency afforded by Tinder in allowing people with busy lives to pursue partners without having to devote much extra time or energy. Alexander noted that 'it's a good way to connect people, especially in large cities in today's environment where people do you know work pretty hard'. Tim said that his use of Tinder over other apps was due to the fact that people on the app 'don't mess around' and that the mobile nature of the app – 'the fact that it's on a phone as opposed to a computer' – made it an easy-to-use platform. For Leigh, a 31-year-old lesbian, dating apps are an imperative technology for navigating the contemporary dating scene. The key benefits for Leigh concern choice, efficiency and control. As someone with a busy life, Leigh values being able to find a potential partner with a minimum of effort. When asked whether she would prefer to meet a new romantic partner via the use of an app or in a more traditional 'chance' encounter she responded: 'It doesn't matter any more.... I find apps easier.... It's more time-efficient.' She also suggests that people who are not using the apps are doing themselves a disservice:

I think it limits their dating opportunities.... I think dating via applications is so accessible and so easily done with not as much effort required [and] those people are expending unnecessary effort to go to bars when they could just do it in bed at night or sitting on the couch watching TV.

Leigh's views on the benefits of dating apps were also reflected in the survey data. As was noted above, 66% of respondents agreed with the statement 'mobile dating apps allow me to control my romantic and/or sexual encounters'.

Tinder, like other social media platforms, affords mutual visibility and can thus be conceptualised as an architecture of social surveillance (Westcott and Owen, 2013). A period of conversation facilitated through the use of Tinder allows some users to engage in a process of building trust prior to meeting in person. Amy expressed a disdain for people who used the app to chat to people ‘for weeks at a time’ without then moving into an in person meeting: ‘I was, like, I’ll chat to you for you know a week if that means that I’m gonna meet you in person, because otherwise it just seemed like such a waste of time.’ Leigh felt that dates arising from apps were:

generally more compatible because I generally won’t go on dates with people that aren’t compatible on more than [just] a physical level. I think the difference between meeting someone in real life and meeting someone online is that you can get a sense of who they are and what they’re about online prior to meeting them.

Self-commodification and self-branding

Users also spoke of competences of use, and especially in relation to practices of self-branding. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have been analysed in terms of user practices of self-branding and the commodification of the self (Bauman, 2007; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013), while pre-internet dating advertisements have also been analysed in terms of Giddens’ (1991) concerns regarding self-commodification and the interpolation of market dynamics in practices of self-construction (Coupland, 1996). Similarly participants in this study had a commodified understanding of the self. They acknowledged the need to engage in self-branding activities to market themselves as desirable commodities in a crowded relationship marketplace – a process of self-stylisation for self-transformation (Foucault, 1988).

For example, Tim, a 24-year-old heterosexual, discussed the ways in which the creation of a Tinder profile required – in his estimation – various techniques and competences that would make the profile stand out and exhibit the user as desirable. Tim boasted of helping a friend to redesign his Tinder profile because it was not receiving any interest from prospective partners:

He’s in my student housing and he’s like ‘Man, I don’t I don’t have much success on Tinder.’ So I ask ‘Can I look at your profile and can I change it for you?’ So I get him a different picture and I make his profile his ‘buyer’ – he didn’t have a buyer. I made his profile a buyer, and said ‘You can always go back’ and it blew up! It was almost like in the movies.

Tim’s use of the term ‘buyer’ denotes a sales technique designed to encourage other Tinder users to ‘buy’ the profile. This is an explicit recognition of self-branding techniques and supports Bauman’s (2007: 6) arguments on the commodification of identity.

Similarly, Josh, a 28-year-old heterosexual, discussed his amusement or disdain on encountering other people’s profiles that he felt were lacking in the competences required for the successful presentation of self on Tinder:

Whenever I use it I just have so much fun laughing at how some people think some things are a good idea ... things like ... can I just say it bluntly? I don’t mean to be rude but if you’re fat you have head shots where you sought of turn so you get like a jawline. If you’re fit but ugly

you have like wide shots, or at the beach with sunglasses and a hat pulled down. If you're fat and ugly you hide in a group shot.

Alice also discussed the issue of selecting a suitable profile photo: 'you try and pick the best photos of you ... we've all got this idea of ourselves and it is marketing'.

Amy felt the need to engage in the self-branding technique of 'edited authenticity' (Marwick, 2013) when creating her Tinder profile so as to not exclude herself from potential partners:

One strategy for me was probably like making a conscious decision not to have any extra information. From a strategic sort of point of view the more I say about myself on the profile the more likely I am to alienate certain people who I might actually click with but who are saying 'She likes this band? Well I hate that band so she can fuck off.' And then I guess a couple of my photos I wanted them to have friends in them so you could see that I had friends and I wasn't you know a loner, and also didn't wanna have any selfies because I wanted them to reflect that I hopefully wasn't, you know, super vain or caught up in appearances too much.

Similarly, Alexander observed that his profile was 'brief, so I wouldn't say it's, you know, a complete picture of who I am as a person, but that's fine too, it doesn't have to be ... that's why you're supposed to meet up and have a conversation I guess.'

Conclusion

The exploratory findings offered by this study suggest that users of dating apps view them as welcome intermediaries in the search for companionship, love, sex and intimacy. Unlike the argument advanced by Bauman, dating apps and internet dating more broadly are not 'liquefying' ideals like romantic love, monogamy or a commitment to longer-term relationship. Indeed, the data suggest that a majority of individuals continue to value and seek these social phenomena, and are merely using the technology as a means to pursue meaningful partnerships. This study's participants felt they have more romantic and relationship possibilities than previous generations, and that the technologies give them greater agency with regard to pursuing and meeting potential lovers and companions. The concept of 'networked individualism' (Rainie and Wellman, 2012) is readily applicable to studies of app-enabled dating/hook-up practices as individuals become responsible for, and exercise control over, their life-chances within a broadened social network environment. For those living in urban areas, their smartphones are allowing them access to an extensive network of romantic possibilities. Only with time will we see whether this seductive network of romantic possibility has a gradual cultural influence on people's desire to commit to long-term monogamous relationships – an area for future longitudinal research.

What is clear is that not everyone is deriving the same experiences from the technology. As noted above, a small number of survey participants felt like they were missing out on intimate experiences as it was 'only the attractive people' who were able to harness the full spectrum of possibilities offered by the network. Likewise, some participants indicated that they felt that the interactions afforded by the technology were somewhat superficial in that they were based mostly on profile photos, which could not provide a fair account of a

person's personality. Others were concerned that dating apps reduced people to commodities in a marketplace of romantic options and that exchanges were too strategic. And yet these same concerns can clearly be applied to 'real-world' sites of seduction and courtship, as many strangers begin a conversation based solely on physical attraction and subsequently engage in the strategic 'presentation of self' to convey a desirable impression (Ansari, 2015; Goffman, 1959).

Despite concerns about strategic and inauthentic behaviour, the majority of this study's participants believed that the technology merely enhanced their desires and abilities to find a date or suitable life partner. Indeed, dating apps provide a 'network of intimacy' that dramatically enhances the user's social capital and further enhances what Giddens called 'plastic sexuality'. These networks of romantic possibility enhance a person's capacity to find a partner with whom to build a mutually fulfilling relationship and continue the trend towards the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1991). Networked intimacy is, then, about flirting, courtship and the ongoing search for love and fulfilment via dating apps and smartphones. It brings new freedoms, opportunities and pleasures, as well as old and new anxieties about risk, self-image and love.

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