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BORED GHOSTS AND ANXIOUS TEXT GAMES: HOW DATING APPS ALGORITHMICALLY CHANNEL THE DESIRE FOR INTIMACY INTO ANXIOUS ENGAGEMENT

Gregory Narr
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Dating apps have been characterized as fostering superficial hookups and exacerbating the toxicity of hookup culture because users must decide with whom to meet primarily by looking at photos (David & Cambre, 2016; Shaw, 2016; Thompson, 2018). Dating apps are probably not the vast hookup factories they are often depicted as (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Enomoto et al., 2017; Hobbs et al., 2016; LeFebvre, 2018). But their popularity seems to point to a shift in the locus of power away from what Michel Foucault referred to as entrepreneurs of themselves (2010), with affective engagement online seeming to be generated from disappointment and anxiety rather than a market mentality (Fisher, 2018; Heino et al., 2010; Illouz, 2007; Kendall, 2018).

This argument is based on two key findings from a thematic analysis of 50 in-depth interviews of online daters, many of whom made the transition from OkCupid's website to the popular swipe-based dating apps of Tinder and Bumble (Guest et al., 2012). I used the "media go-along" method for these interviews, asking my respondents questions that arose as I watched them navigate their dating apps (Jørgensen, 2016). The first finding indicates that my respondents began using dating apps because they wanted to engage in intimate exchanges to get to know their matches, something they felt the elaborate essays on OkCupid rendered redundant. The second finding indicates that instead of intimacy they encountered anxious text games exacerbated by the widespread practice of ghosting on dating apps. And while they considered ghosting to be inconsiderate and nonsensical, they admitted to ghosting matches that they became bored with. These findings help to flesh out how particular feelings, moods, and modes of subjectivity are cultivated by the distinct algorithms dating platforms employ, contributing to our understanding of what many following Tiana Buchar (2017) have called algorithmic imaginaries. While much research has uncovered how online daters feel about the algorithmic recommender systems employed by the platforms they use (Parisi & Comunello, 2020; Sharabi, 2020; Wang, 2020), the algorithmic imaginaries of dating platform users have not been explicitly compared.

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The matching algorithms of dating websites like OkCupid are generally devised to allow users to home in on compatible matches by deliberately refining their search criteria. They thus seem devised to cultivate entrepreneurial subjects looking to rationally optimize their intimate relationships (Heino et al., 2010; Illouz, 2007). The recommender systems of the most popular dating apps, on the other hand, are calibrated from affective patterns of engagement like swiping and messaging rates. They thus seem to update dating protocols in a way that dovetails with the shift to affect that many have argued is central to algorithmic media (Clough, 2018; Hansen, 2015; Sampson, 2016). Tinder and Bumble also clearly limit “attractive” profiles and matches in order to get users to pay for them while privileging users that receive lots of matches and texts (Courtois & Timmermans, 2018; Fellizar, 2015; *Powering Tinder*, 2019). I argue that this is likely to create a feedback loop where ghosting exacerbates the anxiety users feel while texting each other. While dating apps seem to render searches for intimacy fraught with anxiety and substantial connections hard to find, they are well-calibrated to the exigencies of platform capitalism, where social relations are as likely to be sold as things, especially when they vanish as quickly as they appear, like ghosts.

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