

Dating Apps: A “Logistics of Desire”

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Abstract

Dating apps are fundamentally reshaping romantic and sexual dynamics by leveraging powerful algorithms to optimize human interactions. While the digital platforms democratize access to connections—benefiting marginalized groups like LGBTQIA+ individuals and those in rural areas—they also introduce a significant logistical burden, often referred to as the “logistics of desire.” Women navigate environments fraught with safety concerns and heightened emotional expectations, while men contend with pressures to conform to traditional expressions of masculinity. A transactional perspective dominates online dating, reducing human relationships to utilitarian processes. Nonetheless, many users actively seek to infuse authenticity into their interactions, resisting the consumer-driven logic inherent in the digital platforms. For dating apps to evolve meaningfully, they must embrace values like empathy and active listening while recalibrating their algorithms to prioritize emotionally fulfilling and enduring relationships. The challenge lies in harmonizing the logistical efficiency of digital matchmaking with the depth and authenticity that define meaningful human connections.

Keywords: Algorithms, Commodification, Dating apps, Human relations, Inequalities, Logistics of desire, Technology.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly digitized world, dating apps such as Tinder, Badoo, Hinge, and Bumble have profoundly reshaped romantic and sexual relationships, replacing the spontaneity of chance encounters with meticulously streamlined, optimized processes. These digital platforms have quickly become indispensable tools in the pursuit of the elusive “ideal” partner (Wu & Trotter, 2022). By leveraging advanced technological mechanisms, they deliver customized dating experiences where each profile is commodified within a hyperconnected network of interactions. While digital platforms prioritize algorithmic precision, they often do so at the expense of the depth and nuance inherent in organic human connections. This transformation of love and desire raises pressing questions: to what extent do these tools, by simplifying the dating process, erode the richness and spontaneity of human relationships? Do they risk reducing love to a transactional exchange, where decisions are governed by cold, utilitarian logic rather than emotional depth and serendipity?

Far from being mere virtual spaces for dating, dating apps have evolved into intricate logistical systems, powered by algorithms designed to analyze and exploit personal data to maximize the likelihood of a match. Digital platforms harness geolocation, behavioral preferences, past interactions, and usage patterns to predict connections with remarkable precision. While such technological optimization promises unparalleled efficiency, it also presents significant risks. By narrowing compatibility criteria to surface-level attributes—such as physical appearance, lifestyle choices, or hobbies—these algorithms often reduce individuals to data points, stripping away emotional nuance and complexity. Moreover, the algorithmic approach fosters a transactional mindset, where every interaction becomes a consumable experience in an endless quest for the “perfect” partner. This relentless pursuit dangers devaluing authentic human connection and long-term emotional fulfillment, prioritizing fleeting satisfaction over meaningful relationships.

Building on the concept of the “logistics of desire”—an industrial system in which human relationships are sorted, managed, and standardized much like components in a traditional supply chain—this article examines how dating apps reduce romantic and sexual encounters to optimized logistical processes. This reduction risks profoundly dehumanizing interpersonal relationships, reducing them to commercial transactions and stripping

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away the essence of desire, authentic intimacy, and genuine human connection. While the concept of logistics is not explicitly discussed, the analysis resonates with Illouz's (2007) exploration of how intimacy is shaped by digital platforms. By investigating the logistics of desire, its social and emotional consequences, and the gendered dimensions of these platforms, this exploratory contribution seeks to illuminate the tensions between technological optimization, the artificiality of interactions, and the pursuit of emotional authenticity in contemporary human relationships.

2. Optimizing Romantic and Sexual Relationships

Although it may seem surprising from an analytical standpoint, yet consistent with the conceptual fluidity discussed by Hoeyi (2019), dating apps function as highly sophisticated logistical systems designed to organize human interactions with a precision and efficiency previously unknown. Geolocation, a cornerstone of the digital platform model, is reshaping how individuals connect for romantic or purely sexual encounters. Apart from long-distance relationships, every profile on dating apps contributes to a "cartography of desire," driven by geographical proximity (see Box 1). By optimizing personal exchanges, these digital platforms introduce an algorithmic dimension that evaluates compatibility based on behavioral data and individual preferences. Through technology, the physical world is transformed into a network of localized and customized possibilities, diminishing the traditional limitations of chance or space, while fundamentally altering the dynamics of both romantic and sexual encounters.

Box 1. Like the Days of the Village Ball: The Importance of Local Connections

On certain dating apps, such as Bumble, there is an "on-the-go" mode that allows users to set their location to a city they plan to visit. However, these apps are generally designed to match users who are nearby. As the Tinder website states, geographical proximity is a key factor, explaining that "it is always more fun to meet someone in your own neighborhood because you share a community." In its early days, Tinder employed the Elo rating system, originally developed to assess the skill levels of chess players. Under this system, users earned more points by matching with people who had higher ratings, especially if those users were far away. In other words, it rewarded matching with more attractive people, sometimes even hundreds of miles apart. Tinder no longer uses this ranking system, which once prioritized local connections between users.

Source: Adapted from DataScientest (2022).

Geolocation features are just one element of a more complex exchange dynamic. At the heart of digital platforms' operations are matchmaking algorithms, driven by advanced machine learning models. Supporting what Bandinelli (2022) refers to as a libidinal economy, these algorithms collect, analyze, and interpret vast amounts of data through artificial intelligence: explicit preferences (e.g., desired age, preferred distance), usage behaviors (such as connection times and the duration spent on specific profiles), and implicit factors (e.g., the types of profiles swiped left or right). By integrating this information, the algorithms create an invisible hierarchy of compatibilities, calculating the likelihood of a successful "match." The algorithmic management of dating not only generates relevant suggestions but also actively optimizes interactions. For example, if a user favors profiles with a particular hobby or aesthetic, these preferences are incorporated into future recommendations. In this way, algorithms serve as *invisible intermediaries* (or brokers), streamlining decision-making and maximizing the efficiency of the process.

One of the most emblematic innovations is the swipe mechanism, which represents a radical simplification of the dating experience (Olivera-La Rosa *et al.*, 2019). By allowing users to accept or reject a profile with a simple flick of the finger, swiping minimizes the cognitive and emotional effort involved in evaluating potential partners. Each profile thus becomes a unit to be sorted, akin to a component on an assembly line or a product on a supermarket shelf. The swipe, designed to be intuitive and rapid, encourages compulsive, repetitive interaction, with decisions made in a split second. This simplification has profound implications for how human relationships are perceived and experienced. On one hand, it democratizes access to dating, making the process more accessible and less intimidating. On the other hand, it reduces individuals to superficial characteristics—a photo and a catchy tagline—evaluated based on visual or contextual cues that leave little room for emotional depth or nuance.

Moreover, to maximize profitability, dating apps often encourage behaviors that foster user dependency, sometimes with serious health consequences (Alparone *et al.*, 2024). Strategies such as promoting specific profiles or artificially creating scarcity by limiting the number of available *likes* push users to purchase paid subscriptions or additional features in hopes of improving their chances of success. The revenue trends of four major digital platforms underscore the effectiveness of these practices (see Figure 1). The marketing tactics exploit psychological vulnerabilities, cultivating dependency and reinforcing compulsive usage patterns to drive

engagement and revenue growth. In this sense, dating apps do more than merely facilitate human interaction: by optimizing each step of the logistical process, they rationalize the exchange between providers and seekers, akin to the dynamics of consumer markets. But what are the implications for the nature of social connection? How does this impact the spontaneity of encounters, the durability of relationships formed in such a commodified environment, and the authenticity of exchanges—frequently sacrificed in favor of digital performance and calculated efficiency?

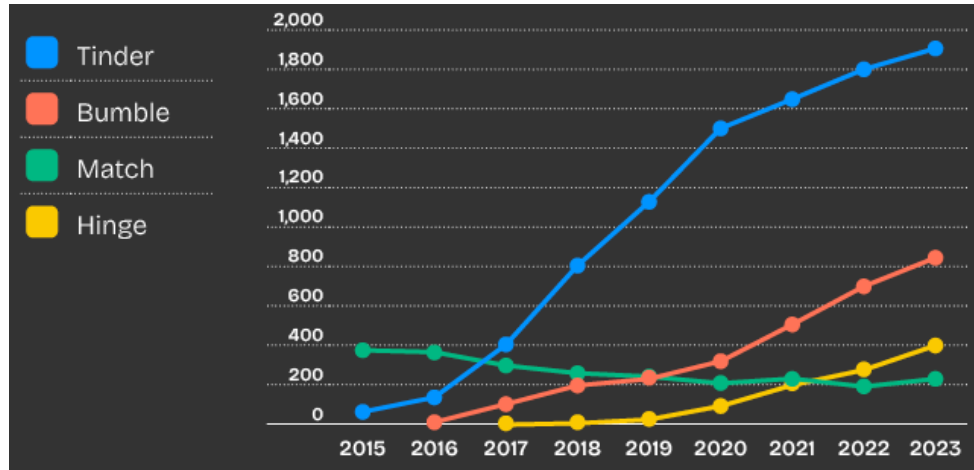


Figure 1. Dating app revenues in million U.S. dollars of four major digital platforms (2015-2023)

Source: Business of Apps (2024).

3. Social and Emotional Impact

The logistical optimization of encounters by digital platforms carries significant consequences for users' social and emotional dynamics. These impacts, often subtle but deeply ingrained, arise directly from the principles of overabundance, algorithmic standardization, and transactional simplification. Access to an endless array of choices, facilitated by intuitive interfaces like the swipe, generates a paradoxical effect: rather than simplifying decision-making, it complicates it. Known as the *paradox of choice*, this phenomenon leads to decision paralysis, as users are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of possibilities (Schwartz, 2015). Each potential interaction is seen both as an opportunity and as a gateway to better options yet to come—a more “compatible” partner just a swipe away. This fosters an incessant pursuit of impossible perfection, making it difficult for users to fully commit to present relationships, which are often reduced to mere choices among others, fleeting and ephemeral.

The relentless pursuit of perfection fosters superficial interactions, where emotional investment remains limited. As a result, deep, meaningful connections become increasingly rare, overshadowed by fleeting exchanges. This phenomenon gives rise to *emotional fatigue*, as the constant process of sorting through profiles wears users down. Relationship burnout, often intensified by unmet expectations and repeated disappointments (Sharabi *et al.*, 2025), can lead to cynicism about relationships themselves. What were once spontaneous and authentic experiences of love and connection are reduced to logistical tasks to be checked off, stripping away their human dimension and diminishing the quality of interactions, which become mechanical, calculated, and detached rather than emotional. This shift in perspective creates a vicious cycle, where unrealistic expectations, social pressures, and the fear of failure further hinder the formation of genuine bonds.

Moreover, the standardization of criteria imposed by digital platform algorithms plays a crucial role in shaping how users interact and are perceived. By classifying and filtering profiles, these algorithms often prioritize standards of attractiveness or popularity. These criteria, which are frequently implicit, reflect deeply ingrained cultural and social biases—such as physical appearance, dominant beauty standards, and self-presentation through specific visual cues. Users deemed “attractive” receive disproportionate attention, accumulating matches and interactions, while others struggle to gain visibility and forge meaningful connections. This dynamic exacerbates existing inequalities, reinforcing social hierarchies that extend well beyond the apps themselves (Adeyinka-Skold, 2020). As a result, marginalized users—particularly those from socially or culturally disadvantaged groups—face a double exclusion: from both Society at large and the digital dating ecosystem.

The transactional framework underlying digital platforms further amplifies this phenomenon. Human interactions are reduced to quick, utilitarian exchanges, with connections assessed based on immediate, superficial criteria. Dating apps promote a model of relationships where the Other is viewed as *a product to be acquired*, rather than as a person to be genuinely known (Finkel *et al.*, 2012; Minina *et al.*, 2022). This utilitarian perspective often

results in feelings of dehumanization, as users may feel reduced to data sets or profiles designed for consumption. This fragmentation of emotional experience raises critical questions about how digital platforms influence the perception of human relationships, particularly regarding authenticity, empathy, and trust. By encouraging ephemeral interactions, the digital platforms risk desensitizing users to the deeper dimensions of interpersonal connections. In prioritizing efficiency, convenience, and instant gratification, they sacrifice the potential for long-term emotional fulfillment and meaningful connection.

However, the impacts extend beyond the individual, affecting society at large by shaping social norms and relational expectations. The prevalence of standardized criteria can homogenize preferences, fostering expectations that align with dominant norms while marginalizing diverse identities and experiences. In short, while dating apps offer efficient logistical solutions to the challenges of contemporary relationships in a world dominated by individualism, they also introduce new tensions and inequalities. The prioritization of a transactional perspective transforms human interactions into streamlined logistical processes, often at the expense of emotional depth. Moreover, digital platforms—despite their seemingly democratic and open nature—often perpetuate existing social and cultural imbalances, imposing new forms of interaction, particularly for women and marginalized groups. The romantic encounter, mediated by a screen, thus becomes a space where the logistics of desire intersect with the realities of patriarchy and heteronormativity.

4. Challenges of Gendered Logistics of Desire

For women, using dating apps often requires heightened attention to personal safety (Choi *et al.*, 2018). As shown in Figure 2, women are significantly more likely than men to perceive dating apps as unsafe spaces. The fear of harassment or harmful interactions looms large, influencing behavior and prompting proactive strategies to mitigate risks. In response, digital platforms have implemented features like reporting tools, blocking options, and *incognito* modes. However, these technical solutions fail to address the underlying problem: they shift the responsibility for safety onto users themselves. This creates an added “logistical burden,” where every decision—whether to respond to a message, share personal information, or select a meeting location—requires careful consideration. This logistical burden often extends beyond the digital environment. Women may share their location with friends, choose public meeting places, or take other precautionary steps to ensure their safety before a date. Over time, the constant vigilance and mental energy devoted to these efforts can lead to emotional exhaustion and a diminished sense of freedom.

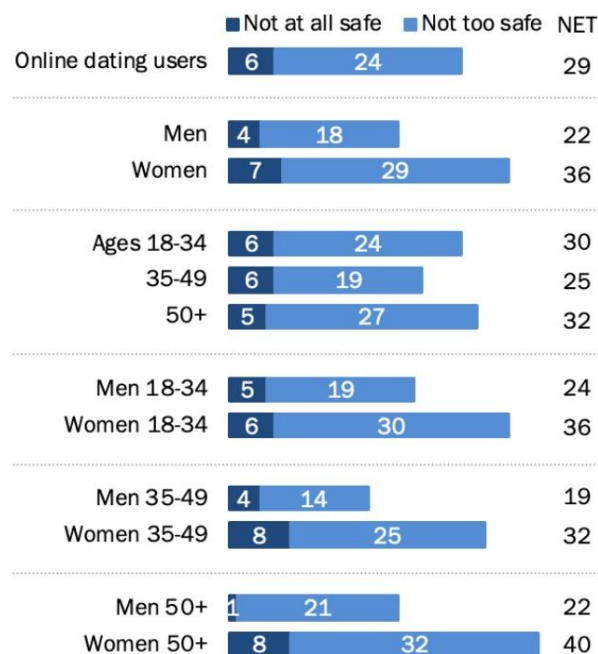


Figure 2. Percentage of U.S. dating app users identifying apps as safe or unsafe spaces

Source: Pew Research Center (2020).

Beyond safety concerns, in predominantly patriarchal societies, women often find themselves shouldering the responsibility of managing the emotional dimension of interactions. In a context where online conversations are frequently superficial, women must clarify intentions, interpret contradictory signals, and revive conversations that lose momentum to uncover their interlocutor’s true intentions (Tanner & Tabo, 2018). These logistics of desire

reflect deeply ingrained social expectations: women are often seen as the custodians of emotional bonds and relational balance. In contrast, men face different logistical challenges. They may feel pressure to conform to masculine stereotypes, such as taking the initiative or being assertive. However, they are generally less exposed to physical safety risks or harassment, allowing them to approach these interactions with greater ease. These gender dynamics underscore the unequal emotional labor involved, further complicating the already complex landscape of modern relationships in the digital age.

While dating apps present significant challenges, they also offer unprecedented opportunities for historically marginalized groups. Grindr, for example, has transformed dating within LGBTQIA+ communities by creating digital spaces where users can explore their identities and desires beyond the heteronormative gaze (Blackwell *et al.*, 2015). In contexts where homosexuality is still stigmatized or even criminalized, digital platforms play a crucial role by providing tailored, often safer, logistical processes for connection. Similarly, dating apps offer new possibilities for other groups typically excluded from traditional dating circles, such as people living in rural areas or those with disabilities (De La Cruz, 2017; Miron *et al.*, 2023). In situations where offline opportunities are limited, the digital platforms become invaluable tools, reducing the barriers posed by isolation and fostering a more diverse range of encounters, experiences, and relationships within these marginalized communities.

However, the design and use of digital platforms often reflect deeply ingrained institutional biases. Ethnic minorities, transgender individuals, and people who are overweight frequently report experiences of exclusion or fetishization, highlighting the intersectional complexities of digital spaces. Moreover, the emphasis on physical appearance in dating apps intensifies gender inequalities. Women specifically face immense pressure to conform to unrealistic physical stereotypes—such as very large breasts, slim waists, and long hair—pressures that are often amplified by social media culture (Hanson, 2022). While dating apps offer unprecedented opportunities for interaction, they ultimately impose gendered logistical demands that mirror societal challenges. Women must navigate emotional expectations, safety concerns, and systemic biases. The question remains: how might the digital platforms evolve to become truly inclusive and equitable, reducing the asymmetrical burdens they place on their users?

5. A Double-Edged Transformation

By structuring human relationships around the logistics of desire, dating apps are profoundly reshaping how individuals meet and interact. With powerful algorithms, they offer unprecedented efficiency, allowing users to filter, select, and connect on a scale once unimaginable. Yet, this transformation, though promising, is double-edged. While digital platforms break down geographical and social barriers, they also risk reducing human interactions to transactional processes, often stripped of their emotional depth and spontaneity. Moreover, the emphasis on metrics—such as swipes, matches, and response rates—further gamifies and commodifies relationships, shifting priorities. As we have explored, this tension between logistical optimization and humanity raises fundamental questions about the nature and future of human relationships. Can the digital platforms cultivate genuinely authentic and lasting connections, or do they merely foster superficial, fleeting exchanges that lead to emotional exhaustion and relationship burnout?

One of the primary advantages of dating apps is their ability to break down barriers that once limited access to potential romantic or sexual connections. Digital platforms go beyond traditional methods of interaction, a benefit enhanced by their advanced logistical features. Sophisticated algorithms streamline the partner search process by analyzing users' preferences, values, and behaviors to create customized experiences. By leveraging vast amounts of data, often sold to other companies (see Box 2), these systems offer tailored journeys for users—but this efficiency comes at a cost. By reducing human relationships to standardized processes—*matching, liking, swiping*—digital platforms risk reducing individuals to mere bundles of attributes. This echoes Samuelson's (1938/2002) microeconomic concept of the weak axiom of revealed preferences, where choices are boiled down to transactional terms. Such an approach promotes a utilitarian view of dating, prioritizing predefined criteria over the unpredictable, dynamic qualities that define offline human interactions. As a result, spontaneity and authenticity—qualities essential for meaningful, lasting relationships—are often sacrificed in favor of mechanized exchanges that lack emotional depth and genuine intimacy.

Box 2. Tinder: A Cash Cow

Like many other dating apps, Tinder is free to use but offers paid features that enhance the user experience. However, Tinder is not focused on helping people find lasting love, as doing so would undermine its business model. In fact, it has never marketed itself as a platform for “lifelong relationships,” but rather as a space for “casual hookups”—experiences that can be repeated quickly and endlessly, in contrast to exclusive, long-term romantic relationships. Tinder also turns its users into products by collecting as much personal data as possible. It encourages users to link their accounts to Facebook, claiming this helps prevent showing profiles to friends, and connects to Instagram, where users can showcase hundreds of attractive photos. Is Tinder being considerate? Let’s just say it acts more like a powerful data vacuum, selling all that information to other companies.

Source: Adapted from *Le Monde*, October 19, 2021.

In this context, the pursuit of love can transform into a “technical” experience, where each interaction is evaluated based on its emotional or temporal return on investment. This aligns with Becker’s (1973-1974) economic theory of marriage, which posits that marriage functions as a cost/benefit calculation, weighing sentimental and financial satisfaction against the inconveniences of cohabitation. In the realm of dating apps, this transactional vision is further reinforced by their business model, which prioritizes prolonged user engagement. While algorithms are designed to maximize time spent on the digital platforms, they are not necessarily optimized to facilitate lasting or meaningful relationships. Instead, they emphasize continuous stimulation through an endless logistical flow of new profiles, fostering a mindset of infinite abundance. However, as Figure 3 underlines, the primary motivation for using dating apps is often the search for a serious, long-term relationship, including men. This creates a potential mismatch between the digital platforms—designed to multiply opportunities—and users, who require time and sustained interactions to build mutual understanding.

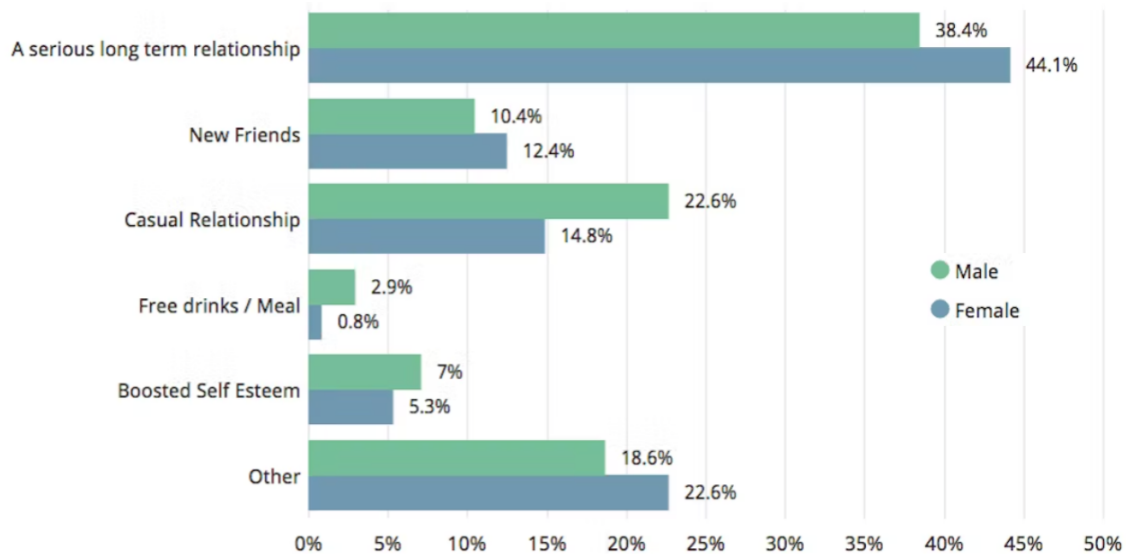


Figure 3. Motivation for using dating apps (Bumble data)

Source: HackSpirit (2023).

It can be concluded that users are not merely passive consumers of sexual content on the digital platforms. Many actively seek to move beyond transactional interactions by introducing authenticity and spontaneity into their engagements. Some users add more personal details to their profiles, while others attempt to slow down the process by fostering deeper exchanges before committing to face-to-face meetings. These strategies demonstrate a desire to preserve the human and emotional dimensions of relationships, despite the inherent limitations of the digital medium. Ultimately, the future of dating apps depends on their ability to balance the logistical efficiency they offer with a more respectful approach to emotional complexity. A renewed approach to desire would incorporate values of authenticity and diversity, such as algorithms that prioritize emotional compatibility over superficial physical attractiveness or interfaces that encourage users to engage with profiles beyond their usual preferences. However, achieving this balance is challenging, as the stranger encountered through a dating app always retains the potential to be a threat (Veel & Thylstrup, 2018).

Beyond technical adjustments, a truly ethical transformation requires a collective reflection on how human relationships are perceived and experienced. Digital platforms must encourage interactions that go beyond mere logistical efficiency, by creating virtual spaces where users can explore the full diversity of their desires and emotions without feeling reduced to mere commodities, like Unio in France (see Box 3). Moreover, they need to prioritize values such as active listening, empathy, and the promotion of a culture of patience and respect. Ultimately, as mentioned, dating apps represent a double-edged transformation. They make the search for a partner more accessible, efficient, and less intimidating, while also introducing risks of dehumanizing relationships. The challenge lies in striking a balance between logistical power and emotional richness. If they succeed in meeting this challenge, dating apps could redefine not only the way we meet partners, but also the way we conceptualize and nurture human relationships in an increasingly digitized and fragmented world.

Box 3. Unio: A Benevolent and Humanistic Dating App

The French dating app Unio operates differently from Tinder, which relies on endless matches based purely on appearances or men's willingness to pay for premium memberships. Its approach, fundamentally benevolent and humanistic, focuses on intelligent matchmaking. Unio connects people using a model grounded in psychology, matching individuals based on compatibility rather than superficial traits. The digital platform encourages users to reveal their true selves and build meaningful connections, rather than merely selling an image. Over time, Unio continues to foster deeper conversations and shared reflections. For instance, when past users face relationship challenges—just like any couple—Unio provides customized advice, drawing from its understanding of both personalities, which helped bring them together in the first place.

Source: Adapted from a company document (2023).

6. Conclusion

An analysis of dating apps through the lens of the logistics of desire reveals a profound transformation in the dynamics of love, romance, and sexuality. Digital platforms have undeniably democratized access to human relationships, dismantling geographical and social barriers. They offer individuals from diverse backgrounds—whether isolated by location or belonging to marginalized communities—new opportunities to explore relational possibilities often overlooked in traditional settings. Moreover, algorithmic optimization, leveraging geolocation and behavioral data analysis, has enhanced efficiency, enabling users to identify compatible partners in a world increasingly shaped by individualism and the pursuit of speed (Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009). The swipe mechanism exemplifies this transformation as a groundbreaking innovation that simplifies the dating experience while making it more accessible to a broader population. It optimizes users' time and emotional energy, both of which are frequently strained under the weight of societal expectations and the pressure to meet unrealistic ideals.

Dating apps, however, come with significant limitations that complicate their promise of enhanced connectivity. The commodification of relationships, driven by the transactional perspective underpinning digital platforms, reduces the human experience to a series of automated actions. This process atomizes individuals, reducing them to a set of superficial criteria that prioritize numerical performance, such as matches or likes, over emotional depth and meaningful connection. The paradox of choice, while broadening access to potential partners, fosters chronic dissatisfaction and emotional exhaustion. Users often find themselves trapped in an endless and illusory quest for perfection, unable to fully invest in relationships due to the constant allure of seemingly better options. Additionally, dating apps exacerbate existing social and cultural inequalities by reinforcing stereotypes and excluding already marginalized groups. From a gendered perspective, the digital platforms often place a disproportionate “logistical burden” on women, who must navigate safety concerns while meeting high expectations tied to physical appearance.

When exploring research avenues, it is crucial to examine the impact of digital platforms on perceptions of human relationships, particularly their role in reshaping intimacy and emotional engagement. Scholars might investigate mechanisms that promote authentic connections within systems where interactions are often reduced to brief, transactional exchanges. Two promising directions warrant attention: first, examining potential algorithmic modifications to prioritize deeper, more meaningful criteria—such as emotional compatibility—over superficial factors like appearance or surface-level behaviors; and second, analyzing how users actively reclaim and adapt these tools to infuse authenticity into digital platforms that may initially appear dehumanizing. Research into strategies of appropriation and resistance, particularly among marginalized groups, could offer valuable insights into how digital platforms might evolve into genuinely liberating spaces. Such studies could highlight ways to balance logistical efficiency with the need for inclusivity, emotional depth, and meaningful human connection.

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