

Love Interfaces: Identity and Attachment in Online Dating

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1. Introduction

During the last decade, online dating has been institutionalised as one of the main rituals in the intimate sphere and has become a popular medium for social interaction. This article will explore the practice of identity and attachment in online dating qua a theoretical approach based on my experience as a user of these apps in 2014 and 2015, both in Mallorca and London. The analysis, informed by gender theory and ritual theory, will mainly focus on two aspects of online dating software: first, the process of mediated self-disclosure its users undertake, in which a representation of the subject is created through the parameters of an interface; and second, the affects that derive from this and how they relate to forms of attachment and heteronormativity. I will argue that online dating devices recapture the polyvocal flux of desire and rationalize it, making it consistent through its algorithmic processes. Ultimately, despite often being perceived as a practice that differs from more traditional processes of courtship — for example, due to its centrality in hook-up culture — online dating occupies a blurred space in relation to heteronormativity, epitomizing the commodification of an idea of the good life that is based on homogamic sexual intimacy.

2. Narratives

During the first part of this article, I will look at the narratives surrounding love and intimacy in contemporary Western culture and its relation to online dating. As mentioned above, it is my contention that online dating apps rationalise desire by disciplining it with a very specific idea of love based on homogamic and heteronormative sexual intimacy. In this essay, I will follow Berlant's (2012) definitions of *desire* and *love*. Accordingly, "desire describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between the object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it", whereas "love is the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated: rather than being isolating, love provides an image of an expanded self, the normative version of which is the two-as-one intimacy of the couple form" (6). In Freudian psychoanalysis, desire is what motivates the leap into sociality of the infant, who seeks substitutes onto which they can project their desire after the traumatic realisation of the caregiver's Otherness and the process of overcoming Oedipal triangulation. Here, desire is disciplined by the super ego, which will later direct it towards proper objects, signalled after the horizon represented by love (Berlant 2012, 23-36).

However, sexuality and love are historically specific concepts: the unity of sexual desire and identity that we take for granted has not always been a permanent trait of personhood. For example, Feher (2015) traces the genealogy of the

secularization of the love exchange as analogous to the shift of sociality from fostering “giving” during the Augustinian age, to “exchange” in the liberal age to “sharing” in the neoliberal condition. The question of what needs to be shared does not emerge until the crystallisation of Second Wave Feminism, with its growth of literature contemplating same sex relationships and its critique of love as based on an exchange grounded on the inequality caused by the attribution of different characteristics to both sexes inherited from Victorian psychiatry. It is in this context that Illouz (2007) situates the gestation of contemporary *emotional capitalism*, in which a regulation of the emotional sphere is popularised through the rise of the discipline of psychology. A shift also linked to the blurring of the border between public and private, insofar as “emotions have become instruments of social classification [through] new hierarchies of emotional well-being, understood as the capacity to achieve socially and historically situated forms of happiness” (73). In this context, the self becomes the target of commodification: it is defined by its deficiencies and emotional competence. Emotions become negotiable goods that can be exchanged with people who reunite the targeted conditions.

I follow Massumi’s definition of emotion as opposed to affect, according to which

an emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity [affect¹] owned and recognized. (Massumi 1996, 221)

This centrality of the category of the *emotional* in the creation of the neoliberal subject stems from neoliberalism’s relation to heteronormativity, whereby the latter is linked with capitalist ideas of a successful subject: someone productive and reproductive or, in other words, sustaining what Edelman describes as *reproductive futurism* (2004).² Simultaneously, emotional wellbeing is central to some facets of commodity culture, such as the self-help industry, whereby optimism becomes a regulatory discipline to salvage the precariousness of neoliberal subjects.³ The privileging of heteronormativity popularizes very specific versions of love, which identify the good life with reproductive homogamic sexual intimacy, with which most online dating apps identify.

¹ I use Massumi’s definition of *affect* as understood by Deleuze and Guattari: “a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act.” (201, xvi). As Shouse clarifies, “Feelings are *personal* and *biographical*, emotions are *social*, and affects are *prepersonal*” (2005).

² I also use Edelman’s (2004) meaning of *queer* as the social order’s death drive: *queerness* names the side that refuses the valence of the Child as the condition for any political project. I oppose *queer* to the political project of social reproducibility, even though the question remains as per whether *queerness* can give rise to alternative modes of sociality.

³ Here, I follow Berlant and Edelman’s (2014) definition of *optimism*: an “orientation toward a future, toward something always yet to come, conceived as bestowing a value on life by way of the future anterior, by way of the life one *will have lived*, conceived, moreover, as justifying this refusal to live it *while one could* [...] a condition so wide in its reach that it shapes our experience into narratives touched with the gloss we might think of as finish, in more than one sense of the term” (3).

Accordingly, it is my contention that online dating sites become a market that gathers all offer available, providing a common language that promises the user a profitable *sharing* experience. However, their ritual is trapped in its own promise. In contemporary Western culture guided towards a self-fulfilment attainable through the acquisition of categorised emotions, private life becomes, according to Berlant and Warner, “the endlessly cited *elsewhere* of political public discourse, a promised haven that distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives [...] and shames for any divergence between their lives and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood” (2000, 317). It could be argued that this promised haven represented by intimate life tends to the Durkheimian category of the sacred (1995): one’s private life becomes a realm to be respected since it constitutes one of the main steps towards self-fulfilment.

But how can this scarcity be combined with the language used for the marketing of online dating sites, usually described as easy and fun solutions to meet new people? It is through this paradox that online dating is stigmatised as something that always lags its own promise: it becomes a field for speculation built on the creation of a common portfolio based on shared assets, it opens the affective sphere to the language of sharing and negotiation, which can be traced in user’s profiles.

3. Identity

During the second part of this article, I will look at how online dating interfaces condition the possibilities for representation of the subject. Online dating interfaces tend towards identity definition and fixation, even more so than any offline dating environment. Most social networks are profile-based: this means that any user can create an online presence by filling out text fields that echo a set of common questions that are regarded as definitory of one’s identity. The fields that gain more relevance insofar as they are the ones by which one can filter other users are, most commonly, gender, age, location and a picture. Dating apps create a hierarchy that focuses on narratives surrounding gender, race and labour as definitory characteristics of the subject, reproducing offline hierarchies and modes of relationality. Once a user has created an account, they can see the profiles generated by other users and indicate whether they are interested.

In the progression from Internet Relay Chat environments towards profile-based software, the interface becomes a tool for efficient definition, which provides the user with a hindsight on other users’ personalities that would not be available otherwise. I argue that this previous step of identity definition gives the impression of minimizing the investment of reliance necessary for the user through mainly focusing on the profile picture and the body as the main sign of one’s identity and thereby attaching one’s desire to an object. This impression is reinforced by the removal of the moment of rejection: one does not usually explicitly see a list of all the users who are not interested in oneself.

It is because of this that online dating occupies a blurred position between an outsider to and an agent of heteronormativity — for the latter, I take Berlant and Warner’s definition, heteronormativity as “a complex cluster of sexual practices [that] gets confused [...] with the love plot of intimacy and familialism that signifies belonging to society in a deep and normal way” and that is invested with a sense of rightness. In its relation to heteronormativity, online dating does not allow bodies to

remain in indeterminacy; instead, it uses definition mechanisms that try to mimic real life interaction but result in a simplification because of the impossibility of capturing the always-on performance of identity. It does not tend towards queerness as that which refuses systemic complicity, but to fixity, to categorisation. Its emphasis falls on the profile picture (a common feature in all profiles of mainstream online dating software), which is the most prominent element of most online dating interfaces. The picture becomes the signature of the autobiographic text that is the profile and serves as a sign of verification of the user's identity.

Online dating sets up the stage for a ritual centred on the body of the participant. Bell (1992) has explored the relation between the ritual and the body in the creation of regimes of power in a particular social organisation. She defines this power not in terms of a totalitarian force and unconscious action but of a slightly flexible dialogue: "the body of the socialized participant structures an environment but sees only the body's response to a supposedly pre-existing set of structures" (220). Embodiment implies appropriation and, hence, the possibility of deviation that resides in the individual's agency, i.e. in its concrete enactment of a set of practices deriving from the internalisation of certain social relationships and made visible through the social body's practices.

There is, however, another aspect worth considering: the usage of the level of disclosure as a negotiation tool. This expected reciprocity in information exchanging is already documented in Slater's (2011) ethnography of the IRC and its dynamics of sex pictures trading. In it,

participants operated within a dialectic of cynicism and belief [...] with a mixture of cynical detachment on the one hand (a refusal to believe anything online and therefore a refusal to treat events or relationships there as serious), and on the other hand a desire to trust and invest in on-line relationships which depended on pursuing strategies of authentication (and constant concern of being deceived, ripped off and otherwise hurt by other's inauthenticity). Significantly, these strategies of authentication — necessary in order to trust in a relationship, in order to credit a relationship with ethical weight — were attempts to fix the other in a body or body-like presence, one which persists over time and is locatable in space. (2011, 331)

There is a dialogue between the individual and the ritual in which the self is negotiating the terms of its exposure: a resistance is held towards the complete acknowledgment by the other, towards a complete process of *sharing*. However, this resistance may not be absolute, such as with the rather common partial pictures that leave a body in an almost-definition, exposing just a fraction of its reality. As Sontag (2005) noted,

To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge — and, therefore, like power [...] Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire. (2)

A partial picture offers itself to the other as much as it rejects it, precluding a complete possession by evading the gaze — the core of recognition. In online dating, this is an ethos of negotiation that can extend to the discussion of the details of any encounter beforehand, even in practices that have traditionally been regarded as boundary-blurring, such as cruising, now commodified in online cruising sites with thorough interfaces.

But can attachment be revolutionary or reparative? Before we move onto the next section, I want to clarify here that this description has no positive or negative valence: it simply describes a way for subjects to form attachments to others and assess their belonging to the world. I am not valuing the emotions mobilized by online dating according to their capacity for political transformation but I am instead describing the mechanisms of identity creation fostered by its interfaces and, in the next section, will be speculating about the kind of attachments that may derive from them. As Berlant (2012) writes: “Although desire is anarchic and restless, the objects to which desire becomes attached stabilize the subject and enable her to assume a stable enough identity [...] Your object [...] says *something* about what it takes for you to anchor yourself in space and time” (76-77). It is my contention that attachments may be imbued by certain narratives or assumptions about what it means to have a good life. However, this does not imply that attachments are inherently transgressive or regressive, but simply that they may be “in excess to what has been encoded” as normative forms of attachment (Berlant 2016).⁴ In other words, this is not a critique of romantic love: the desire for romantic love stands for a wish to have a zone where intimacy can flourish without conflict.

4. Attachment

Finally, I will look at how this mediated self-disclosure in online dating fosters different types of attachment to both others and the self. My thesis is that the presence (and the subsequent interaction) on an online dating — quasi-public — platform serves partly to *legitimise one’s identity*. Similarly to reality TV shows, online dating provides the user with a sense of validation of their own identity, simply by the fact of allowing oneself to pin down their ongoing performance of identity and of allowing other members to interact with them: the user becomes special, visible, they are given the perception of an opportunity to define themselves in their own terms. The definition portrayed on the interface is bestowed with an aura of importance and truthfulness due to the power given to the medium in a context privileging mediated self-disclosure. But where does this privileging come from, what are its antecedents and how do they differ from online dating?

Couldry (2008) relates the rise of neoliberalism and the appropriation of the social sphere by the market with the growth of the Reality-TV genre. Accordingly, Reality-TV formats would mimic neoliberal conditions of labour to which one should submit passionately, embracing them as a part of one’s own identity. Moreover, it naturalises the practice of a permanent surveillance and authority, as well as the normalisation of an always-available lifestyle in which not willing to disclose oneself publicly becomes suspicious: “the paradox of a surveillance-based economy is that it pretends to individuals that they count — that they are worthy of individual attention — even though all it wants to do is count them — to plug their vital statistics into a marketing algorithm” (Andrejevic 2004, 111). What is

⁴ As Sedgwick (1990) noted, even though nobody inhabits completely these attachment ideals, they mark the horizons by which people assess their lives. Heterosexual culture, too, encompasses a wide arrange of forms of life whose conflicts go unrecognised due to the givenness of male-female sexual relations (Berlant and Warner 2000).

interesting about this approach is that it provides an example of the power of naturalisation of behaviours by the mass media.

Furthermore, this media ritual reinforces a neoliberal ethos while legitimising the authority of the medium as a point of access to societal values. Priest (1995) analyses this power and grounds it on the perception of television as a seal of legitimisation of any narrative that goes through it. Having approached the centre, participants in Reality-TV shows have their identity *relabelled*, “the stigma that once engulfed many of the participants is expunged and replaced with a new master trait: ‘As seen on TV’” (174). Its most relevant feature would thus be the ability to represent oneself, a definition legitimised by the sacred character associated to the medium in which it is performed (168). Similarly, dating apps gain its centrality by allowing their users to pin down representations of their identity and bringing them to a (quasi)-public sphere.

However, the design of these apps also allows users to interact with different users at the same time without these other users knowing about it. Therefore, on the flip side, online dating also exposes its users to negativity — i.e. “the psychic and social incoherencies and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity”, as defined by Berlant and Edelman (2014, vii). This is achieved by situating the user in a space of mediation that fosters relationality, and, therefore, jeopardises the stability of their identity and the process of its definition.⁵ The negativity is there, indeed, as opposed to the promise of contingency enacted by the interface, which derives from broader collective fantasies on love whereby “in the popular culture of romance [desire’s] instability and ambivalence are always shaped by the gridle of love. These dramas are always formed in relation to a fantasy that desire, in the form of love, will make life more simple, not crazier” (Berlant 2012, 89).

All in all, online dating environments operate in a space of ambiguity: they are spaces that reveal one’s negativity but insist in the fixation of a form of identity. They become a mechanism to avoid becoming undone by a space prone to relationality, the picture becomes the signature that testifies the truthfulness and prevalence of a version of identity eclipsed by its performativity.

Online dating culture even counts with vocabulary to signal this contradiction. Terms such as NSA (no strings attached) or even, in gay online dating, *masc4masc* (understanding autonomy and confidence as traits of mainstream notions of hegemonic masculinity), point towards this tension between exploring the plurality the medium offers and the need to hold back caused by the fear of becoming undone by this paradox.

Additionally, the interface sets up the environment for desire’s enactment: in a similar way to how fantasy would operate, the interface regulates the subject’s desire, it provides a sense of continuity amidst a flux of intensities. Precisely, the subjectivity modified by its own desire can reassemble anyone in different ways — e.g. can create stories about what we want to which we can cling to find ourselves as

⁵ This notion is similar to Kristeva’s definition of the *abject*: “something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object [...] It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order.” (1982, 4) Here, however, I would argue that, in spite of the unavoidable exposure, one does protect oneself from negativity: the possibility to minimise rejection adds urgency to the encounter with negativity, as opposed to the sudden irruption of the Real resulting in the feeling of abjection.

solid. Therefore, we can say that objects stabilise desire, and objects are nothing else than fantasmic investments in a scene that seems to offer some traction. In the case of online dating, I argue, this stabilization is aided by the interface, which gives a vantage point to the subject insofar as it allows her to note down her identity, in an attempt to escape desire's destabilisation. In this case, one may even argue that the interface itself becomes eroticized, insofar as "the scene of desire and the obstacles to it become eroticized, rather than the love that seems to motor it" (Berlant 2012, 73). However, this scene is cramped by an interface that, as stated above, fosters a very particular kind of interaction that maintains offline fantasies (and inequalities) required for love's enactment.

Following Ahmed (2012), I argue that this favouring of heteronormative homogamic intimacy reflects a broader cultural ecology where this type of intimacy is bestowed with the promise of happiness: "the judgment that some things are good not only precedes our encounter with things but directs us towards those things [...] The promise of happiness takes this form: if you have this or have that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows" (28-29).⁶ The prevalence of this sort of narratives as the precondition for desire to be enacted in a normative environment are exemplified by the act of creating a profile pretending to be someone else. This represents the potential for escaping one's position in normative sexual hierarchies, by transgressing, qua a made-up identity, conditions such as race, age or gender. This feeds into the fear of becoming undone by one's desire attachments: the object of desire that offers some traction to the subject may not exist at all!

I speculate that the conditions imposed by this sort of mediation leave a trace that is carried over the future stages of any form of attachment or relationship. The offline self always lags behind the fixity of the online self, the offline self is driven towards the scene of stability provided by the online profile. The question remains as to whether the optimism sometimes attached to either this romantic love narrative or to the possibility of a queer undoing can ultimately be productive or reparative at all.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, online dating is a practice developed in a milieu in which the merging of the public and the private naturalise the habit of mediated self-disclosure, a process that unfolds parallel to the development of models of emotional capitalism. The conceptualisation of love with the market terms of a sharing economy is optimised by interface mediation. Online dating is grounded on the contradiction of an easy access to love. However, the mediated exposure of the self propitiated by the interface provides a mechanism of legitimisation of one's identity. In the practice of self-disclosure, information becomes a power tool open to the negotiation of the traits that one *decides to share*, thus constituting an invitation as much as a rejection of the other. In this way, the ritual establishes its horizon vis-à-vis the self-fulfilment

⁶ The promise of happiness attached to these objects circulates independently of actual results. As Ahmed notes, "the very promise of happiness may acquire its force by not being given by the objects that are attributed as happiness-causes. The happy object circulates even in the absence of happiness by filling a certain gap; we anticipate that the happy object will cause happiness, such that it becomes a prop that sustains the fantasy that happiness is what would follow if only we could have 'it.' The happy object, in other words, is a gap-filler" (32).

utopia, reinforcing the market consumerist dynamics per which one must possess the best products before the others. Despite this, online dating has the potentiality for undoing the subject's sense of self as a space prone to negativity. To repress this, interfaces insist in a very strict mechanism of autobiographic definition signed by a picture which pins down the performativity of identity at the cost of a self that is always lagging its online promise.

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