LP103: Media, Creative and Cultural Industries
Assignment: Digital Intimacy Essay
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The ways in which we relate to love and sex in the world have been transformed by digital technologies. I will discuss this by first comparing dating in the past, the substitution of the family intermediary through online relationships and rise of dating platforms and their differences. As the aim of this essay is to present ways of relating to love through different digital technologies, I will then explain implications when comparing these ways of relating to certain concepts. Later I use those theories and concepts to explore Instagram, as it reflects just how complex the modalities of finding love in the digital age are and the many signals involved in the process. The examples present what makes them so complex and potentially problematic for coupledom creation online.

Ever since the beginning of time, the friends of one's friend (Feld, 1981), therefore family and friends, have been what created new connections between people, and therefore the core modality of coupledom creation. Taking the example of mating in the United States from a Stanford University study (Stanford.edu, 2017), before WW2, most couples met through family, and friends, in primary and secondary school, but also met in the neighbourhood or in church. After WW2 most couples still met through family, but by the 1950's got largely surpassed by meeting through friends and ultimately by 2013 this got surpassed by meeting online. There was a historical change in 1995, when the first popular web browsers were introduced, Netscape and Internet Explorer, and hence the creation of a new market for internet dating.

Before this new market boom changed not only the dating market, but the whole world, the dominant "family system" (Rosenfeld, Thomas and Hausen, 2019) reassured mates that their potential partner was "vouched for by trusted alters". Hence meeting through friends and family was secure for individuals as they were regarded as trusted social relations, the intermediary playing the matchmaker role between two parties (Rosenfeld, Thomas and Hausen, 2019). This system was deemed efficient, as studies from the 60's found that higher marital duration actually coincided with higher degree of these close-knit networks, as each partner with a close-knit network of friends and kinship will get "emotional satisfaction from these external relationships" (Bott, 1957), getting help from kinship and demand less from the spouse. In fact, supported in proper doses," the kin network provided "external support for marital solidarity" (Blood, 1969). Though, with the rise of the internet, new benefits came along, such as access to a broader supply of prospective partners, substituting the family intermediary and making singles rely less on their family network. What enabled this is the 1995 graphical web browser and 2007 smartphone introduction, that opened up new markets for internet dating.

With online dating services expected to reach 413 million active users worldwide by the end of 2022, nowadays people are progressively looking for (and finding) a partner with the help of dating apps and platforms (Statista, n.d.). As people have different objectives when relating to love and sex, today's

digital technologies offer a variety of dating platforms, with different dating subcultures and for people with all sorts of sexual orientations. For example, hook-up culture patterns on Tinder that aim to lead to a romantic relationship oppose the Grindr culture of disconnecting sexual pleasure from any expectation of a relationship (Licoppe, 2019). The users' linguistic execution differs: Grindr users would avoid engaging in personal and topic-oriented conversation, as opposed to Tinder user majority. Similarly, there is a "linguistic ideology", where the mutual trust acquired in the conversation depends on the common-ground level (Licoppe, 2019). Though, both apps, alongside others such as Bumble, OkCupid, Happn and many more, are SBDA (swipe-based dating applications). The swiping on a mobile screen feature is what differentiates SBDAs from other online dating platforms, alongside image-dominated profiles. Users of such apps, as studies have found, outline "higher levels of depression, anxiety and distress" (Holtzhausen, 2020) when compared to those who do not use SBDAs. Understanding these psychological effects could direct users to use less-mainstream dating applications, whose cultures contrast to "swipe right" modalities such as Tinders; examples of such include S'More, focusing on emotional connections, gradually revealing one's photos as one starts chatting, eHarmony, focusing on commitment and matching partners according to long-term relationship wishes, alongside many more.

      With so many differently cultured platforms, what can this new modality of dating online be compared to and are there any implications? Knowing how to portray oneself is crucial in online spaces, in other words, "marketing" oneself (Heino, Ellison and Gibbs, 2010). Economic metaphors for romantic relationships have existed much prior to online dating, as ever since the existence of the "date", courtship became a commercial entity (Bailey, 1989). An article published in The Journal of Social and Personal Relationships aimed to explore how such metaphors resonated with online dating participants within a specific CMC (computer-mediated communication) environment in the initial phase of relationship formation. Participants themselves, without any encouragement to compare it to an economic transaction, referred to the dating site as a "supermarket" or "catalogue," This explains why users have to engage in almost an "economic-based self-presentation" (Heino, Ellison and Gibbs, 2010) as in order to attract matches, they go through a branding process when building a dating profile; emphasising positive characteristics and deemphasizing negative characteristics. Prior to determining their own, they evaluate potential partners' desirability or market worth. This determination of their own market worth was based not solely on their self-perception of desirability, but also "market demands for their attributes and the supply of other competing partners with those same attributes." (Heino et al., 2010) They came to comprehend their own desirability in "regards to various considerations made more explicit by the number and types of responses received." This presents the question if there even is a defined set of criteria for "desirability." An article published in the National Library of Medicine presents the *matching hypothesis* (Walster et al., 1966) defining *social desirability* as the sum of individuals' "social assets,"

such as "physical attractiveness, popularity, personableness, and material resources" (Berscheid et al., 1971). The 2014 article presents a 6 month online dating study of 8,259 men and 6,274 women in one of the USA's southwestern mid-size cities, evidence found that both men and women tend to send messages to the "most socially desirable alters in the dating market, regardless of their own social desirability" (Kraeger et al., 2014). By examining both studies I came to the conclusion that the following are the main implications of the online dating "market": the positives are that when viewed as a "numbers game," with the increased supply of options, one can refine one's search, increase their "inventory" and hence chance of meeting the right partner. By repetitively presenting, or "selling" oneself through communication there's affirmation and re-affirmation of one's self-worth, positively reinforcing self-image and own desirability perception. This is also reaffirmed when relating to the 2020 study of SBDA usage, as the researchers found that out of their 437 subjects, more participants reported a positive impact on self-esteem as a result of SBDA use than a negative impact (Holtzhausen, 2020). I found, however, that overall the negatives prevail. Firstly, psychologists express having more options is more emotionally draining, as swiping through thousands of profiles can become overwhelming and lead to a choice overload effect (Vanderbilt, 2022; D'Angelo and Toma, 2016). The option of being presented with too many choices leads to spending less time looking at each one, hence for a quicker skip-through of options, one potentially develops a "find my flaw" mentality (Heino, Ellison and Gibbs, 2010), eliminating good potential partners just because of a system of instant decision-making that is based on only a flaw. Apart from causing a less satisfying experience due to stress on the human brain and mental drainage, this uncaring attitude concerning disposal of others once a flaw is identified may remain in relationship behaviours even after the initial phases. For instance, online dating participants might "disappear" rather than strive for mutual closure when terminating relationships: this is because, as research shows, they may not see themselves as amendable to others because there is not an "integrated social environment" (Donath and Boyd, 2004). In the past, people have engaged in acts of disappearance, but such behaviour was limited to a "certain type of scoundrel" (Vilhauer, 2015), contrasting to nowadays' online daters' lack of social connections, this has become so common in both social media and dating spaces, that the term "ghosting" has been coined for it.

Secondly, if messages go to the most socially desirable daters, regardless of the senders' desirability, as mentioned earlier, then the dispersal of received ties will be highly concentrated among a select few men and women (Kreager et al., 2014). According to medium.com (Medium, n.d.) a socio-economic study by Tinder found that in terms of attractiveness "the bottom 80% of men are competing for the bottom 22% of women and the top 78% of women are competing for the top 20% of men. Though, the low response probability from the most desirable message receivers in regard to the less desirable senders, is what counterbalances the previously mentioned uneven distribution. (Schaefer, 2012)

Thirdly, with the risk of the design of dating services influencing user's beliefs in the real world (Fiore and Donath, 2004), hence depending on the platform's design, the online dating market can lead to objectification, commodification of relationships and individuals, devaluing people and promoting a more dispassionate approach to finding a partner. This is because, instead of focusing on hard work and communication skills involved in building a positively strong relationship bond, the construction of dating platforms in general, alongside the market metaphor, prioritises the level of selectivity or ideal formula determination in finding the right person. Hence, locating the "perfect product" or mate, "relation-shopping", instead of building a prosperous relationship through communicative interaction; "relationshipping" (Duck et al., 1991).

After initial contact on dating applications and sites is made, many users soon switch the communication to social media like Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, Snapchat etc, or switch later, only once a certain level of trust has been formed. Either way, they play a key role in how people relate to love and sex in the digital age. With such platforms redefining the boundaries of flirting, hooking up, romance and sexuality (Harris et al., 2019) concerns are rising about social media's ability to foster young users with a ground for more pervasive and hidden abusive behaviours (Stephenson et. al., 2018). Research on heterosexual teenage couples has found that the beliefs and values relating to the social media world are mutually dependent on those of the dating world, hence what is allowed in a dating relationship is intertwined with what is allowed on social media (Belotti et al.,2022). This can lead to unintentional DDA (digital dating abuse, such as snooping around, controlling behaviours, and aggravated sexting) or excusing and allowing it. There are "idioms of practice and media ideologies" (Gershon, 2010) meaning the set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning "dating scripts and romantic ideologies" (understood by Belotti as norms and beliefs underlying dating relationships). The lines between these concepts are blurred, forming "digital dating scripts" and "romantic media ideologies," new ways of relating to love and sex in the digital age.

Could a dating platform mimic the benefits of kinship and a close-knit network, that would offer the same support system to a couple as before the invention of the internet? The explained concepts and theories can be applied to analyse what might not be usually perceived as a "dating platform," but a social application with a function feasible of acting as a romantic intermediary: Instagram. Datareportal reports 23,9% of internet users aged 16 to 64 say making new contacts was also one of the main reasons for using social media such as Instagram in 2022 (Kemp, 2022). There are many similarities between previously mentioned dating applications and Instagram, when observed through the same lenses.

In terms of finding a mate, when relating Instagram to the market metaphor and hence the user's "economic-based self-presentation," the user is analysed by potential partners by his "feed" pictures, through which almost the same level of social desirability insight as on dating apps can be gained; this, however, is limited to what users choose to publicize about their life. Just as in traditional dating applications, one would want to emphasize positive characteristics and values through profile, to "market" oneself. With many accounts at disposal, one can refine one's search based on profile picture and bio-assessment methods in case of private accounts, and increase their "inventory," by "following" people, in hopes of "follow reciprocation." If the account is public, one follows potential partners by making the same assessment but considering the addition of mates' feed, or "catalogue" insights. Such a system, however, resembles SBDA's image-based focus, potentially developing a "find my flaw" mentality (Heino, Ellison and Gibbs, 2010). Risks of deception can be minimised by viewing the users' "tagged" posts, i.e. expanding insight into their social circle. The advantage of the Instagram dater towards the potential partner, for explanatory purposes named Tom and Suzanne respectively, when relating to Rosenfeld's concept of "trusted alter," in comparison to the Tinder dater, or 1950s dater, is that Tom can appear "trustworthy" by having a friend in common with Suzanne, that both don't know personally. It hence builds trust, but also the element of no social pressure and hence easy detachment from one another; as social ties are not strong, it could potentially lead to facilitated "ghosting". This could be limited though to users who share the same "idioms of practice," alongside "media ideologies" which according to anthropologist Ilana Gershon (Gershon, 2010) are in this case users who both engage in the practice of following people online that they do not personally know, ideologies hence directed towards a lesser need for digital privacy. Deciphering Instagram as a dating application can be facilitated by blurring the concepts of "media ideologies," the user's belief of what Instagram ought to be for them, and "romantic ideologies," forming "romantic media ideologies," such as for example expectations of an "Instagram story reply" from a prospective partner. Other examples include common expectancy of leaving a message to one's partner in the morning or frequent video-call communication. Hence, a problem arises when users have different ideologies or beliefs than can ultimately lead to relationship termination.

Online dating technology brings many opportunities to connect people and is here to stay. However, by comparison to dating in the past, and observation of digital relationships through the different data researched, the ambivalent implications of relation to love in the digital age are exposed. There are new sets of arising complex problems and indications, linked to miscommunication between users, potentially resulting in objectification, ghosting, DDA and other mentioned issues. Future research could test what complete awareness of the theories and concepts presented (i.e. romantic media

ideologies), would signify for coupledom communication, hence, whether potential partners would relate to love and sex in the digital age differently.

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