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Dating apps: towards post-romantic love in digital societies

Carolina Bandinelli

Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, School of Creative Arts Performance and Visual Culture, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to studies of implicit cultural policy in platformised societies by offering an empirical study of dating apps and the ways in which they are operating a digital enclosure of the practice of dating. Reflecting on a qualitative research project conducted in different phases from 2017 to 2021, I analyse subjective experiences of dating apps in the aim of deciphering some traits of digital culture of love's structure of feeling. I focus on the role played by the algorithm as a libidinal object invested with merit and blame, and capable of (re)producing a libidinal economy within the app itself. This is characterised by the gamified alternation of validation and humiliation, which gives the subject the possibility to deal with these feelings in the de-personalised virtual space of the app. Engaging with the app, the subject aspires to foster a careless conduct, in which moral codes traditionally associated with personhood are lifted. I argue that the policies implicit within the logic and agency of dating apps shape the techno-utopia of post-romantic love: a risk free, painless and efficient interaction, deprived of the complications of embodied romance.

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Introduction

In *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (A Lover's Discourse), published in 1977, Roland Barthes reflects on the love letter and how it puts the sender and receiver in a specific position, enthralling a reaction that, in its turn, produces an imaginary about what is a love relation. The love letter, Barthes explains, joins two images, the 'I' of the lover, and the 'you' of the beloved, and in so doing it 'enjoins the other to reply' (Barthes 2001). The kind of love that the love letter (re)produces is romantic love, one that demands to be reciprocated, lest the metaphorical (or actual) death of the lover – the young Werther dies of unreciprocated love, like many of his fellow romantic characters. This fragment, along with many others in the book, casts light on the close entanglement of love as a subjective experience and the technologies that organise, shape, and model the different aspects of it, enabling certain thoughts and actions while foreclosing others. Another example is the phone call which, Barthes points out, produces a peculiar temporality of waiting that nails the lover down to its fatal identity as 'the one who waits', (re)producing an ideal type of the lover as someone who is at the mercy of the beloved's will, and that cannot but hope for its fate.

This analysis unveils both the letter and the phone as technologies that provide love with a specific context, co-constituting the identity of the lover. Technologies, in this broad sense, are inherently imbricated and co-constitutive of culture and of society, there is no space for cultural or technological determinism. This also means, importantly, that technologies are always part of a web

CONTACT Carolina Bandinelli  carolina.bandinelli@warwick.ac.uk  Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, School of Creative Arts Performance and Visual Culture, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7HS, UK

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of relations of power and resistance. They reflect and emerge out of existing socioeconomic structures, and are part of the individual's lifeworld. Foucault's definition of technologies of power, and technologies of the self is helpful to capture this ambivalence. Whereas the first of these 'determine[s] the conduct of individuals and submit[s] them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject,' the second 'permit[s] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and soul, thought, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Foucault et al. 1988, 18). Analysing love through its technologies is a way to focus on the contingent principles that govern the culture of love, constituting the subjectivity of lovers and affecting them (D'Aoust 2013). Such an endeavour appears to be particularly meaningful now, when in less than two decades dating apps, have profoundly transformed the culture of love.

While 'computer love' has a long story (see, for instance, Hicks 2016) it is to dating apps that we own the normalisation of what was previously associated with social stigma (Gibbs, Ellison, and Lai 2010; Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). Scholars have talked about a 'seismic shift' (Kavka 2021) and the expression seems to be not too hyperbolic. Global dating app users rose from 198.6 million in 2015 to 250 million in 2021, at the moment of writing, dating app industry is worth approximately \$3.06 billion, with a predicted growth of \$10.87 billion in 2026 (Curry 2022). Number aside, what has happened is that meeting someone online has become quite an average thing to do, especially for gen Z and millennials living in urban contexts, for whom, as we'll see, dating apps are often considered the 'default opinion'.

A Foucauldian perspective on dating apps, and platforms in general, as technologies of power and of the self, is helpful to appreciate the extent to which they operate as agents of 'implicit cultural policies', i.e. policies that impact on culture but are not defined as such. In the words of Jeremy Ahearne, the study of implicit cultural policy has the capacity to reach beyond a narrow focus on governmental institutions, to involve 'any political strategy that looks to work on the culture of the territory over which it presides' (Ahearne 2004, 112–116). A study of cultural policy in digital societies would map how platforms are (re) shaping the various 'territories' they are taking ownership of e.g. health, work, education, and, in the case of this article, love. In this respect, any study on digital culture is always already a study on cultural policy broadly defined. In a sense, it is a matter of making explicit, and explicitly tackling, the role of platforms as cultural policy agents in so far as they (re)organise social practices, prescribe political agendas and economic models, and trigger affective experiences (see, for instance Bucher 2017).

Whereas apps are typically promoted as 'neutral tools' that allegedly allow users to 'fix' social and personal problems, it has been repeatedly argued (notably by Morozov 2013) that this solutionistic rhetoric works as an ideological device concealing platforms' agency and the hegemonic role of their owners, recently defined as 'digital lords' (Brevini and Swiatek 2020) governing over entire domains of life in what some have described as 'digital feudalism' (Mazzucato 2019), a system in which profit is achieved through ownership of virtual spaces and the surplus value produced by users' free labour (Terranova 2000). Already in the early 2000's, Ahearne located implicit cultural policies in the (hidden) work of digital technologies; he wrote that scholars will have to look at 'hidden software codes, recording of web usage and the exploitation of the knowledge thereby acquired within large economies of scale (Ahearne 2004, 144).

In this article, I contribute to the study of digital cultural policy by analysing the ways in which dating apps (re)mediate, organise, and (re)produce a certain culture of love. I take dating apps as a case study and draw on the findings of a small scale qualitative research to explore how people engage with them, negotiating, resisting or following their algorithmic injunctions. I argue that dating apps offer an enclosed digital space to rehearse the dramas of contemporary love in a desensitising manner. They do so by providing an algorithmic structure to blame for the failure of love, while giving access to the position of the evaluator and the automatic reproduction of validation and humiliation. The structure of feeling that emerges out of digital love is marked by the

aspiration to care less, and the utopia of a love encounter that can be as efficient as painless. At stake there is a post-romantic kind of love that can exist within the space of the app.

This article is structured as follows. To begin with, I locate the analysis of dating apps in the context of the platformisation of culture. In doing so, I review existing literature to highlight the tensions between power and resistance in the digital industry of love. Then, I offer a brief methodological note. After that, I proceed to the empirical part of the article, which is divided in two sections. In the first one, I focus on participants' perception of dating apps as both unavoidable and inefficient. In the second one, I analyse the dynamics of validation and humiliation that is central to the libidinal economy of the app. To conclude, I draw attention to carelessness and the quest for painless efficiency as the emerging traits of digital cultures of love.

Power and resistance in the digital industry of love

The rise of dating apps is part of the wider process of platformisation of life (Van Dijck 2014; Van Dijck, Poell, and Waal 2018) and is marked by issues of cultural commodification and concentration of capital (Srnicek 2016; Zuboff 2019). Looking at the history of dating apps, as well as at their business model, material relations of power reveal themselves at a first glance. The major players in the sector (i.e. Tinder, Hinge, Bumble) are all part of one of the biggest tech conglomerate, the IAC Match Group, which owns 45 dating sites, and has been leading the market of online dating since its inception in the late 90's (Bown 2022). The business model of dating apps is that of value creation in digital feudalism (Mazzuccato 2019) and relies on tech platforms' exploitation of personal data and relationships, what Zuboff's (2019) calls the 'behavioural surplus'. Dating apps participate in data markets, gathering and commodifying users' data (Albury et. al. 2017). Moreover, the algorithms that apps deploy are obscure to most, yet they deeply influence what we may or may not encounter and desire, reproducing at the level of love what media scholars identified as 'cyberbalkanization', i.e. the fragmentation of the internet into closed groups, usually referred to as filter bubbles (Bown 2022).

Structures of power are visible also in the social and cultural genealogy of dating apps. Most apps (of dating and non) were funded in Silicon Valley, in a socio-economic environment marked by a culture that, despite the promotional claims of democracy, is in fact based on strict mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion which benefit certain categories, mostly white middle class males, while marginalising others, notably women and ethnic minorities (Marwick 2015). It should not come as a surprise that sexist, racist cultural codes have been translated into mainstream's dating apps affordances (see, for instance, Ranzini and Rosenbaum 2020; Zhou 2022; Bivens and Hoque 2018; MacLeod and McArthur 2019; Currington Vaughan and Lundquist Hickes 2021). Apps replicate the world vision of their creators, and who builds and benefits from the means of production is at the core of digital forms of extractivism.

On the other hand, it has also been noticed how dating apps have given people with a non mainstream sexual orientation (in terms of gender, sexual preferences, kinks, etc.) a space where to meet each other. This applies chiefly to apps addressed to LGBTQ+ and queer publics, or to sexual subcultures. In this regard, we can refer to Grindr which, released in 2019, has digitalised the practice of cruising offering a socially safe space to gay communities (e.g. Ahlm 2016). To further problematise any univocal claim on the oppressive nature of dating apps (and apps in general) we need to consider the social context in which they operate. Chan's (2021) monograph on the politics of dating apps in China, for instance, highlights the extent to which they can be empowering for women and sexual minorities, *vis a vis* the politics of central government; while Bryan (2019) elaborates on the role of gay 'hook up apps' like Grindr and Scruff in providing opportunities for expression to LGBT counterpublics in Uganda. These are only two examples, but they are helpful to underline the impossibility of making universal claims.

No doubt big tech conglomerates profit from the datafication of love, sex and intimacy. The digital industry of love represents an unprecedented subsumption of love within a market logic. At the same time, to survive it needs to intercept people's desires, to offer means that resonate with the

necessity to face, negotiate, obey or refuse existing injunctions and tackle current dilemmas. To reduce this to false consciousness would obliterate the space of the subject's agency. Hence, while dating apps are produced within a certain web of power and ideological apparatuses, which they, on their turn, re-produce, they are also used in ways that are not necessarily consistent with these premises, or not always. They provide people with pre-coded affordances which allow some actions and exclude others. More or less implicitly, they operate as cultural agents that shape what people (can) do and (are encouraged to) think. All the same, people use them in ways that may not be obvious, and that, to an extent, feedback into the code itself, or lead to new products and services to enter the market.

For example, the sexism of many Tinder's interactions – denounced mostly by women and reported in numerous mainstream media outlets, e.g. the very popular article on the Dating Apocalypse published in 2015 by Vanity Fair (Sales 2015) – has created the space for Bumble to be launched. Bumble, a self-declared 'feminist app' represents the attempt to code an idea of 'women's empowerment' within the affordance of a dating app. Or, to put it differently, to establish, by means of affordances, a series of policies that disincentivise sexist behaviours. While the actual impact of this may be debatable, and we can speculate on what happens to 'feminism' once it is digitally coded (MacLeod and McArthur 2019), it nonetheless signals a dialogue and process of translation and communication between existing romantic and political cultures and the digital business of love. Diversity in the final product, anyways, does not correspond to diversity in ownership; as mentioned earlier, Tinder and Bumble are part of the same monopolistic company.

That love is something which capital profits from is certainly not new in itself. In fact, the culture industry has profited from the commodification of romance since its very inception. According to Illouz (2008), the production and consumption of the 'romantic utopia' has provided the blueprint of capitalist's commodification of culture (and of the self). More recently, Kavka (2021) and Bown (2022) have both suggested that 'love' may be the very foundation of the digital culture industry. Kavka notices how algorithmic 'matching' – the inner mechanism of (most) online dating sites and dating apps – is in fact at the heart of digital cultural consumption. What platforms like Youtube, Netflix, or Spotify do is precisely that of 'matching' you with cultural products that their algorithm thinks you may like. At stake there is a computational idea of compatibility that is performative in itself (Kavka 2021).

In this article, I maintain the structural analyses briefly discussed above but I shift the focus on the psychic life of the subject (Scharff 2016; Bandinelli 2020) by means of an empirical analysis of how people relate to dating apps' algorithmic matching. What I dwell on is the subjective experience of dating apps, how individuals feel acted upon by them, and what operations they do with them. At stake there is an approach that seeks to investigate how media and cultural phenomena, with their associated economic and political structures, play out at the level of the self. Such an approach takes into account the intimate relationship that people establish with dating apps, and resonates with explorations of media affects and emotions (see Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013) and more specifically on 'algorithmic imaginaries' (Bucher 2017; Lupinacci 2021), the way they shape our vision of the world, and of ourselves.

Methodological note

What follows draws on a small scale qualitative study comprising of 35 open ended recorded interviews and 4 recorded focus groups conducted in 2021 as part of a wider fieldwork on digital love that began in 2017 and comprises of over 70 interviews and 9 focus groups, as well as multiple informal interactions. Participants are mostly well educated people aged from 18 to 40, living in London and the Midlands; but some interviewees are from other parts of the UK, and from Italy. While a few (2021) come from working class families, and are occupied in low skills jobs, the vast majority are from a middle class background, currently students or cognitive workers. While this is not a comparative research but rather one that look at the similarities of the experiences of

participants (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2008), it is important to flag up the relative homogeneity of the sample

The majority of participants are from a white ethnic background, however the sample includes people of diverse ethnicities. In terms of gender and sexual orientation, it has to be noted that the most interviewees are heterosexual or queer women, with a few queer or gay men, and a striking minority of straight males (2 out of 35). These data are corroborated with fieldwork observations and interviews with heterosexual men, yet the voices that compose this contribution are mostly those of female and queer publics. The (relative) homogeneity of the sample is a good reminder that no research can be omni comprehensive, and each intellectual endeavour is situated between the reach and experience of the author and (in the case of qualitative empirical study) the participants.

While this is not the space where to engage in an exhaustive discussion of the relationship between love, sex, and gender, I also want to flag up that this self-selected sample is indicative of a disposition on the side of subjects living certain identities to speak out and share their experience. This is reflected also in the academic circles, where queer and feminist scholars have been the most concerned with the topics of love and sexuality. It may be because sex and love have been *the* issue for all of those that do not embody a hegemonic masculinity, and thus find themselves in the position of the other who wonders about what those carrying the universalised identity of cis-gender heterosexual male can only take for granted. For this reason, a study on love and sex from a cultural studies perspective cannot but emerge also as a gendered and feminist undertake. Thus, while I do not theorise on gender and sexual identities, I account for them in the information about participants. All of them have been pseudonymised, and pronouns are used according to their expressed preference.

The feminist nature of this work is engrained also in its epistemological assumptions. When we talk about love, sex, emotions and feeling, the neutrality of the interviewer is inevitably (and happily) lost, to leave space for reciprocated sharing, intimate communication, and co-creation of knowledge (Oakley 1981; Skeggs 1995; McRobbie 1982). Recognising the value of small scale qualitative studies, this research does not aim at proposing an universal truth, but rather attempts at deciphering and narrating a possible story that emerges from deep conversations with participants, and the way they resonate with theoretical understandings.

Importantly, in this context truth is not an objective outcome, but rather a discursive construct (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Yet, one that resonates with the readers and listeners, and that can open up spaces for new questions and thoughts. Truth becomes an ethical and political matter, instead of an ontological one. The ethics of this paper is to give space to the voices of those who spoke to us, and to allow the researchers to find and produce knowledge about the (dis)satisfaction of our societies, in the hope of contributing to our understanding of what keeps us so attached to certain habits, thoughts and practices, even when – or mostly when – we do not believe or understand them.

The digital enclosure of dating

Dating apps can be defined as digital spaces that offer a specific context for experiencing the potentiality, thus fear and desire, of having a sexual or romantic encounter. Dating apps remediate the activity of 'looking for the one' (or the many), an initial (preliminary, in fact) stage of love that has to do with meeting and matching. Kavka (2022) observes that matching is never a random occurrence, but rather relies on some (however enigmatic) principles, generally identified with a kind of 'fate' ('we were meant to be together' say lovers, in retrospect). Digital technology has allegedly acquired a kind of mastery of this enigma thanks to algorithmic mathematics. Or at least this is what is implied in dating apps' reflexive narratives. One the most eloquent in this regard is E-Harmony's, which claims to have found 'The Brain Behind The Butterfly'. OK Cupid's founder's Christian Rutter expands on this matter in a Ted Ed video in which he joyfully describes the app's algorithm as a 'surprisingly simple... step by step way to solve a problem' made of just 'some addition, multiplication, a little bit of square

roots' (Rutter 2013). Tinder' tagline 'Match Chat Date' replicates this procedural notion of love, and the idea that romantic encounters can be brought down to simple steps.

It is quite easy to view these narratives in light of the ideology of 'technological solutionism', a paradigm that interprets society as something to be 'fixed', and thus creates the space for (marketable) solutions to arise (Morozov 2013). This is what drives 'innovation' in the digital industry in general, and in the digital business of love in particular. Dating apps' solution is to maximise access to a pool of strangers, offering a form of ready-made social capital (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022) and a set of functionalities (geolocalisation, swiping, liking etc.) to connect with them. Different apps have different affordances and structures, OK Cupid asks questions to collect data and offer a match, Tinder lets you see those within a certain radius and give very few information about them, E-Harmony has a matching system based on statistics, and so on, but conceptually they all claim to solve the same problem.

In my fieldwork, I explored how this solutionist ideology is decoded and experienced by dating apps' users. Most of the people I talked to during the research, especially in its latest phase, and surely during and after Covid, do not perceive dating apps as straightforward solutions, but rather as default options which are as unavoidable as inefficient¹. Hence the mismatch between the alleged efficiency of the apps and the experience of most users, the collective attempt to 'make dating apps work'. People are vocal in criticising dating apps, they are suspicious of the algorithm or simply let down by it. At the same time they try to rectify this situation, by changing app, changing attitudes, changing parameters.

This is how Mary, a woman in her early thirties who has been on dating apps in different countries including Russia, Hong Kong, Armenia and the UK, reflects on her motivation for using them:

I am not even sure where you would meet people otherwise. Outside of apps. Especially reaching the age of 25 ... all my friends have gone on and gone into serious relationships and having children. I feel like, I am 32 and everyone is married at this point ... You ask people, can you introduce me to someone? They say, oh I don't know if I have any single friends! (Mary, heterosexual, Tinder, Hinge)

Andrea, a woman the same age of Mary, based in London, considers dating apps 'almost inevitable' because:

When I go out with friends, I want to stay with them, and I don't talk to other people. When I was younger the whole point was to go out and hook up with someone, but now when I go out I do it to stay with my friends, it is rare to meet somebody new. (Andrea, heterosexual, Hinge)

Marisa, in her forties, based in London too, is frustrated with dating apps because 'it is impossible to have meaningful conversation' but nonetheless considers them 'the only way to go' (Marisa, heterosexual, Tinder). Chiara, a few years younger than Marisa, during a conversation in a cocktail bar in South East London, expressed all her discontent 'it is so exhausting, I need to quit' but laconically remarked that: 'I wouldn't know how to meet people otherwise' (Chiara, heteroflexible, Hinge).

This sense of inevitability accelerated during Covid lockdowns, when dating apps recorded a dramatic surge in downloads (Statista 2022; Nolsoe 2020) Yet, the tendency towards the digitalisation of dating was in place well before the pandemic. US based studies have reported that '[t]he traditional system of dating, mediated by friends and family', was surpassed by internet dating already in 2013 (Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen 2019, 17753). What is striking is the affirmed difficulty to meet people otherwise, either because they are already in a relationship, or because it is no longer fashionable to talk to strangers in a café or pub. Arguably, the very diffusion of dating apps has performatively contributed to make it awkward or unlikely to approach or be approached in embodied public spaces. The platformisation of dating has *de facto* gained ownership of an activity which previously was organically intertwined with other social activities (work, leisure, etc). In other terms, dating apps have created an ad-hoc digital space that subsumes and condenses the processes of meeting and matching, coding them into specific affordances and enclosing them within the app. This gives an idea of the extent to which platforms have been shaping the culture of dating, while claiming to be only 'tools'.

It's not you, it's not me, it's the algorithm

Perceived as unavoidable, dating apps are likely to cause a degree of frustration because more often than not they do not live up to their less than humble promise to fix the messiness of love. Virtually everyone I have interviewed or talked to as part of this research have discussed the ways in which dating apps *don't* work. Amelia is a woman in her mid twenties, she uses a range of dating apps to meet both men and women. This how she spoke about some of them during an interview:

Her just doesn't work [. . .] Hinge's algorithm is dog shit . . . it's really bad. It matches you with people that are just not . . . just not possible to match with! (Amelia, queer, Hinge, Bumble, Tinder, Her).

Chiara, who we mentioned before, shares a similar view:

Hinge's algorithm doesn't work, I don't know what it thinks of me, look at who it matched me with? Do you think I am this kind of person? (Chiara, heteroflexible, Hinge)

Discourses about dating apps (in)efficiency, and how users shall 'make them work' are quite central in media debates. Reputable outlets routinely publish articles on how to use dating apps. The Guardian, for instance, put out the 'Beginners Guide to Dating Apps', a piece in which different apps are presented according to the criteria 'how do I use it', 'Who Will I Meet', 'Word of Warning', 'Using if you are Looking For' (Kalia 2019). More niche outlets such as Verge, a tech oriented website, foster a similar approach, offering video tutorials on 'How to get better at dating apps' (Verge 2018). Using dating apps is something that one needs to learn, and the learning requires emotional and cognitive labour, given the lack of shared and stable norms (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022). Dating apps, in fact, do not (or not necessarily) 'work'. Yet, what remains, what 'sticks', is the question around efficiency, the fact that they are approached *as if* they should work. Hence, finding out what works and what does not work constitutes one of the overarching frameworks with which platformised dating is experienced, negotiated and thought through. At stake there are not efficient means but means that have the quest(ion) of efficiency at their core. The underpinning utopia (or dystopia) being that of love as a procedural process, a process that can be pinned down to an algorithmic formula. Users constantly try to decipher how the algorithm functions, and reflect on what kind of effects it has on them. This is what Selim, a queer man in their early thirties told me about it:

I don't know exactly how the algorithm works, but when you set up a new profile it shows you a profile from very hot people. You immediately get more matches. It makes sense because they want to draw you in. I immediately got the dopamine hit! (Selim, queer, Bumble, Hinge, Tinder)

Lawrence, a man in his late thirties spotted a similar dynamic:

I don't trust Tinder's algorithm in the first couple of days, it just gives you all these matches with these people that look like supermodels . . . (Lawrence, bisexual, Tinder)

Nicolò, same age as Lawrence, took it as a personal challenge:

I deleted and reinstalled the app, and then I changed the parameters every week, I want to see what the algorithm does, I want to test Tinder and push it to its limits. (Nicolò, heterosexual, Tinder).

The algorithm becomes itself a libidinal object, an object that suscitates affective responses and existential questions. 'What does the algorithm think of me, and is it right?' is a question that recurs, in various formulations. Equally common are remarks on the quality of the algorithm: 'the algorithm is dogshit!' to quote Amelia again. The algorithm becomes a character in itself, a fantasmatic other in the dialectic of love. It becomes a master signifier, and we are left with the painful task of making sense of and coming to terms with it. As Cohn notes, presenting their algorithms as 'based on scientific studies . . . [dating sites] train their users to doubt their own desires and trust instead in the sites' proprietary algorithms' (Cohn 2019, 126).

What supports this dynamic is the possibility of projecting into the algorithm's otherness the responsibility, merit and (most of all) blame, for what works and does not work in the quest for

finding love, or any cognate feeling or interaction. In this respect, I argue, it responds to, without resolving, the dilemma of choice and responsibility that has characterised love in postmodern societies. As cultural sociologists have shown, in the aftermath of the sexual revolution, amidst ramping neoliberalism, finding love has come to be interpreted as a matter of individual choice (Giddens 1993; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Illouz 2012; Bauman 2014). The erasure of shared codes and social norms which have organised love in modern societies (mostly regulated by the church and the family) has left individuals dealing with what Illouz calls 'ontological uncertainty' (Illouz 2019). This uncertainty does not play out only at a behavioural level, but goes deep into the existential question of what is love, and how to recognise it. Since the individual is finally set free from the grip of traditional morals, it has only its very own self to blame if things go wrong.

Dating apps' technological solutionism resonates with this malaise, and intercepts a degree of exhaustion that people experience confronted with such weight. The promise of delegating the process of 'meeting and matching' to an automated formula releases the subject of responsibility. Hence while algorithms do not solve the issue of love, they at least can be blamed for its malaises. Precisely at the point in which the much proclaimed algorithmic solution fails, the subject can project the blame into something other than itself. Dating apps produce a screen onto which individuals can cast and enact their anxiety about love, without the need to engage with another, embodied, person.

Validation and humiliation

These anxieties have to do with the ability to choose well amongst potentially infinite opportunities, as well as with the possibility of being chosen despite the infinite availability of partners. At stake there is a form of reassurance of one's value. Indeed, quantitative research on dating apps' users' motivations rank self confidence first (Carpenter and McEwan 2016; Sumter and Vandenberg 2019; Ward 2016). My findings reflect this pattern. Most interviewees, as well as those I talked to as part of the extended fieldwork, mention how dating apps can be used to feel more empowered, and overcome the fear of rejection. The app is seen as a source of validation, and is used to get reassured of one's attractiveness. It is not infrequent for people to install it after a breakup, as a way to ascertain that there are indeed many romantic and sexual possibilities out there, and that they can be desired and chosen.

That was the case for Charlotte, a woman in her early twenties, who when she downloaded Tinder for the first time it was because she was feeling:

... like shit. I was feeling bad about himself [former boyfriend] and asking if I should use these boys as validation. it's nice to see how many likes you get or matches you get, or seeing people compliment you. (Charlotte, heterosexual, Tinder).

Elizabeth, a few years older than Charlotte, accounts for her experience as follows:

I just talked to people to get a bit of validation, you know, this person thinks I'm attractive. Most people don't take it seriously. If you go on it, you know, with your friends, you look at the bios, and laugh at the pictures, and make a joke out of it. Occasionally you indulge in a conversation, for a bit of validation, it's always nice. But then the convo would end, and they would not reply or something. (Elizabeth, woman, heterosexual, Tinder).

Elizabeth describes a very common approach, which Felix, a queer man in his mid twenties explains taking into consideration the business model of the app:

You get a match and you go, oh someone is interested in you! On Tinder, when they want you to buy the premium version they tell, there are this many people interested in you. And you're like, uh I must be really attractive! It's ego-boost! (Felix, queer, Hinge, Tinder).

Walter, a man approximately the same age as Felix echoes them: 'I had some nice chats on Tinder but people use it like an ego boost rather than actually wanting to find a partner'. (Walter, queer, Tinder, Grindr)

As these examples show, the app is used for the automated (re)production of the feeling of being valued, a feeling that is associated with matching and does not require further interactions to be triggered. The match itself, as a research participant explains, 'is like receiving a compliment'. In this respect, it is a sign in itself which is independent from the steps that can eventually follow, i.e. chat and date, to stay with Tinder's tagline. As I argued elsewhere, the match is a 'replicable sign of likeability' that can be technically reproduced *ab libitum*, and what is reproduced with it is the horizon of the possibility of being desired (Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021, 190).

It is equally common for users to recount how they feel rejected, disposed of and humiliated². Interactions with people met on dating apps can be brutal. The practice of 'ghosting' is exemplary. Defined as unilaterally cutting off contact with a partner and ignoring their attempts to reach out (Timmermans, Hermans, and Oprea 2021) ghosting is frequent, messages often ignored, in person dates abruptly canceled. Journalist Nancy Jo Sales' account of her horrific experiences on dating apps (Sales 2021), Facebook groups such as Tinder Hell (a private group of almost 10K members), and the popular book *Tinder Nightmares*, contain plenty of examples of epic fails, and ugly interactions. To add up to these, I share the story of Chiara, who the reader may remember from previous quotes.

Chiara has been on dating apps for a while, she installed Hinge five years ago, after a traumatic break up, and has used it ever since. She routinely gets frustrated and deletes the app, only to give it another go to prove to herself she is open again to the possibility of dating. Very recently Chiara has re-matched with a man she had dated a year ago; they had kissed after a movie night, and then he had ghosted her. When after the re-match he texted her 'you have a beautiful smile' she replied that she would have rather received that compliment a year ago, instead of being ghosted. He apologised lightheartedly, saying he could not recognise her in the new picture, he then found her number on whatsapp (they had exchanged contacts after the date), and called her. Upon having heard her voice, he said. 'Oh! Now I remember, you are the short one!'. Chiara, understandably, felt angry and humiliated. She knows that she shouldn't, but she cannot help taking it personally.

Erika, in her early twenties, offers a critical reflection on the ruthless conduct that dating apps support:

I do feel like people do see other people are more disposable because there is commodification. There is this big feeling of being disposable. Like even the idea of ghosting was not really a thing before dating apps were a thing. (Erika, heterosexual, Tinder, Hinge)

The same person may very well express both feelings, i.e. validation and humiliation, and they can alternate quickly. This is how Walter describes this oscillation:

When you match with someone, you go oh this person likes me and I like them too. And then they disappear and ghost you. Or they'll start talking to you and you're like, oh no I've got to ghost 'em! [laughs]. (Walter, queer, Tinder, Grindr).

The app operates through the automatic (re)production of loss and gain, self-validation and humiliation, hope and frustration. This is the main affective work that the app does for the subject that uses it, and it can do it regardless of whether embodied romantic or sexual encounters happen. It is a libidinal economy which is entirely enclosed within the app's affordances. This affective dialectic between validation and humiliation is not something that is typical of digital love but lies at the foundation of postmodern marketised love, whereby freedom from the grid of traditional morals has translated into a freedom to evaluate modeled on the ideal type economic actor.

Evaluation, Illouz explains, is different from recognition because it can prescind from a holistic notion of personhood and from a relational context. Evaluation poses the one who evaluates in an independent and detached position from the object evaluated. In a 'free' market of love the price to pay for evaluating is that of being subjected to evaluation. Notably, the access to the position of evaluator is regulated by asymmetric relations of gender, with women being more easily objectified than heterosexual men (Illouz 2019).

Dating apps emerge as digital apparatuses that institutionalise and automate this mechanism by means of the swipe and match. In this sense they act as agents of a specific cultural policy of love. Their affordances determine the binary opposition between choosing and discarding, being chosen and being disposed of (David and Cambre 2016). The user is automatically given access to the position of the evaluator, in the swiping phase, while at the same time being continuously evaluated. The two are combined. Every time a match happens there is a sense of ego-boost, but every time a message is ignored one's is devalued, and may thus turn again to swiping in search for a shot of validation, in a repetitive cycle.

What I want to flag up is that the empowerment offered by being in the position of the evaluator is inextricably related to the humiliation of being subjected to the other's (de)valuation. This foundational ambivalence is deeply felt by participants. Amelia, who was introduced above, recounts a feeling of 'melancholy' derived from the realisation that they were 'craving attention' from people that do not really care about them. They recognise their 'craving' for validation, is addressed to people that do not recognise her as a person but rather as an object to be quickly assessed, and this causes them a certain type of sadness as well as raising the question as to why this is what they keep on doing.

Play with(out) care

Paraphrasing Amelia, we can ask what function this serves for the subject, what do we do with the technically reproduced combination of validation and humiliation. The answer to this question, I argue, is to be found in the fact that dating apps gamify these affective responses. It shouldn't come as a surprise that dating apps 'gamify' love. Processes of gamification have been at the core of digital media industries for over a decade now, and can be broadly defined as the organisation of users' engagement around principles appropriated from game design (Ruffino 2014)³. Dating apps turn sexual and romantic evaluation into a game in that they organise it within a structure of quantifiable losses and gains, bonuses and maluses. It is a game that one can play alone (a solitaire) but also a game that can be played with friends (as in when people swipe together, or on each other's behalf).

Participants are very aware of this:

It feels like a game and it's made to feel like a game, and that's what it's made more, it's a little addictive. Yes, no, yes no, oh no he's ugly! Playing Tinder is like a game. When you're with your friends and you swipe profiles, and you're like oh this guy is ugly! It becomes this commodified and dehumanising love, which I think it's crazy! It's problematic. In some kind of subtextual way, it means that people are disposable, swipe left, swipe right. . . . There is this big feeling of being disposable. And that's very personally dehumanising in a lot of ways. (Harriet, heterosexual, Tinder Hinge)

I argue that the 'dehumanising' aspect of gamification, is key to understanding the ways in which the subject uses dating apps to (re)negotiate with the affective malaise of marketised, postmodern love. I am not saying this to enthuse a kind of nostalgia for a supposedly 'humanised' love, but rather to point at a specific moral status that people acquire and ascribe to others when socialised within the space of a dating app. As noted by Garda and Karhulahti, the acts that we perform on dating apps do not have straightforward consequences outside of the app itself because the gamified structure produces a virtual scenario for the user to operate:

The "like" and "nope" labels that define the core mechanic are first and foremost symbolic and (not unlike "running," "shooting," and "driving" in video games) mainly signify a virtual act that has predetermined software-specific consequences in the ludic system. (Garda and Karhulahti 2021, 250).

Similarly to when one shoots in a video game, matching or connecting with someone on an app has a different status of reality than doing that in-person. There is an ontological and moral hierarchy at stake, which is implicit in people's accounts. As long as interactions remain within the app of dating, the moral codes regulating them are much looser and the other is not really recognised in their personhood. To signal a change of status in the interactions, users typically would move the

conversation to Snapchat (for the youngest) or Whatsapp, where people feel 'more like an actual person' as put by Amelia in the same interview quoted above.

The gamification operated by dating apps reproduces the dilemma of empowerment/humiliation of postmodern love but in a partially weakened version; affective responses are constantly triggered in very small doses until the individual becomes desensitised by the habit of disposing of the other and being made disposable. My fieldwork's observations indicate that after a period of time spent within dating apps, people begin to learn how to not care, they become impermeable to the hurt of being disposed, humiliated, diminished. The happiest users of dating apps are the most careless. Those that do not mind if they are ghosted or rejected, neither do they mind to ghost and reject. They have learnt that what is at stake is not necessarily their personhood. 'You learn take it less personally' told me Camilla, a queer woman in her twenties, during an interview (Camilla, queer, Hinge, Bumble, Feeld).

Some participants, generally those who have used the app for a few years, express a degree of mastery of it, which goes hand in hand with an acquired form of carelessness. For them, looking for love is basically out of the picture, a pleasant externality at best. Mary has used different dating apps, including Tinder, Bumble and Hinge, for at least five years and in different contexts, she has been to more than 100 dates, and was one of the few interviewees who were 'at peace' with digital dating, meaning that she did not express subjection, sufferance or frustration in relation to the app. This is what she says:

Tinder, it's great and it affirms you being attractive and people wanting to add you, but it's a game and it doesn't mean anything. You may as well give it a go. It was never intended as way to find love. (Mary, heterosexual, Tinder, Hinge, Bumble).

Maitreyee has been on dating apps for a much shorter period of time than Mary, but she has used them heavily and displays the attitude of the expert. She says:

I guess I am on the colder, logical side of it. Gambling is more fun, but higher risk. Being colder, you're protecting yourself. If you cared about every match, you shouldn't be on the app. (Maitreyee, queer, Hingle, Feeld).

Chiara is struggling not to care. She really would like to find a serious relationship on the app, and she cannot help but take rejection at a personal level. But she is learning, she says, because 'if you care too much it's going to kill you'. Francesca, a woman in her mid thirties, is very clear about what is the 'correct' use of dating apps 'My friends use the app to find love, to find Mr right, but of course this is not how you are supposed to use them' (Francesca, heterosexual Tinder).

With this, I do not want to corroborate the argument that dating apps are only 'hook up' apps. What I want to underline is rather that they offer a symptomatic way for the subject to deal with the pain of marketised love, for they take away the fear of being rejected and humiliated while offering the possibility to inhabit a position of power (choosing amongst 'infinite' possibilities, keeping and discarding at one's will). This is achieved because the perception of the self and the other in the context of the app is emptied out of the ethical obligations that is attached to a persona, to whom is (generally) ascribed a moral status. Deprived of the materiality of the body, and detached from social contexts (replaced by the app affordances) people lose their 'human substance', they become bidimensional, abstract symbols with which one can, indeed, play. What is created is a level in which dynamics of fear and humiliations can be projected and acted out without the risk of getting hurt, or hurting too much. In a way, the very purpose of the app is that of learning how to 'not care' to 'not be hurted' by being exposed to 'homeopathic' doses of pain.

Love after love: a post-romantic utopia?

This article has proposed a cultural study of digital love by means of an empirical research on dating apps. I have analysed dating apps for how they are imbricated in social and economic structures of power, and in so far as they are co-constitutive of the subject's identity. Instead of focusing on the

relationship that people have by means of dating apps, I have drawn attention on the relationship that the subject has with the app itself. In doing so, I have highlighted the extent to which platforms, their economies and algorithmic technologies, are agents of implicit cultural policy, whereby the term 'policy' is used in its broad meaning to refer to the regulation and operationalisation of cultural practices underpinned by a specific set of values.

To begin with, I have highlighted that dating apps have gained ownership of the sphere of dating, enclosing it within their affordances, and creating the perception of their unavoidability. Then, through the analysis of interviews' excerpts and fieldwork observations, I have deciphered two interrelated traits of digital love's emerging structure of feeling. These are: 1) digital love is marked by the algorithmic ideology of (in)efficiency, which provides the subject with a way to negotiate with the dilemma of choice, while producing an aspirational notion of love as something that 'should work'. 2) digital love reproduces in a gamified way the affective alternation of validation and humiliation, offering the subject the possibility to deal with these feelings in the de-personalised virtual space of the app. These two functions make the app 'sticky' besides its proclaimed purpose. It is of particular importance to reflect on the fact that these regulations happen not only at the level of behaviour, and in so far as they establish new social norms and expectations, but also because they operate at an affective level. If we take seriously a vision of platforms as cultural policy agents, they are not only implicit, but also affective, as they unfold within an intimate relationship with users.

Reflecting further on the implications of these findings, what seems to be at stake is an ideology of love as a risk free, efficient interaction, deprived of the complications of embodied romance. It is a kind of love that strives to do without the painful backlashes of romance, the emotional toll of drama, the tragedy of loneliness. We can call it love after romance, a post-romantic kind of love. To further grasp this aspect, let's go back to Barthes and the technologies he analysed. The letter enjoins the other to reply, the phone call creates the space for waiting. Dating apps give permission to ghost someone, and cancel the interstitial time of the wait by means of an infinitely reproducible offer. Of course, this is only an impressionistic comparison, but it serves to flag up, by contrast, the agency of dating apps, and the ways they are reframing our understanding of what love is supposed to be, and feel like.

The idea of post-romantic love is a speculative one, yet one that is able to grasp the emerging traits of the culture which is (re)produced by dating apps. A culture in which suffering is to be avoided and the ideal self is one that is always in control, always 'empowered'. Love, in this frame, should not be something that lets the individual 'fall' dangerously, at the risk of 'breaking their heart'. Rather, a kind of love that seeks efficiency, controllability and safety, in which the lover is supposed to know what they want and how to obtain it. This should not make us nostalgic of the 'good old times', where love ache was idealised at least as much as individual autonomy is idealised now, but it rather points at a shift in the articulation of the utopia attached to love. Further research and reflection would be needed to work this concept; for now, I want to indicate a possible direction of thinking.

Notes

1. This is more frequently the case for people living in big cities, e.g. London, but it is recurrent also in interviews with participants living in smaller cities, or even rural areas. The motivation of dating apps users in London is often that in the city everyone is busy and people don't meet in pubs anymore; while in more peripheral contexts it may be that the low density of the population makes it difficult to randomly meet those of one's age, who are also single, or anyways seeking an encounter. Even more so if those living in smaller villages look for interactions with people of their same sex, or if they want to experiment with some sexual kinks.
2. For a study on humiliation in media cultures see Cefai (2020).
3. For a comprehensive anthology on gamification see Fuchs et al. (2014).

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Notes on contributor

Carolina Bandinelli is Associate Professor in Media and Creative Industries at the University of Warwick. She is the author of *Social Entrepreneurship and Neoliberalism: Making Money While Doing Good* (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2020), and co-author of *Fashion as Creative Economy* (Polity, 2022). In recent years, she has published widely on the subjective experience of dating apps from an interdisciplinary perspective combining cultural and media studies, sociology and psychoanalysis.

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